In the summer of 1979, Regulus Black vanished from British wizarding society with horcrux in hand, ducking his head down into the obscurity of a French village to complete his task of destroying Slytherin’s locket - and with it, a fragment of the Dark Lord’s soul. When the risen Voldemort calls his followers once again, sixteen years later, Regulus makes haste to the home he left behind half a lifetime ago, reconnecting with his estranged brother and settling on a very different side of the conflict, with a very different set of allies. The Order of the Phoenix is reborn from the fog of the brewing Second War, tugging forth both old conflicts and new.
There was a certain peace in obscurity, in the soft quack of ducks and in blades of grass that tickled the soles of your feet. To Regulus Black, comfort smelled like old books, and with his back propped against an old tree and worn pages between the tips of his fingers, there was no greater peace on Earth.

Summer sunlight peeked over the horizon, dusk settling around them and smearing vivid blood orange across the sky. A little girl ran past, tittering something in French to her little brother trailing behind, and as his eyes lifted from the book, a small smile tugged at the corner of Regulus’s mouth. He had called this little French wizarding village his home for some 15, nearing 16 years now. Privacy was a gift he’d been given here, a community of witches and wizards who were content to tuck away in the countryside, to have their hobbies — be they over the table or under the table — and live out their relatively uncomplicated lives.

When first he’d come, desperate and worn, they had granted him a place among them. Trust was slow-won as community and visitor alike sized each other up, but never had he been more grateful for the years of language tutoring he and Sirius had been subjected to throughout their childhood.

“Mssr Rian!” the little girl called out, stopping only a few paces away from him. “How much longer under school starts?”

Regulus could see her teeming excitement, bittersweet in its ignorance of the horrors of the world, blissfully unaware that school could be anything but safe and thrilling. For her, perhaps it would be just that. “The school year hasn’t even ended yet,” he responded as he placed his hand between the open pages to mark his place, his French mirroring her own in lilt and tone. “You still have all summer.”

“But I want to go to Beauxbatons now! I want to be beautiful and powerful like Fleur Delacour,” the girl declared, flinging out the stick in her hand like a wand, “I wonder what the last challenge was. I bet she will win the tournament today!”

“Perhaps,” Regulus said agreeably with a subtle tip of the chin.

Loose blonde hair whipped as she turned back around to face her brother. “You’re stinking Harry Potter,” the girl shouted back at the boy with her makeshift wand pointed squarely at him (small as he was, he had scarcely caught up on small and frantic legs). “You will never beat your dragon before me!”

As the children scrambled away again, jumping and ducking around the hedge bushes, Regulus shook his head, a small twinge of satisfaction settling in his stomach at her declaration. Though he had never met this ‘Harry Potter’ the papers so often spoke of now, he sounded as arrogant and inconsiderate as his father before. It was terrible, what had happened to the Potters, and Regulus could admit that, no matter how deeply he had despised the boy who had taken his brother away
from him... but if this Harry was half the disaster his father was, Regulus was unsurprised he had cheated himself into a competition for the sake of glory.

Shaking his head, Regulus lifted his hand from the page and shifted back against the trunk once again, scanning the ocean of words to find his place.

(The sun would be wholly set soon, and he knew he oughtn’t even bother starting up again, with the darkness creeping up on them as it does.)

Reluctantly, Regulus placed a bookmark where his hand had been just a moment before, gently shutting the book with a soft thump. He caught sight of the two children running towards their parents now, who apparently had come to the same conclusion as himself. Pushing up to a crouch, then up again to his feet, Regulus slipped back into his sandals and started walking back to his home, not far from the park and nearer still to the antique shop he’d been working at for years now. (Oh, what his life had come to. Working in a shop. It was near comical.)

He was nearly home when the pain struck, a sharp sting that flared out to a burn and slithered up the inside of his arm so suddenly he dropped the book he was carrying. Immediately his other hand clasped over the spot, as if to crush its writing head, and though his long sleeve covered the mark (always, he wore sleeves to smother his past, however long it had been) the familiar skull and snake were burned well into his mind.

For 15 years, he had been free of its call. Now, a terrible lurch turned in his stomach as cold reality set in. The activation of his Mark — it could mean only one thing…

“No…” he whispered to himself, fingers bone-white as they gripped his forearm. The locket was destroyed, the Dark Lord was dead, and the worst was meant to be over…. (He heard it scream, saw its decaying husk. Destroyed.) He shook his head as bafflement creased thin lines in his brow. Without his horcrux, the Dark Lord ought to have been destroyed for good, yet Regulus knew of nothing else that could set their Marks burning, this brand tying them to their master.

Either he was having a terrifyingly vivid nightmare, or something had gone terribly wrong.

A haze fell over him then as he walked the remainder of the way home without really seeing, hearing, experiencing the settling bustle of the village. If anyone noticed his ghost-pale visage, he didn’t notice them noticing, and when at last the heavy wooden door of his home was closed securely behind him, Regulus thunked his head back against it and squeezed his eyes closed, as if to brace.

Slowly he pulled up his sleeve, white cloth bunching at the elbow. For several stretching seconds, he just stood there, eyes shut tightly, the muscles of his forearm tensing against the burn. Forcing his eyes open was as punishing as he had expected it to be, the inky writhe of the Dark Mark striking a stark contrast with the pale skin of his arm. His breath caught in his throat, and for a moment, he was 17 again, terrified of the impossible life laid out in front of him.

Against reason, Regulus approached his desk, pulled open the drawer and brushed his fingers over the broken remains of Slytherin’s locket, devoid of its eerie glow and exactly where he had left it. Clenching his fist around it, the uneven edges pressed into his palm, and with a grunt of aggravation, Regulus threw the locket back into the drawer and slammed it shut. Running restless fingers through his hair, he turned away from it once again, frustration brimming as he approached the nearest window. Planting his hands on the windowsill, he lifted his eyes to the darkening sky, where blood orange bled into deep purples and looming shadows. What was beautiful just moments ago now felt suffocating, ominous.
“Somewhere, the Death Eaters have gathered, and the Dark Lord has risen again,” he whispered to himself, storm-grey eyes fixed on the darkness, as if a ghostly green skull might form above him at any moment, far fetched as the feeling was. “I suppose this isn't over, after all.”

There were many reasons to pretend as though his Mark had not burned to life that night, rising like an unwelcome spectre. Regulus could name a great many: the efforts he’d silently offered, the old life he’d sacrificed, the new life he’d forged…the books and antiques he oversaw, the friendship he’d fostered, the quiet moments sitting peacefully at the duck pond. That would be shattered, the moment he stepped foot in England.

Rian would die, and Regulus would be dragged forcibly from the grave once again.

In the weeks that passed, he tried to clear his mind of the decision nipping at his heels, but the international news heralded rumors of the Dark Lord’s return, told of a boy dead on the eve of the Triwizard Tournament’s final task: Cedric Diggory, the proper and legitimate Hogwarts champion. He saw as the news rapidly turned on its head, vehemently denying rumors related to the Dark Lord…yet the louder the denials grew, the more certain Regulus became of their nightmare’s return.

His home was in turmoil, chewing its own tongue off.

(Was he doing the same, clinging to his life here?)

No one spoke of the news openly, but he felt more eyes on him than normal in those two weeks. However expert his French, he was Rian the Englishman; it did not matter the years he had spent holed away in their community. He knew they wanted to ask him what he thought, whether he’d experienced the war, whether he'd ever seen a Death Eater (or perhaps ‘You-Know-Who’ himself).

They did not know the half.

It was a warm and stuffy morning, the day Regulus chose to leave his world behind for the second time. In a bag, he packed clothes, books, favoured artifacts, the crushed locket that started this whole fiasco…the catalyst for the past 16 years of his life.

He had run away from the chaos, back then — young and desperate, full of fierce purpose.

(Now, he ran towards it, like a complete fool.)

Shutting a desk drawer, Regulus raked his eyes over the surface, spotting a small white box in the corner and feeling a subtle twinge in his chest. Thumbing off the lid, he pulled the box closer and looked inside at the small collection of magical photographs. The years had worn friendship into his heart again like grooves, however buried he had once been, resigned to remain furiously alone in his misery. Their faces were now etched in his mind, familiar and fond — and strangely reminiscent of a crowd of very different faces, dimmed and distressing.

Closing his eyes, Regulus reached back in time, grasped for the memory of his once best friend, of Barty Crouch with his straw hair and bright eyes. He remembered how Barty was always the first to congratulate him after a Slytherin win in quidditch and the first to trash Sirius and his friends when they were being twats (which was always). He remembered the conspiratorial thrill the night they received their Dark Marks, teeming with misplaced anger and a desperation to be part of something grand and secret. To belong. Regulus recalled wanting to vomit, the last night he saw his friend, but it had been a decade and a half since Regulus had seen his face.

When he had left his home behind, he had expected to die — and dead men did not need to
remember. With death falling off of him like shedded skin, there was nothing he wanted more than to see them all again...his friends, his family… (Barty had been sent to Azkaban too, he recalled all too painfully, as had Bella, but if Sirius had escaped, then maybe, just maybe…)

Pressing his lips to a line, Regulus closed the box again and dropped it into the bag.

When later he faced the living-breathing-human contents of that box, it was not as easy to cover the problem as it was to close the top of a bag.

“You're not going back to England, are you?” In front of Regulus stood a man some 5 years his senior, the ruffled brown hair framing his face in a way that made him look as though he was always a little bit frazzled. He set the contents of some potion ingredient down on the table to extend a pointed finger in his direction. “You'd better not be, because they're saying You-Know-Who might be back, and even if they immediately said he wasn't back, we both know that only SOLIDIFIES the fact that it's definitely true.”

“You should probably keep going with your potion,” Regulus responded evasively, gesturing toward the cauldron. “You're going to ruin it.”

“If I do, it’s your fault for dropping this on me while I’m brewing,” the man said defensively, picking up the ingredient once again, dripping three drops into the mixture before continuing, “But don’t think I didn’t notice that confirmatory deflection. Why would you want to go back there? And I don’t even mean that as a jab against England, this time.”

A grim shadow fell over Regulus’s face as he shook his head. “It's complicated.”

“That sounds like the start of a really great and non-ominous decision, right there.”

“Don’t act like you know what’s best for my situation,” Regulus said curtly, brow furrowing.

“Your situation?” In puzzlement, the potioneer threw up his hands — still holding a vial, for a beat longer, before he noticed and set it back down amongst the other ingredients. “What kind of situation are we talking, here? Is there something I should know about your ‘situation’?”

“Nothing you need concern yourself with,” Regulus responded cryptically, pressing the heels of his hands against his temples, thinking that he’d made a grave error, actually warning people of his departure. Perhaps vanishing without a word was not such a terrible way to go about it, after all. When he was met with further skepticism, Regulus released an aggravated sigh and approach the door to the potion shop, hand securing on the brass handle.

“Why are you being so weird about this? You're- Rian! You know I can’t leave while this is brewing!”

Regulus was already several steps out the door, by then, and when he turned back, his friend was standing in the door, propping it open with a mildly irritated expression on his face. Guilt wriggled uncomfortably, but there was little that could be done. “Look- I just need to go back, at least for a little while. Don’t blow this into something it’s not.”

“Is anyone going to watch the shop? Emile won’t be back for days.”

Regulus flattened his mouth to a line, some hybrid of sheepish dismissal. “I’m going to need you to tell him...I really need to go.”

“You need to go, right,” came the exasperated echo. “Of course, Mssr Drama. Be sure to come back, then. No getting blown to pieces by lunatics in masks storming the streets. If I have to turn 40
alone, I’m going to be really upset.”

“You still have some time before that.”

“Dying’s permanent, though, so don’t forget it.”

(Dying was not so permanent as many might think — not metaphorically, not even literally, for even now, Regulus could recall the cold, choking grip of the inferi with more vividness than he could ever want. Sometimes, finality would be better.)

“As if I could.”

“And this better not be some 16-year trade off thing, either. I will be way older than 40, 16 years from now!”

Rolling his eyes, Regulus smothered a wry smile, stinging with truth. “Bye, Julien.”

With a brisk wave, Regulus turned back around, hands shoving deep in his pockets as he rounded a corner. As his eyes lifted to the sunny sky above, he thought how unassuming it all felt, how the clouds roamed the skies without a care, how the sun shone no less brightly, whatever the task ahead. “The least you could do is rain,” he muttered upwards to no one in particular, and in response, the birds twittered in flight, swooping across his vision to land on a nearby roof.

This chapter of his life was closing, now. All he had to do was turn the page.

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The sky in France may not have listened, but England was all too eager to oblige with a splash of gloomy summer rain, the clouds tucking away the moon like a child to bed and dimming an already darkening night. Though he had apparated to the spot, he could feel water soaking into his bones by the time he reached the door, the weight of his memories holding him in place.

His father had possessed something of a passion for wards and concealments, and their home had been guarded by protective bloodline spells for far longer still, spanning back to the 1300s when first this house was claimed by his House. Regulus had been ‘dead’ for over a decade now — could a building have some makeshift concept of time? Had he been pronounced dead, or did the spells know no difference so long as he was deemed a blood member of the House of Black?

(Now was as good a time as any to find out.)

Steeling himself, Regulus stepped forward once more, fingers clasping the handle and pushing it open, bracing himself—

—for a fallout that never came. Though he lingered in the doorway, no movement stirred, no sound drew his ear, save for the rapid pattering of rain behind him.

The thunk of the door shutting about him sounded ominous in the dark, corridor lamps devoid of life and cobwebs coating the surfaces with a dirtied glaze. Though he felt tempted to cast the string of lamps in one sweeping spell, he had no true assurance that he was alone. His mother would be older now, if she was still alive — but regardless of age, she was powerful in more ways than one, and certainly not a force that he wanted to notice him before he noticed her.

Compromising with a small and silent Lumos, Regulus crept quietly, eyes gliding over every faded cushion, every peeled corner of wallpaper, every sleeping portrait. Like stepping back in time, Regulus felt a teenager again, crushed by the staggering rush of familiarity… how this house had grown old, worn, looked as though no one had paid much care to it in ages. A measure of sadness
twinged, struck with the pangs of his decaying childhood, painted in shades of grey and green and coated in grime.

Reaching the staircase at the end of the hallway, his eyes lifted to the shrunken, severed heads of house-elves past, and his stomach immediately turned. Never in his life had he liked this staircase — no matter how it was justified or explained, chopping off an elf’s head and displaying it on the wall always felt more unsettling than it did honourary. With each step, his eyes retraced each elf in turn, their unique eyes, the flop of their ears…

When he reached the top step, Regulus released the breath he did not realise he’d been holding, sickness still turning in his stomach, but the suffocating dread lightened its burden when he found each head on these walls to be the same as they always had been. No sign of Kreacher — and for once, that was a relief.

Each footstep from there drew him forward like a silent siren song, and before Regulus had processed much conscious intention, he found himself standing in the drawing room, taking in the grand, sweeping sight of the family tapestry as he let his bag drop to the floor… Toujours Pur. Always pure. Generation after generation of their ancient and noble bloodline, splayed out across the wall and peppered with the charred splotches of divergence and rebellion. (Of betrayal, Regulus would have once remarked with scorn. Time was a funny thing.) Now, his fingers brushed the names — what had once been large and expansive now dwindled in death. Just three years prior, his Aunt Lucretia had passed, as had Crazy Aunt Cass (cradled in a nest of her cat children, no doubt). His grandparents on both sides, just prior to that.

His mother.

His mother had died a decade ago.

All life ended in time, or at least it ought to, yet some part of him thought of his mother as constant, some unstoppable force that did not require the dark and repulsive means of a horcrux to evade the clutches of death. (Had she been ill? He could not picture her pale and weak. Had she been alone? He left her alone.)

Beneath, his own name was still stitched in place, death assigned to the year he had left, as expected. A dark smudge bled over just slightly, flecks of char reaching over into his space… his brother’s spot, burnt in rage… (So long ago, yet so fresh, kneeling in this room. Sirius Black had been a smudge on the tapestry for more years than he had ever been a name, yet Regulus remembered that night all too clearly. The uncertainty of his brother's departure in the night — the certainty of his mother's blast, the moment they returned home from that summer home trip.)

An unfamiliar name caught his eye, then, beneath the fond and familiar branch of his (favourite) cousin.

Draco. Cissa’s son. Fifteen years old, now, undoubtedly possessing of a blindingly pale complexion, considering his parents. He would be a Slytherin too, of course, bedecked in silver and green, proud and pure. Regulus knew nothing of the boy, and he hated to think there was a child of Narcissa’s that he had never known, even as an unborn air of excitement. Did Draco like quidditch? Reading? What type of magic did he favor? Would he make prefect, this summer? Was he the sort to float to the center of a party or linger to the sides?

(Would he be drawn into the Death Eater’s fold as Regulus once had, at his age?)

Anxious dread lurched in Regulus’s stomach, cold and acidic. Dropping his wandering fingers from the tapestry, he stood and took a steadying step back to take in the sweeping generations, eyes
raking from corner to corner. The Ancient and Most Noble House of Black. Their blood would live pure in Draco, but he and Sirius were the last of their name — what would become of them if this war ended in blood and blasts?

Legacy hung by a thread, and he felt the clippers press like fangs, slithering up his arms and wrapping around his neck in a taunt. He hadn’t a clue where the other horcruxes might be. Thematically, there might be two others, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw’s relics to match the locket...perhaps four, if the Dark Lord could deign to use Gryffindor in his plots, but he had no more than fleeting speculation and no shadow of a clue where to start. No information to tip one direction or another. No one would trust him anymore…

(No one on either side. A defector, a traitor...)

Glumly, Regulus pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, the pressure and return to blackness easing his mind just slightly, if only for a moment — but when he lowered his hands and opened his eyes again, the tapestry still stretched before him, lit dimly by the wand still clasped in his fingers.

This was his reality. Again, and again, and again.

Stepping out into the hallway, Regulus felt a subtle dip in his nervousness, knowing his mother was not sleeping somewhere in the house, however guilty the thought made him feel. His mind then leapt back to the next closest likelihood to still walk these halls — and without delay, Regulus set down the stairs once again, forging a straight path to the kitchen where Kreacher often dwelt. Anxiety gave way to hope that Kreacher’s absence from the staircase was a sign of his safety, his survival...and not a false hope veiling a worse death. (Regulus had left him — perhaps shouldn’t have left him — but…)

Coming to the kitchen, Regulus crept quietly to the room Kreacher called his own, creaked open the door, and felt the first pull of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Curled on a dirty blanket and surrounded with a few family trinkets (...strange, as he was not normally the type to hoard), Kreacher was safely sleeping. Like a crushing wave, Regulus felt the onslaught of affection hit him, a flood of gratitude beyond measure, and it took every ounce of his self-control not to wake the elf right then, late though it was. “I will see you in the morning, my friend,” he whispered, and only after grabbing a large cloth hand towel and draping it over Kreacher like a blanket did Regulus shut the door again and retrace his steps upstairs, pressing further still to the topmost floor where his own bedroom awaited.

Do Not Enter Without the Express Permission of Regulus Arcturus Black

A wry smile flickered again. There had been a time in his life when that had felt as though it ought to be effective enough. There was never a time in his life when it was actually effective, but he supposed perception factored a great deal into one’s sense of security.

With a soft click of the handle, Regulus pushed open the door, only to be hit with another staggering wave of nostalgia. Everything was precisely as he’d left it, sleek swaths of green and silver everywhere he looked. He saw his bookshelf, brimming with texts, tall and wide and inviting as ever. He saw his broom hanging on the other side of his bed, saw the bedstand where his owl’s cage had once rested, back when he’d owned an owl. Canopus would be long dead by now, and again, a pang twinged in his chest... He saw the wardrobe, presumably still full of clothes, neatly folded and hanging primly alongside a sack filled with ancient tomes telling of horcruxes, charmed to look like outdated books of quidditch history and an account of the world’s greatest magical chess players.
As a treacherous yawn escaped, Regulus conceded that deeper investigations could wait until morning — and without changing from his clothes (he had left his bag down in the drawing room, too far away to be bothered with now), Regulus slipped out of his shoes and fell on the bed, arms wrapping around the largest pillow to breathe deep the stale scent, so jarringly unlike it had once been, yet as he lay surrounded by the safest space he known as a child, he felt the nostalgic give way to exhaustion.

When again Regulus woke, it was to a heart-stopping screech, tearing him from a dreamless sleep into what felt like a waking nightmare. Through blurry eyes, he could see his door was still securely closed, yet his ears were full of a bone-chillingly familiar scream, muffled somewhat by the floor between...but that had never given full reprieve the last time he’d heard it, either.

“Mother?” he muttered to the air around him, answered only by another warbling shriek, presumably some tirade or another, but he couldn’t make out the words. (He could not make them out, but he could guess with some confidence what his mother would be saying whilst under such distress.)

His mother was dead, he knew, or was said to be dead, at least, according to the tapestry...Blood turned to ice beneath his skin once more, as the possibility settled in that he may not be alone in the house after all...that perhaps his mother’s spot on the tapestry was as accurate as his own. To have such a reaction was shameful, he knew; Regulus was meant to be the good son, and what kind of son hoped to be wrong about something like that?

Some part of him — young and uncertain and guilty — longed to see her, to apologize, to make things right again, and bile reached up in a threat as he began to wonder if it was not so farfetched a chance, after all.

Taking his bottom lip between his teeth in a fit of nerves, Regulus steeled himself to stand stepping toward his still-cracked door. Eyes flicking to the bookcase, he noticed the fresh smear of fingerprints over the surface and knew well that it had not been his fingerprints brushing over the wood. Limbs stiffening and wand held ready at his side, Regulus silently slipped into the halfway and closed the door to a crack with far more care than was needed, considering the shrieks still barrelling up the stairs in a furied stampede.

With each step down the staircase, his pace increased to a rapid patter, quickening at the pivots until again he was passing the collection of elf-heads… Only then did he slow into his turn, pausing at the corner of the staircase to first look first down the hallway of the ground floor.

For a moment, Regulus couldn’t speak. The screams were deafening, down here, and only now did he realise there were two voices shouting. Against what his better judgement might have suggested, he took a few steps toward the ruckus. Ringing off the walls were the same two voices that always destroyed any semblance of peace in this place. His mother and…

“Sirius?”

Chapter End Notes

'Renascentia' is Latin for 'rebirth,' referring to the more spiritual sense of the word.

Kuchikopi and myself have been planning to collaborate for years, and here we finally
have it! We're going to be exploring the concept of Regulus surviving his snatching of the horcrux (which will be further explained and explored in the future) and the ramifications his knowledge has on the early Second War.
On his fourth morning in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, Sirius had awoken to rumbling thunder and downpour. The storm had broken. The more dramatic part of him thought that at least this was appropriate weather to be stuck in the family snake pit in the middle of bloody London while the Ministry searched half of Europe for him. It was almost comical.

The last few days had been a flurry of activity; Dumbledore had been and gone, stopping only briefly to check that his father's wards had stood the test of time. They had. He wasn’t sure if he was happy or annoyed about it, but when it came to the safety of what was left of the Order of the Phoenix, he supposed he was glad. When it came to the safety of Harry, he was always happy. He hated leaving him with people who didn’t like him; with a sneer, Sirius could look around the place and be appreciative that at least all that was left of the people who’d hated him was his dear old Mum’s portrait and a batty house-elf. One he could pull the curtains on, and the other he could tell to piss off. Dumbledore had warned them against getting rid of Kreacher. He knew too much. He’d also warned against leaving the house, as Fudge was trying to discredit Harry at every turn. He’d then said not to send too many owls. You don’t want to draw attention to the place. Rules and orders had never been his strong point.

“Half-breeds! Filth! Crawling all over house of my fathers!”

Leaning his head against the glass, Sirius sighed and bopped against it a few times as his mother's portrait continued her barrage. He’d better go sort it out. It sounded like Remus had ran afoul of it.

“Sorry,” Remus said, looking apologetic and putting the troll foot back into its corner where undoubtedly Kreacher had moved it from in the first place. “I’ve got an interview at the Ministry in an hour and I didn’t want to wake you.”

“At the Ministry?” Sirius took a couple of steps further down to hear him over the racket, which now included screeching insults about regretting that she’d ever given birth to him and how ashamed she was. “Why?”

Remus responded, “I think because of Dumbledore. They’re looking for any excuse with him, and he did hire a werewolf to teach at Hogwarts.”

“And the best damn professor they could hope for!” Sirius exclaimed, loyally. “Don’t let them try and nail you.”

Remus did respond, Sirius could see his mouth open, but he could barely hear anything now over the shouting. It was becoming a repetitive problem, but his mother had shoved a permanent sticking charm on the thing. Without taking out the wall, there was no way to get her down. He supposed it would be rude to gift someone a headquarters then burn it down.

“Shut up!” he yelled back at her, which promptly seemed to make her worse.

Remus winced, then made a gesture to the door with a pained expression.

“Go! I’ll shut the old hag up!” Sirius yelled, trying to be heard over the wretched noise. This was not how he wanted his morning to go, but sometimes, screaming at the old bitch could be cathartic. It’d certainly helped when he was half his age.

Never one to be a fool, Remus ducked out the door. It took all of his strength not to follow him.
“Bringing shame to this house, the house of your fathers, with disgusting creatures and mudblood lovers…”

Sirius let out a huff and went over to get the curtains; they were stronger than he’d imagined. She was clearly in a shitty mood. Well, art imitating former life, then, since she was usually in a shitty mood. “And still alive, which is more than I can say for you. Shut up!”

With that, he pulled the curtains closed and hoped she’d calm the hell down enough he could go away.

“Sirius?”

Instinctually, Sirius grabbed his wand from inside his back pocket and swung around on his heel, letting go of the curtains to the renewed one-woman banshee show his mother’s portrait was insisting on putting on. There was no one else in the house. Except there was someone else in the house. How had they gotten in? They’d swept the place. McGonagall had swept the place, and there was no one more thorough, except perhaps Mad-Eye, who had also swept the place. Even the basement and the attic.

He opened his mouth to ask who the hell they were, what the fuck they were doing there, and why they seemed to be perfectly comfortable to speak to him on a first name basis when his brain kicked in then promptly short-circuited. He’d finally done it. Twelve years in Azkaban, and he can survive with a few rough edges, but less than a week in Grimmauld Place, and he’d cracked up. This was really annoying, he thought in a detached sort of way. They probably don’t let nutters be vigilantes or godfathers, and he’d been trying to do both.

(With very little success on either front, he thought bitterly.)

There was a man on the stairs, perhaps five and change younger than himself and staring. If nothing else, it was the staring that was familiar. Regulus had been known for being watchful. He wasn’t a ghost. He didn’t look like one, for a start, and he actually looked as if he could be around the right age. But if this was a full blown hallucination in reaction to his current circumstances, his brain did wonderful work on the little details. The voice in particular was a nice touch. Managing to still sound like someone had shoved a stick up your ass and lodged it there was an impressive thing to convey in a single word.

And damn it, now his mother’s portrait was off again.

With his other hand, he reached over to one of the ridiculous amount of random trinkets on the cabinet table and tossed it towards the other man. He wouldn’t say he threw it at him exactly. He was just relatively sure hallucinations were not capable of physically stopping a figurine with their torso or catching it.

And quite unlike any spectre or hallucination, Regulus’s hand seemed to instinctively rise to grasp the hurtling object with all the grace and speed that had once served him so well on the Pitch. Holding it in front of his face for a moment, he saw it was just a small paperweight, a silver serpent curled in an ornate design.

“Was that really necessary?” Regulus deadpanned as his eyes flicked to the screeching portrait, nose crinkled in a subtle wince.

“If I’m having a psychotic episode, I’d prefer to know about it,” Sirius said snippily, still not totally convinced.
However, that raised another problem: if Regulus was not only alive but right in front of him and seemingly quite aware of him, then there had to be a problem with the Fidelius. Had something gone wrong, as Sirius had not technically been the last Black? That would mean that the entire plan was in danger, because though Regulus Black may be standing in the Black ancestral home, a Death Eater was also standing in the newly minted headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix.

However, Regulus had, for whatever reason, scurried. He’d never known any of the details; it was only with the last resort of asking Narcissa that he had even found out that his brother had gone missing. The answer had seemed obvious. When people had gone missing back then, they tended to show up in pieces, sooner or later. Clearly, Voldemort had decided to have him killed, and Bellatrix didn’t have the decency to inform her sister of the fact, so the death had been blamed on the Order. Supposed death, he amended. But then what was he doing here? He’d gotten out, no mean feat for a teenage Death Eater. Why come back now?

His stomach plummeted. Hadn’t Harry said that Voldemort had sent out a call to all of the Death Eaters? Was that what he’d come back for? “What the hell are you doing here?” he said, over the continuing verbal bullshit his (their) mother was spewing from her portrait.

"Well, I was trying to sleep..." Regulus called back evasively, thumb tracing the patterned twist of the paperweight as his eyes again flicked between Sirius and the curtained portrait.

Sirius glared at him.

He was starting to get a headache, and it wasn't even halfway through the morning. What were they going to do if someone came in the door right now? Not that they'd hear it with his mother still at it. He pressed a finger to his temples. No matter how much he yelled at the stupid thing, it seemed to take it as encouragement to screech louder.

"You'd think the sight of the perfect child looking considerably less dead than she imagined would at least get her to lower her voice!" Though he supposed no one would have considered putting in a 'back from the dead' clause. Surprising, since it was becoming so popular.

From his measured distance by the stairs, Regulus lifted his eyebrows and eyed the flapping curtains and its steep angle from the stairs. "I don't know if she can see me over here, technically speaking."

Sirius weighed up his options. On the one hand, taking a wand away from a Death Eater was a profoundly stupid thing to do. But it was Regulus. He was still relatively confident he’d be fine with him, even if he decided he wanted to hex him. Regulus had never been known for his strong stomach.

(But it had been a very long time.)

He sighed. “Give me a minute, and don’t say anything; she’s not going to shut up.” He stomped back over to the curtains, and with an undue ferocity, pulled them shut. He winced as the screaming continued for a few minutes, Then, he noted with a sigh of relief, she went silent.

He looked back to Regulus and made a ‘move it’ motion with his hand. They were not going to do this in the hall, because this was probably going to be noisy, and he was already trying to nurse a pounding headache from prolonged exposure to his mother. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

With some distance between them and the furied portrait, the tension in Regulus’s shoulders at last
began to loosen. His eyes flicked over to his brother again, and with the anxiety of chaos fading to peace, his mind, too, quieted to a muse. The years in prison had done his brother no favors, wearing the youth from his hair-framed face and dampening the carefree air of mischief that had always simultaneously dug under Regulus’s skin and draw him to follow as a child, yet it was Sirius, no less. His brother, as safe as could be reasonably expected whilst on the run - and as irreverent to their mother as he’d ever been. (It was no true surprise that she was shouting at him.)

“I don’t recall the de-escalation process being quite so simple, in the past,” he muttered wryly, voice quieted despite the floor between.

"It'd escalate a lot less if the old bat hadn't put the permanent sticking charm on the back of it," muttered Sirius coming to a stop a fair distance from him. "However, your inability to answer a simple question is downright nostalgic."

The path was familiar, well-worn under their feet -- as much in their words as in the physical sense. Regulus had wondered on occasion what he might say to his brother if ever they met again, what apologies, what expressions of concern, yet here, in this steadily decaying house, the only words he could grasp were more of the same, bone-deep and passing his lips with an ease akin to breathing, however many years had passed.

“Unfair accusation,” Regulus countered then, smothering the awkward uncertainty beneath a veil of detachment. “Just because it wasn’t the answer you wanted doesn’t mean I didn’t answer you.”

Sirius shot him a withering look. “Why are you in Grimmauld Place, Regulus? As opposed to the mausoleum.”

Pressing his lips to a line, Regulus hesitated a beat, eyes locking with Sirius’s in a stretching moment of truth. (Truth - when had truth last had a place between them?) The horcruxes burned at the back of his mind, the destroyed locket and the shadowy possibilities beyond anything he had dared to assume. Perhaps Sirius could help, perhaps the burden could be shared after years of isolation-

-or perhaps Sirius wouldn’t believe the story, or worse, believe the story and go rogue, running his mouth at some inopportune moment outside the secured walls of this house. There was little Regulus had control of, but this - this was his, and he would hold the reins.

“As it turned out, death suited my tastes better than I thought it would,” Regulus began sardonically, a tiny shiver creeping over his skin at the prickling memories of a dark cave and an even darker lake; forcibly the thoughts were subdued, grasping instead the serenity of a duck pond, cozied away in a distant French village. Crossing his arms securely across his chest, Regulus shook his head, continuing in a more sobered tone, “Even so, I felt it was time to come home.”

Sirius echoed the movement, crossing his arms in either disbelief or sheer exasperation. "And had nothing at all to do with a call to arms that went out a few weeks ago?"

A pause. And a plunge:

“It had everything to do with that call to arms,” Regulus responded, his tone even but no less challenging as he added, “but not for the reasons you are undoubtedly assuming. The Dark Lord is a poison that must be expunged before the wizarding world is well and truly torn apart - I realise that. People have died, are continuing to die for this stupid war...” Breaking eye contact to examine a particular curly edge of wallpaper lifting to the left, Regulus took a steadying breath before speaking again, a clashing blend of stubbornness and discomfort edging his tone. “I am all too aware that I was part of the problem, so I thought it appropriate to make some...restorative efforts.
Whatever that is even supposed to look like.”

There was a beat of silence before Sirius responded.

"All hell is about to break loose, and instead of remaining somewhere safe, your bright idea is to run towards the danger?" His eyes glanced him over curiously. "Should I be checking for polyjuice?"

“Not polyjuice, no, but these past few weeks have me wondering if I’ve managed to completely lose touch with reality in the past decade and a half,” Regulus granted with a put upon sigh. “Does it still qualify as losing your mind if you are cognisant of it?"

Sirius shrugged, then shook his head slightly. He was fidgeting, perhaps trying to come to terms with the idea. "I'm not the authority on keeping your sanity," he admitted. "I checked your room a few days ago. There was no one there. When did you get here?"

“Late last night, not sure of the exact time,” Regulus responded with a slight shrug of his own. Sirius had been poking around in his room. He was never one to respect any instructions to stay out during all the years they had lived beneath the same roof, so Regulus supposed it was no surprise that presumed death had no greater control over his behavior. Absurd though it was, Regulus looked again to his brother with eyebrows lifted and added, “Did you touch my bookcase? I saw a smudge this morning.”

Shutting his eyes, Sirius cursed quietly under his breath and let his shoulders drop. He seemed to take a moment before processing what Regulus has said. "Probably," he replied utterly not bothered by the accusation. "You didn't go into Mum's room, did you?"

“No...I went to the drawing room, down to the kitchen to check on Kreacher, then straight to my own room.” Expression furrowing to a narrow, measuring look, Regulus added more firmly, “Why? Did you do something awful to it?"

"No, but there is something potentially volatile in there, so I wouldn't go in until I've checked the wards. I think some of them must be broken. The drawing room's infested with something as well.” Sirius looked contemplative at the idea. "That bloody elf keeps waking up the portrait and taking barmy orders from it. Either that painter was terrible or dear old Mum really lost her marbles in the last days of her life."

Curiosity flickered in Regulus’s expression, mouth twisting subtly in thought. “But the orders are presumably harmless, right? What is Kreacher going to do from inside the house?” The words were casual but probing, and though he loathed the thought, Regulus felt a small twinge of that billowing uncertainty still clouding the years between that night in the cave and the present. The portrait of their mother did not seem to extend any reach beyond these halls - surely Kreacher was not still being used for anything of import, yet he could not stop that initial leap in his pulse at the mention of ‘orders.’

(The thought was ridiculous, he knew, and Sirius would not be speaking so calmly if anything truly concerning was afoot…)

Again, Regulus fought to calm the nerves bunching in his chest. “Have you seen him this morning?”

"No. I told him to stay in the house, though whether he'll listen is up for debate," Sirius admitted, looking a little uncomfortable himself. "But if you're planning on sticking around, you need to have a word with Phineas."
Expression pinching at the brow, Regulus walked forward, mind already turning over the highest-probability spots for the elf to start his day - maybe still down in the kitchen, maybe cleaning a room somewhere…gathering more trinkets for his cupboard, strange though it was, or perhaps lamenting the reappearance of Sirius, who had never been a positive addition to Kreacher’s environment, however thoroughly Sirius liked to blame the elf for that.

“Phineas can wait,” Regulus responded as his arms fell loosely at his sides again, “I’m going to find Kreacher.”

As it was, the statement flared more dramatically than necessary. After parting ways with Sirius, not even a full minute had passed before his search came to end. Kreacher was, in fact, standing scarcely a pace from the door of the drawing room with eyes fixed so squarely that Regulus physically jolted at the sight, if briefly.

"Master Regulus is safe...Master Regulus is home," Kreacher rasped, breaking the silence with little delay, and the misty mix of joy and fading surprise nearly broke Regulus's heart in two.

Surprise swiftly melted into a rush of relief, and again, the stoic lines of his face softened to something of a smile. Foolish though it was (and so thoroughly against his normal stance on such things), Regulus dropped to his knees and pulled the elf into a hug, spindly arms wrapping around his neck in turn. Kreacher was no bigger than a toddler but somehow frailer than he would imagine a tiny child to be, with delicate bones and leathery skin. The years had continued to whittle away at Kreacher, as it had with them all, and Regulus counted it no less than a miracle that nothing dreadful had happened in all of those long years.

He felt a little embarrassed, setting Kreacher back to the floor; never one for emotional outbursts or physical displays of affection, the compulsion was jarring, another strange leap into this new and stumbling reality he found himself navigating - yet no less comforting, no less securing, to have solid confirmation of Kreacher's own safety. He thought himself blessed that no one - namely Sirius - was in proximity to observe the sudden fit of affection, because even on his best day, Sirius had difficult using even a neutral tone with Kreacher, much less could he understand what Kreacher had done for him.

And as it was, there was no easy to explain it, even if Regulus were to try.

"I am safe because of you," he said with an affirming nod, "I have not forgotten it, not even for a day."

"Kreacher woke up with a towel for a blanket, knew the nasty blood traitor could not be responsible- he is not kind like Master Regulus. Kreacher wondered if it could really be true..."

Warmth spread through his chest like a flickering flame, and Regulus granted another fond smile, shifting his kneel to sit more comfortably on his feet. "I plan to stay, at least for awhile, until this mess is cleaned up once again. If he is mistreating you, I will put a stop to it." (Or rather, he would make every effort with a slew of firm words, but the reality was somehow less certain.) "I know many years have passed, but I cannot trust others the way I can trust you." The devotion in the elf's eyes made Regulus feel guilty for his fleeting uncertainty, just a few minutes prior. "Will you help me, should I need it?"

There was no hesitation in Kreacher's nod, a look of genuine determination lining his age-worn face. "If it is to protect Master Regulus, Kreacher will do anything."

To most, such a statement might carry little weight, coming from a house-elf, bound to their master's service by magic rather than any true feeling of love, but Regulus remembered the ink-
black water and slick, clammy hands, remembered the desperate delirium of that terrible potion and the despair on Kreacher's face.

Kreacher could have left that cave alone - *should* have left that cave alone...

"I’m going to protect you, too. We're going to make it through this war, just as we did the last."

Regulus was rising to his feet when the crash sounded, punctuated by a ringing screech that flooded the lower floors with a fresh slew of insults for the second time that day. (It was not even lunch time.)

"*Filthy half-breed, child of muck and mire!*"

Expelling a measured and world-weary sigh, Regulus wondered to himself if this was to be a regular occurrence. Offering some parting words to Kreacher (who would presumably go back to whatever it was he had been doing), Regulus stepped out of the drawing room once again and began making his way back down to the portrait. The curtains were flying, as appeared to be the norm, but as his eyes scanned the stretching hallway, he saw nothing that might be responsible for the crash. The troll-leg umbrella stand was knocked over, but there was no Sirius in sight -- no one in sight at all.

A grimace lined his face, steeling for the approach.

"Here we go," he muttered under his breath, though it was little better than thinking it in his head, for all the racket. Pressing forward with a wince, Regulus forced one foot in front of the other until he caught his first proper sight of the portrait.

For a jolting moment, he thought his heart may stop.

She stood as tall as she had in life, but in many ways, that was the only thing he truly recognized. Her skin was jaundiced and taunt, her eyes burning with a hatred that made him feel smaller than he had in a long, long time. Her hand lurched forward, as if to claw her way out of the painting, and his chest lurched in turn. Though she was trapped inside, he could feel his heart thundering, and his hand rose instinctively, as if to block the swat. Temptation to flee buzzed beneath his socked feed, urging him to step back and let this be Sirius's problem.

But Walburga Black was his mother too, even in death, and if either of them was to be responsible for her, it was Regulus every time, time and time again.

Steadily he breathed in, and out. Planted his feet to the wooden floorboards like planted roots.

Perhaps it would fly back in his face, but at least once, he had to try...

"Mum? It's-" he started, though his voice could scarcely be heard. Forcing a bit more volume to his voice, he continued, "It's me. Regulus."

The scream pattered to silence, the curtains dropped limply to each side, and for a moment, the house fell still. Anxiety began tangling in his chest as she stared at him, but slowly, the rage in her eyes drained to something...different. (*Mournful.*) When again she spoke, the words were chillingly soft.

"My son...They took my son from me..."

"Typical!" came an exclamation from the stairs, indicating Sirius had been on the floor above as he took a few steps down the stairs scanning the floor. He looked positively vexed, frowning at the
scene with obvious disdain.

Sirius shifted his eyeline, suddenly tensing up, but without an apparent source. He was quiet for a moment, then shrugged forcefully. "There's been some developments since this morning, but since Phineas is being about co-operative as usual, I don't know any more than you do. You'll have to ask him yourself, but good luck getting an answer."

Regulus's face contorted somewhat, eyes fixed for a moment longer on the lingering image of his mother - a pale imitation of the great and daunting woman she had been - but his brother's voice now filled the soundspace, and he in turn spared a glance to the side.

"So there have been developments, but we don't know what developments they are?" Regulus clarified before looking to their mother's portrait again. With a sigh, he took the curtains, one in each hand, and began to close them. "Goodbye, for now," he said, pulling the edges together with ease. Lifting his eyebrows, he looked to his brother again. "Maybe the portraits just don't like you."

"I wasn't talking to you." Sirius rolled his eyes in his brother's general direction. He still looked considerably sour. "I was talking about you."

"To who?" Regulus asked, crinkling his nose and looking around in legitimate puzzlement, dropping his hands from the curtains to cross loosely across his chest. "Your invisible friends? I know you said you weren't the authority on maintaining your sanity, but that's a touch over the top, even for you."

Sirius stared at him for several moments before clenching his jaw. "I don't think he can hear you either," he said, eventually. He took the last couple of steps down and stopped. "I just assumed it failed. Is it ever known to be selective? He can obviously see and hear me." Another pause. "No, I think I forgot to put that away after you tripped this morning, I've been a bit busy."

Sirius also gestured to his brother. "Still not talking to you, be with you a moment. I'm not mental either. No more than usual, at any rate."

Face pinching to an irritated scowl, Regulus opened his mouth to extend a firm objection to being waved off like some pestering child, but however irritating the source, Regulus had learned well the merits of listening. Sirius had not been acting particularly mad - no more than usual, as he just admitted himself - but by that logic, there was someone standing right beside him in his own house, existing in a state of invisibility. (The gall.)

Expression loosening to an air of feigned disinterest, Regulus tapped his fingers against his still-crossed arms. (Selective invisibility...what sort of spells might have selective invisibility?) "Of course, do go on," he muttered back to Sirius with a subtle flick of his hand, "Obviously your invisible friend comes first. Don't mind me."

"Given that they're invisible to you and I'm not, yes, they do. They also didn't leave me with a shit storm of a fallout when they decided to piss off, so I'm less annoyed with them," Sirius said, surprisingly levelly. He mostly seemed put out; a little curious, perhaps.

There was another pause, then a slight shake of his head. "No, you've been talking to Phineas and even Mum's got some very specific insults for you compared to the ones she saves for me." He frowned, suddenly. "I wouldn't have put it past my father to do something like to stop any errant sneaking out, but now we have a considerably larger problem than Kreacher skulking about during the process."

He seemed to refocus on Regulus. "You really can't tell at all if there's anyone else in the room?"
‘Didn’t leave me,’ Sirius had said -- ‘fall out,’ he had said. (The nerve…)

"Oh, now you're ready," Regulus drawled, expression darkening from casual annoyance to thinly veiled scorn. The rising heat of irritation spiked to a boiling point as the past bubbled to the surface, memories of Sirius that he had been making every valiant effort to dismiss: The gaping sense of loss when he realized his brother wouldn't be coming home, the screaming, the lingering smell of char and the sting of the Mark on his skin. In one fell moment, any strategic information-gathering fell to pieces as the rush of anger tore open like a wound. Letting himself think this could somehow be better than it once was - he’d been a fool to entertain the thought, and the sting felt sharper for it. "Don't you talk to me about fall out," he leveled with venom creeping into his tone, singling an accusatory finger, "when you decided to piss. off."

Twisting back toward the portrait and pulling back the curtain, Regulus met his mother's drooping eyes. "Sirius and his friend are defiling the house of our fathers," he said coolly, letting the curtain fly loose from his fingers as she set off screaming again. His ears would probably still be ringing when he reached his room on the top floor, but petty though it was, the chaotic ranting brought some strange measure of satisfaction, if only because he didn't have to listen to Sirius talking to his stupid invisible friend like Regulus wasn't even there…

He had been trying to get along with Sirius, legitimately trying, strange and rocky-footed though it felt after all that had happened.

(Why did Sirius have to ruin everything?)
It took a stupidly long time to get the curtains closed, even with Remus's help.

"I think you hit a nerve," Remus said, stating the bloody obvious. If anyone was aware of Sirius's inability to keep himself from blurting out the wrong thing when he was angry or upset, then Remus could consider himself an expert. It didn't make it any less pleasant to deal with the fallout.

It was possible, after all, the point had been to piss him off. It turned out that whether you were thirteen or thirty-five, having to deal with his mother's tendency to scream at him and inform him exactly how much she regretted ever having given birth to him in the first place, then watching a sweeter, if manipulative disposition come over her almost immediately in the mere presence of her younger son stung. He'd had a lot time to stew on the feeling, and he knew that no matter how much he hated his parents' beliefs or how much he could despise them, it still hurt. He hadn't meant for any of that to slip in, but it had all the same.

"It's this place," Sirius groused, when they made it upstairs to the study where they were unlikely to set off that bloody portrait again. "It may be the most fortified home in Wizarding Britain, but it's always felt like a powder keg waiting for a spark."

"That was some spark," Remus replied dryly.

"I know. I know, alright?" He flopped into the chair with an irritable sigh.

"Then I think we should move on to bigger problems," Remus said, sitting down softly. He was being remarkably calm. Then again, wasn't that Remus all over? He had to have self control. He was too afraid of what would happen if he didn't. "There is still a Death Eater in Headquarters who is at least partly aware of the surroundings."

"There was a Death Eater here yesterday," Sirius snapped shortly. Having Snape in the house, however briefly, hadn't improved his mood any either.

"Sirius," Remus said, in long-suffering tones. "The Order will congregate here on Friday. If there's something wrong with the Fidelius, Dumbledore must know."

Sirius scowled. He wasn't a child anymore, he knew what was at stake. "I've tried to get Phineas to relay a message, but he says Dumbledore isn't there. Though the old bastard could well be lying."

"McGonagall, then," Remus said. Sirius was instantly glad he hadn't suggested Mad-Eye Moody. No matter how angry he got with his younger brother, he didn't want him blown to pieces on his account. "If nothing else, she may be able to get Flitwick to help look at the charm and see if we're safe here."

A part of Sirius suddenly hoped they wouldn't be, so they'd just be able to leave. But he regretted the thought almost instantly. The point was that nowhere was safe. This place had been their best shot at it.

"I'll ask her," Sirius said, eventually.

"Quickly," Remus added. Sirius opened his mouth to snap again, before Remus continued. "The moon is only three nights away."

Instantly, Sirius felt stupid again. Remus would need somewhere quiet to transform and be left to
deal with it; even with wolfsbane, he still had to go through it. The idea of someone else wandering through the house while unaware the dangers there would worry Remus deeply. No matter whether Padfoot was there or otherwise.

"I'll do it now."

Minerva McGonagall had shown up in almost no time at all. She sent her apologies for Dumbledore, who would apparently not be back before Friday, and she wouldn’t be able to get a message to him easily. However, she did bring with her some fresh theories and perhaps more importantly than that, boxed up meals that were obviously the handiwork of the house-elves at Hogwarts along with a tin of biscuits he was sure was her handiwork alone. With a stab of emotion, Sirius realised exactly how much he had missed his old Head of House.

“Well then,” she said, as the table began to set itself. “Where is he?”

“His room, on the top most landing,” Sirius said, shooting a look at Remus in case he decided he wanted to tattle on him.

“And he can see you perfectly? But not Remus.”

Sirius nodded in assent. “Does it mean the Fidelius didn’t work?”

“No, Filius had another idea.” McGonagall tapped her wand and plates came flying out of the shelves, though she eyed them suspiciously. “The Fidelius charm alters your ability to perceive your surroundings. Those under the charm cannot be seen, even if directly in front of those who are not. They see only what they expect to see. However, this is true when the Fidelius is cast upon people.” There was a collective wince. “The Fidelius in this case is on the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix.”

“What difference does that make?” Sirius asked.

“Because it relies upon perception,” McGonagall gave him a glare for interrupting. Sirius shut his mouth almost instantly. “This is not merely Headquarters to you. It’s your family’s ancestral home, regardless of how you feel about them. You don’t perceive it as the rest of us do.”

“Does that mean Sirius is not under the charm?” Remus asked, sounding alarmed.

“No, I believe he is,” McGonagall said, pouring herself a sherry from a flask. “But although he’s certainly the legal owner, the house undoubtedly recognises the last legitimate heir. Filius seems to think it’s this interaction of blood magic and perception that’s causing the predicament.”

“What would that mean for me if Narcissa came through here?” Sirius said, warily.

“That,” she said, equally warily, “I don’t have an answer for. However, if the danger isn’t immediate, it can wait until Friday. Answers from your brother cannot, and with a lack of any other way of openly communicating, you’ll have to find out what he’s doing.”

Sirius flushed red. “I don’t think he’ll be in the mood to tell me anything,” he mumbled.

McGonagall narrowed her eyes at him, then handed him a plate. “You’re what we have, so we’ll have to make do. Food and an apology for however you’ve stuck your foot in your mouth ought to do the trick, in my experience.”
For all the childish tones of a bedroom hideout (a force of habit, a path more automatic than perhaps any other, within these walls), the spread of his bed and a book had calmed the brunt of Regulus’s stormy mood, however thick the moody air of irritation still hung.

Staying in this room forever was irrational - and he knew that, even if Kreacher had kindly brought him his lunch an hour before, soup still sitting half-eaten at the desk. Never had Regulus been particularly good at navigating the tension that lingered after a fight, but he had not lost his temper in quite some years. (Perhaps it was also of note that it had been quite some years since he’d been in the same room as Sirius, he could not help but think.) His ability to respond to conflict in a reasonable manner seemed to nosedive, in this house, but it was here that his weaknesses were so glaringly thrown in his face, freshly as the day they had first wounded him. France knew nothing of his family legacy, of his brother’s flight, of the horrors and expectations. France was quiet and safe, and even in silence, their home was not quiet. Even empty, it did not feel truly safe anymore.

Regulus had come home to make difference, but could he really do anything like this? (How was he supposed to make this work?)

Navigating uncertain relationships was exhausting, but at least there were things he could do ...fruitless though they were, thus far. The horcrux passage before him offered no brilliant insight during this review, either. He had scoured this tome plenty of times, back when he first researched these monstrosities, but he had hoped, nonetheless, that there might have been something he didn’t know to look for the first time...

The distant cloud of thoughts was broken by a brief sound, followed by a much louder string of curses. Sirius’ inability to knock before just opening a closed door appeared to have made him run afoul of the jinxed door handle. Trying to barge in, of course. As always.

Regulus sighed, his nose crinkled just slightly. “Sorry, didn’t hear that. I’m too busy reading about something far more important than you,” Regulus called through the door without lifting his eyes from the page in front of him, “How did you put it earlier...I can see this book, but you can’t, so it comes first? Something like that.”

There was a brief pause and then some scuffling. "I hate apologising. Are you really going to make me do it through a door?"

Regulus leveled a suspicious glance toward his brother’s voice. Apologies were not always apologies in the traditional sense, but the tone was sincere enough. Shutting his book with a soft thump, he stuck it back in the bag lying next to him. Sirius had grabbed far too many books from his hands in the past, and although his brother was unlikely to have much interest in magical chess biographies, to avoid the risk of catching a page about dark magic was probably best, as it was.

Taking his wand in hand, he gave it a subtle flick: the door clicked, and with another swish, swung slowly open. Wordless, he met his brother’s eyes.

Sirius looked at the door as if going through it was going to somehow incapacitate him, but seemingly, he decided to risk it. He put down a plate on the cabinet. "I didn't make it, so it probably won't poison you."

He then seemed to come to the conclusion he didn't want to come in any further than that, hanging about awkwardly for a moment. "I'm sorry I was a git, all right?" he said, the words almost all in a rush, as if mashed together. "I'm not doing it on purpose. It's not just you I'm snapping at — but you don't want to hear about that. It's not what I'm on about. And I'm shit at apologising, so I’m sorry for that too, while I’m at it."
There was a certain strain that came with sorry, a vulnerability that everyone involved would - generally - rather avoid entirely. Flicking his gaze over to the plate of biscuits, then back to his brother again, Regulus decided against any itch to make the situation more agonizing than it undoubtedly already was. Irate though Regulus was about the careless remark, an admission of wrongdoing and an initiation to repair the situation was not a thing he wanted to squander - not when everything around felt eerily foreign. It was uncomfortable enough without active argument.

Regulus was different now, no longer a child. How they could truly manage to navigate this mess of situation in the long-term, he didn’t know, but if Sirius was going to keep tripping forward, he supposed he would trip along too, for now.

“Apology accepted,” he granted after what felt like a staggeringly awkward pause, and with his voice smearing into a mutter of his own, he added, “...I probably should have resisted the impulse to set Mum off on purpose, myself.”

To his credit, Sirius sighed heavily as if he had been expecting a much different response. "Poor impulse control, what's that like,” he said, dryly. "It's not the worst thing you could have done, happens four or five times a day. People trip or forget and ring the bell. Doesn't get on my nerves any less, but..."

A pause. “She fucked things up with us enough while she still drew breath. In the future when I’m being a tosser, any chance you can just hex me?”

Wryly the corner of Regulus's mouth tugged taut and crooked. "Physical discomfort? But where's the suffering in that?" Leaning forward, he folded his hands atop his propped knees and released a slow and drawn sigh of his own. With his eyes, he traced the line of his canopy and its draping cloths of Slytherin silver and green. Situated above his pillow, the deplorable clippings of the Dark Lord's rise hung mockingly on the wall below their family crest, now a reminder of every mistake, every loss, every reason to end this war.

The room screamed with identity, focus, certainty - yet every defining line had smudged, every solid foundation had crumbled out from below. It felt almost like a different life time, like sitting in the room of a dead child, except the dead child was himself, and everything around him belonged to him.

Sirius followed his eyeline and quirked an eyebrow. “I’m not a fan of the new addition to the decor.”

“The articles? They're quite terrible,” Regulus conceded, brow furrowing as he tipped his head. Uncomfortably, he lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug, eyes lingering on the pinned clippings for a moment longer - and another - before breaking away, dropping to the deep green spread of the comforter, if only to have something to look at that wasn’t his brother. “It’s harder to ignore, here. The state of my grand plan is a far cry from what I had in mind.” (Not visibly, not practically - theoretically, at best.) Lifting his eyebrows with another sigh he added dryly, “Advice about defection was thoroughly covered, but not in a particularly helpful way.”

“I don't know a lot about defection either, regardless of the Ministry appear to have decided regarding my involvement.” Sirius huffed. “Wrong brother. No offense.”

“No offense taken. The irony is not lost, that is for certain,” Regulus responded, threading his fingers loosely and sparing a sideways glance. “Just looking at these articles makes me feel angry; I thought about taking them down, but it almost...helps to feel angry, so I don’t lose perspective.”

“I've never thought you the type to want to stay angry,” Sirius confessed. He was fidgeting in
“Nn… My phrasing was poor. It is not so much about wanting to be angry, in the strictest sense… Pointedly forgetting that the Dark Lord ever existed has become a less effective solution than it once was, so it is time to switch strategies.” Lifting his brow, his tone lifted - dry and light. “I was angry with you for years, after all. I can be angry for quite a long time when I put my mind to it.”

Sirius nodded slightly, but paused again before speaking. "Nothing wrong with being angry. It can light a fire under you when fuck all else does. Besides,” his mouth curled in disgust, “Forgetting the Dark Lord ever existed appears to be the status quo of the magical world. I don’t think it’s going to stop them from getting killed.”

"Willful and strategically implemented denial cannot stop a killing curse?” Regulus opened his expression to one of feigned surprise and disappointment. With a soft *tsk* and a tip of the head, he sighed again. “I suppose I am going to need a Plan B, after all.”

"It did once.” Sirius was suddenly very interested in the wallpaper.

Skepticism drew Regulus’s features in once again. For a moment, his mind jammed with puzzlement - Sirius appeared to actually mean the words when he said them - and with a jolt he recalled the Triwizard coverage, articles telling of ‘The Boy Who Lived’ and his unsanctioned involvement. “Oh, wait, do you mean Potter’s son? The story about him defeating the Dark Lord merely by existing sounded a little exaggerated, but I assumed the Dark Lord was dead for good, so it didn’t seem too terribly important at the time. It seems he's still in the papers, even now. The way they tell it, Potter Jr. cheated his way into the Triwizard Tournament too? Though the papers weren’t really clear about what happened with that, either…”

There was a moment of tense silence. For a moment, Sirius looked like he might hit him before breathing out through his nose hard in an obvious show of trying to keep his temper in check.

"*My godson did no such thing!*” Sirius said, voice icy. "Fucking Crouch put his name in so he could resurrect Voldemort and kill him. I think we've both established the papers are full of crap, because you're not dead, and I am not nor have I ever been a bloody Death Eater."

Instinctively, Regulus cringed at the casual use of the Dark Lord’s name, but there was a name more jarring still. “Crouch? As in Barty?” ‘*My* Barty?,’ Regulus nearly said, scarcely catching his tongue and settling for a better-chosen descriptor, but neither father nor son made a great deal of sense in this context. "Junior? I thought he was in Azkaban, too, with Bella, Rodolphus, and Rabastan."

"His mother switched out with him and died in his stead,” Sirius said, with a shrug, calming just a touch. "By the sounds of it, he must've gone completely round the twist. Not surprising, given the circumstances."

"What?” Deepening the furrow in his brow, Regulus locked his eyes on Sirius, nonchalant though his older brother was about the news. Barty had been so close with his mother...letting her die...? But then if he was alive, and he was out of Azkaban... (It was foolish, lifting his hopes that Barty could be a salvaged friendship after all this time, and yet-) "Are you sure?"

"I was there when he was caught. He went batty, do you understand? In my experience, it's not too often sociopaths scream for their mothers, but after over a decade hiding in a place they hate...” Sirius winced, looking around the room in distaste. "I understand how he'd lose his mind and become more like the Lestranges and the other fanatics, hoping to gain approval for their loyalty."
"He is not a sociopath," Regulus objected defensively as dread twisted tightly in his stomach, but the words were tethering their hooks, painting a picture that looked increasing bleak... (Sirius spoke of madness, yet could Sirius's assessment of the situation really be trusted? He'd thrown similar insults at their mum all the time, used the word 'batty' in the same way one might use 'purist,' had always been steeped in bias...) Tension pulled at his muscles, tightened the line of his mouth -- and as he forced himself to again look at Sirius, Regulus spoke again. "The papers mentioned nothing of his escape, unlike yours, so I presume they are not aware. Do you...know where he is? I suppose he couldn't go home, considering his father..."

"He killed his father, who had imperiused him for some time. That's why there were reports of Crouch seeming even weirder than usual. When they found out, he confessed to all of it with glee and was Kissed almost immediately." Sirius almost managed to suppress a shudder at the thought.

Visibly paling, a smothering wave of dismay washed over Regulus. If it was true that Barty had been responsible for the Dark Lord's return, some logical part of him might argue that such a person had to be stopped at any costs, but logic had no place in that moment, was not welcome in future moments either, as all he could focus on was the terrible realization that Barty had escaped, certainly, but Barty was no less gone.

"He got the Dementor's Kiss...?" A quiet, creeping realization had wriggled into Regulus's tone, eyes dropping to the bedspread once again as his focus slipped away from whatever confirmations or commentary his brother would spout on the subject. Elbows digging firm against his legs, he pressed thumbs to his temple, fingers to the bridge of his nose, clasped his hands to press anxiously to his forehead, as if the information could be expelled from his mind, if only he could find the right spot.

"He did," Sirius confirmed. "I don't blame him much over his father - Crouch is a piece of work - but he just doomed the entire magical world because he wanted to watch Voldemort tear apart those who didn't go to Azkaban for him."

Sirius's words rolled off like rain pounding on an umbrella, somehow messy and distant, all at once; stiffly, Regulus's focus curled up under that umbrella. In the tangle of his memories, a boy with straw-colored hair talked about the unbearable wait for NEWT scores, the freedom of finishing school, the storm they were going to unleash on the wizarding world as their responsibilities took full form. Over-eager, unleashed, grasping for a direction to hurtle himself in... Regret trampled reason, smothering even the protected secrecy of the horcruxes for a flickering moment, and he muttered - scarcely audible - under his breath, "I should have convinced him to come with me."

For all the idolization of the Dark Lord, people could change, could see the truth, could focus that energy on something constructive rather than destructive.

(People could betray, could steal the locket back, could tell the Dark Lord of its discovery.)

"What a mess..." Regulus again muttered, his tone take a fuller form.

"You really walked back into this blind, didn't you?" Sirius asked, looking him over critically.

As if remembering, suddenly, that his brother was still present and participating in this terrible moment, Regulus shifted a sideways glance, clasped hands still pressing to his forehead. "I'm not omniscient. It's not as if I've been getting a Death Eater alumni newsletter."

“I’m not implying omniscience. I’m pointing out you’re running at a situation full bloody throttle without taking the time to find out what actually happened. What is happening,” Sirius corrected
himself. “The result of which has meant coming into a house with people you cannot interact with but are aware of you, which I’m aware you hate, along with a wrongly-convicted mass murderer while the press and Ministry spin lies about what happened that night.”

Sirius raked his hand through his hair. “Yesterday, you were dead and had been since I was still a stupid kid. I believe I’m entitled to ask a question or two.”

"How could I have possibly known to expect invisible people to be living in my house?" Regulus retorted in exasperation, closing his eyes with a crinkling nose. "I don't know what you want me to say..."

"I want you to say you're not going to take a run at Narcissa," Sirius said, firmly. "Even on the off-chance her happiness overrides her grief and anger, Lucius is already working for Voldemort. He screwed something up a few years ago and he's with something to prove. Don't be it."

Save for a quiet groan, Regulus said nothing for a stretching moment, hating the truth of it as deeply as he wanted to do exactly the thing Sirius was advising against. In what twisted reality did his brother have a head more level than his own? Horrifying and jarring though the realization was, and however thoroughly he understood the myriad reasons he ought to steer clear of surviving family and friends at all costs, it did little to dampen the wish.

"I saw she has a son, now," he said after an uncomfortable pause, "On the tapestry."

Sirius stared at him for a beat, as if acknowledging his refusal to promise just that. "I've seen him. He and Harry had a game against each other a year or so ago. Arrogant berk, shoots his mouth off too much just like his father." He shrugged. "It's still a terrible thing for a fifteen-year-old to be dragged into. I don't wish it on them, regardless of everything."

"Arrogant berks who shoot their mouths off too much. I wonder what it’s like to be around someone like that," Regulus remarked dryly.

Sirius promptly flipped him off. "Can you imagine you or I running to our father every time I did something stupid that backfired to fix it, or to complain because someone was mean to me?"

"No, that would be ridiculous." Regulus glanced over and rolled his eyes. "But I can imagine you exaggerating a situation based on your own biased perceptions."

"Perhaps a little," Sirius allowed, before indicating the clippings board. "But he seems to be a fan, judging by his reaction to Voldemort's return. Brat or not, I'd prefer history didn't repeat itself."

(Again, with the Dark Lord’s name…) Regulus groaned, letting his head fall to his still-propped knees with a thunk. "Of course he is a fan," he muttered, voiced strained and slightly muffled, "But I was still hoping you wouldn't say that."

"It's possible Narcissa will try to keep him out of it." Sirius's voice was a little placating. "Or he'll decide to remain on the sidelines, though I've been informed he duels frequently, seems close with Snape of all people, and Remus did mention him having consistently high marks. Doesn't bode well. It's one of the reasons I asked you not to go to her."

"So instead, I stand by and let him ruin his life?" Lifting his head, Regulus leveled a stare at his brother, implications hanging above them like rusted blades, as mishandled as they were old. "Call him a lost cause?"

“Ruin his life,” Sirius said mildly, shaking his head in a strange sense of disbelief. As to what he was saying or feeling, he did not seem to feel like elaborating. “The last time I trusted someone in
that situation, the last time I trusted a Death Eater, people died. I wrecked my life, Regulus. I fear you making my mistakes as you fear him making yours."

Falling silent, Regulus held a watchful gaze, wondering just which Death Eater his brother could have possibly trusted. There was not a single Death Eater Regulus was aware of that Sirius Black would grant a lick of trust to, related or not, and however deep into the mire Regulus had felt, he did not think it was a reference to himself, unless some indirect tragedy had occurred without his awareness. (There were legions of Death Eaters, surely ones he'd never met - had their reaches extended as far as those who Sirius would have granted his trust? Or could he have actually trusted family, unlikely though it seemed?)

Curious though he was, it did not seem a subject to press, at present. Shaking his head, Regulus knitted his brow once more. "I know you don't like them, you never have, but they're still family... How am I supposed to reconcile that? How do I say nothing when I know he's about to do something stupid without knowing just how stupid it is? Because if his father is in trouble, I can imagine all too well what a great idea it sounds like." Rubbing at his temple, he added glumly, "I know it's foolish, I do. Self-preservation calls to cut one's losses at this point, but it just bothers me."

"You say nothing because you do more good by remaining dead than any words you could impart," Sirius implored. "You were Narcissa's favourite. I've seen the gravesite bouquets she must send or place." He stopped and indicated Regulus. "Supposed gravesite, anyway. With her own child barely younger than you must have been, do you really believe she'll allow him to join, regardless of his feelings on the matter? Knowing it killed her beloved cousin when he was barely of age? She can't do anything about her husband, he's sealed his own fate by coming when called like an errant dog, but she can do something for her son if she believes it'll kill him."

Sighly miserably, Regulus nodded. "I suppose that's true," he admitted grudgingly, pressing his lips to an unhappy line. Everything Sirius had said was jarringly reasonable - it was almost suspicious, how reasonable his brother was being, all of sudden - and not even Regulus could argue against the fact that a living cautionary tale was much less powerful than a dead one.

It was terribly annoying, knowing Sirius was right.

"Besides," Sirius pointed out, in a tone that indicated he'd rather not be. "Once they know you're alive, how long before someone thinks to check the house? How long before Voldemort knows exactly where you are? Or I am, for that matter, but I'm not exactly clear on whether or not he'd actually know I was here or not. I'm still having invisible people issues."

And Sirius was right again - twice as annoying.

"I know, I know. It's not just a bad idea, it's a chain reaction sort of bad idea," Regulus said with a wave of the hand. "I won't contact Narcissa." It still felt like half a betrayal to say aloud, to be home and mention nothing to those who had mourned him - but the less his old friends and family knew, the safer it probably was for everyone, even now...those friends and family, included, as well as any hope of destroying whatever horcruxes might remain. "Too much is at stake."

“Thank you,” Sirius said, softly. He hesitated to speak again, opening his mouth and shutting it before sterling himself. “If you're planning on sticking around and you want Voldemort gone, there is someone you should speak to. “ He paused. “The one person he's still afraid of.”

With a sigh, Regulus looked to his brother again. "Is Professor Dumbledore one of your invisible friends, then?"
“I want to answer that, but I can’t. ‘Sirius looked more than a little frustrated. ‘It’s hard to explain. I'm asking you to trust me that it's him you need to talk to. A lot happened after you...left. If you truly want to take Voldemort on in any way, these are things you need to know.”

Turning the words over, Regulus inclined his head in acknowledgement as a thoughtful expression settled on his face. It was a curious matter, secrets and strategies -- the dance of what you know, what others know, what is safe to tell those who were once enemies (and those who may remain as such). Could Dumbledore know of the Dark Lord's secrets too? Or was it to be an account of more details he had missed?

"I suppose we shall see."

“That's why I wanted Phineas, bloody annoyance that he is,” Sirius said, by way of explanation. “But if we don't do it soon, a couple more rooms will need to go off-limits for the time being.”

"You make me concerned about what you are doing to our ancestral home when you mention rooms going 'off-limits,'" Regulus leveled with a dash of wry suspicion.

“I'm not doing anything to the house except trying to make it hospitable to humans again!” Sirius huffed, looking rather annoyed at the fact. “And checking the apparition lines. I don't want any more unexpected company. I doubt it'd be friendly.”

"We can agree on that much," Regulus granted. Shifting over to drop his feet down to the floor, he added flippantly, "I have to admit, this has been less agonizing than it could have been."

“See how you feel about it on Friday,” Sirius replied, grimly.
In the days following Regulus Black’s return to his ancestral home, an acrid mix of shock, tingling curiosity, and bittersweet melancholy wafted thick and ever-present. Every surface was caked with the grime of age and abandonment, and though he could not blame Kreacher for his decrease in effectiveness in the face of grief, to see his childhood in decay was more uncomfortable than Regulus had expected.

It was late in his first day, going into the second, that Regulus first noticed the changes. Small, usually - gradual changes, such as a chair that moved from one glance to another, despite no one being in the room. Or rather, despite no one being visible in the room. The startle response had been noticeable, the first time, and several times to follow; particularly frustrating was the time he had sat in the drawing room reading in stillness and silence, only to notice an entire shelf of trinkets cleared out from one of the glass display cases, when in drifting thought his eyes shifted in that direction. (Irritation burned hot, and he had made a mental note to hunt down Sirius and demand he pass along the necessary restrictions. Thieving was not acceptable.)

Without the knowledge of Sirius’s invisible friends and their presence in his home, Regulus would have thought his brother was merely moving things around to irritate him, but although the possibility was not entirely out of question, every surface instantly and silently scrubbed without any observable reason served as a frequent and unsettling reminder that he and Sirius were not alone in the house. Sometimes, he stumbled upon half-conversations Sirius was having with some person or another - perhaps even the same one each time, Though Regulus could not say for certain. Given deaths and deductions, he suspected Lupin to be among them, but it had not escaped him, how names were pointedly omitted. On the third morning, Regulus heard his brother’s voice in the drawing room, passing along on his way to the kitchen.

“There’s something scratching around here,” Sirius was saying, words punctuated with a rustle of some sort. “More rats, I expect.”

Silence.

“Yep,” Sirius continued, turning his attention back to the noise briefly. “House is infested with vermin. And for once, I don’t mean Kreacher.”

Again, silence followed his brother’s words, and Regulus paused his step to crinkle his nose in annoyance at the remark. The urge to defend Kreacher was sharp on his tongue, but for a moment, he bit it away.

“Don’t start, we’ve already got the president of the fan club upstairs,” Sirius was grumbling from
the other side of the wall. Wordlessly, Regulus nodded in silent approval at whoever this invisible individual was. Surprising, that one of Sirius’s friends wasn’t a complete twat about Kreacher. (Probably.) “There’s something in Dad’s study as well. Dunno what it is, but it’s making a racket.”

A brief silence followed, and though Regulus knew he ought to be walking on his way, he lingered, feet feather-light and ready to retreat at any indication Sirius was coming out. He hated that he could not monitor the halls for stray eyes watching him, but he couldn’t quite force his feet, either. Briefly, he wondered if his modified, object-anchored alarm wards would trip for the invisible people as well as they would any other person, were he to set them up. Perhaps an experiment for another time.

Sirius was speaking up again, on the other side of the door. “No. Why don’t you go up to the library? See if you can find anything we can do about that permanent sticking charm.” A pause, and Regulus edged back a few steps, still straining to listen. “It won’t hurt to look. Listening to her go off on one twice a day is doing my head in, and it’ll be worse on Friday.”

Crinkling his nose, Regulus supposed to himself that Sirius was now talking about their mother to whoever this person was, but curiosity about the coming Friday spiked, tucking away at the back of his mind. (Again, with the mention of Friday.) Though he had no idea who all Sirius was inviting into the house - neither identities nor numbers - it was clearly an event Sirius expected their mother to disapprove of.

“Maybe,” Sirius agreed. “Can’t use the current method in front of him anyway.” Silence. “Of course she is. That’s her precious perfect baby. I’m the juvenile delinquent.”

Pressing his lips to a line, Regulus lifted his brow. Clearly, the statement wasn’t meant to be complimentary, but he supposed it was not entirely untrue, either, however inappropriate it seemed to refer to him as a ‘baby’ at thirty-three - nearly thirty-four - years old. The distinction between them was in many ways his brother’s own doing when he acted like a juvenile delinquent, but that was neither here nor there, he supposed.

From the other side of the door, Sirius gave a bark of genuine laughter. “You know I think that’s the first time I’ve ever had someone correct me to tell me I’m not juvenile? Adult delinquent then.” After the briefest of pauses, Sirius spoke again, “Come on, I’ll make coffee.”

In one quick, smooth motion, Regulus stepped backwards and slipped into the next room along their stretch of hallway, shutting the door behind himself in gentle silence. Casually, he busied himself with the bookshelf inside, in the case that there was an invisible onlooker in that room, as well.

As the day progressed, Regulus had determined that holing himself away in his room was the most effective solution to guarantee - or at least increase the likelihood - that unseen strangers were not watching his every move about his own house. A bookshelf and Kreacher’s delivered meals were all he would need, at least for some time.

Memories were thick within the walls of his room, however, and charged with tells of the past. The Prophet clippings hung above his bed - the waterway poisoning at Tinworth, the Fire (eventually stuck among the others, at Barty’s encouragement), the razing of Godric’s Hollow, the imperius’d Ministry official who ‘attempted to assassinate’ the Minister for Magic and wound up in Azkaban without much question. Every clipping told a story, some more personal than others, and every story made his stomach churn uncomfortably.

In the bottom drawer of his desk, another tangle of memories reached out to prod and pull, funneling his thoughts to a place he both desperately wanted and desperately dreaded to go.
The album was thick and dusty, worn beneath his fingertips as he settled at the head of his bed. On the first page was a large picture of their family - or rather three-fourths of their immediate family. The bottom left corner had been torn out and stuffed in an envelope along with all other evidence of Sirius’s existence in the book, hidden away; out of sight but rarely out of mind. His parents’ faces were severe, focused, though on occasion, his photographic mother reached down to smooth his hair as that small version of himself, no more than 5 years old, looked to the side where Sirius’s likeness used to be.

Uncomfortably, he turned the page.

Filling the early pages were photographs of his family, immediate and extended alike. In the top corner was Uncle Ignatius Prewett, standing with a warm smile beside the regal frame of their Aunt Lucretia. In the same photograph, Regulus was a few years older - 9, nearly 10, and holding a Montrose Magpies banner, though his robes were as subdued and sharp as ever. In a rush, he recalled that he had not been permitted to sport supportive clothing, base as it was, by his parents’ telling. The photograph had been taken the summer before Sirius was Sorted into Gryffindor (this photo, too, was torn), commemorating the first and only quidditch game he and his brother had been to together, courtesy of their uncle. Aunt Lucretia had not stayed for the game, as he recalled. Fuzzy though the memory was, the beaming smile on his face in the photograph brought back a feeling old and warm, watching as the small version of himself shifted between looking forward and looking around at the surrounding excitement.

Several pages later, photographs of his friends began popping up. Tightly, Regulus’s chest clenched.

Standing together in the snow, two boys were huddled together in Slytherin scarves, one with dark hair and one with light, each speckled with snowflakes. It had been their first Hogsmeade trip. Barty had brought his camera along, snapping memories left and right and commanding the others to take those photographs he could not take himself. Beside it was a photograph taken several years later, inside the Three Broomsticks. Sandwiched between Snape and Avery, he and Barty were again huddled, Barty’s arm slung over his shoulder and leaning so close their temples sometimes bumped. In the photograph, Regulus had a book open, occasionally looking up in response to his friend’s prodding, usually with a half-smothered smile - more sobered than the others’ but no less genuine. A gleaming prefect badge was pinned to Regulus’s cloak.

There were other photos on the page, and pages to come - the Slytherin quidditch team, a picture for each year, second to seventh. Professor Slughorn, Rabastan, Narcissa, Avery, Snape, Barty, and himself at his first Slug Club Christmas party, though less desired members of the club milled about the background. Wilkes and Mulciber performing their interpretations of what probably lived in the Shrieking Shack. Every photo twinged bittersweet, but it was the photos of Barty - his dearest friend, important beyond any other - that sent pain jutting like a jagged blade. So many years had past, yet Barty’s face etched fresh in his mind, bright and playful with startlingly blue eyes.

Barty’s eyes would be empty now, wherever they were, robbed of that life by a Dementor’s Kiss. A rush of anger flared in his chest, throat knotting tightly. If what Sirius said was true, his most treasured friend was responsible for the Dark Lord’s return - something that ought to incense him, he knew, and ought to dull the ache of how it all resolved - but he could only think of the comforting bump of shoulders and knees as they sat silently on the common room sofa, or pouring over textbooks to understand the finer points of any given passage, or the bright smile that flashed on his friend’s face when they spotted each other at a crowded get-together.

Shutting the photo album with a solid thud, Regulus stood up from his bed with tension bundling in
his muscles and thoughts reeling free in his mind. Hanging from the chair at his desk was the bag with his old horcrux books, snatched from the Lestrange’s library, and as if in a haze, he approached that bag and pulled out his copy of *Secrets of the Darkest Art*, disguised as a biography of magical chess players. He had extensively read the section specifically detailing horcruxes, all those years ago, but he had paid little mind to the rest. Buzzing in his mind was a softly growing desperation for any miniscule connection that might build upon the horcruxes, even a passing mention or means to detect - and in turn to distract his thoughts from the state of those he had left behind.

Settling again on the bed, he began to read.

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For Sirius, days passed without incident.

Despite there being quite the flutter about having a Death Eater in the house, several people had come and tried being lookie loo's to see if Regulus would notice. He never seemed to. It could be an act, but Sirius didn't believe it was. His decision to leave would not be seen as lightly as other Death Eaters who left once they believed Voldemort was dead. He'd chosen to leave when he was still in power. Regulus was also more adept at getting Kreacher to do anything than Sirius had ever been, and that blasted portrait tended to treat him as some sort of benediction, so it was a little quieter than it had been. Even if he didn’t appreciate the reason why, he could appreciate not hearing her screeching constantly.

While no one was happy about it, the same conclusion kept being drawn: the positives outweighed the negatives in terms of leaving him to it or forcing a confrontation.

This led to a very strange situation: certain select Order members flitted in and out of the house unseen was strange enough, but navigating both he and Remus while under strict instructions not to use his or anyone else’s name felt farcical. Still, there had been plenty of work to do, and the house had gone feral in the absence of a human inhabitant. Aside from breaks to take the brewed wolfsbane, he and Remus had spent most of the next two days clearing out the kitchen to the point where it at least looked a shadow of what he could remember. The fact that it had taken so long with two, sometimes three, people working on it showed exactly how long taking the place apart was going to take. The thought was enough bring on a melancholy mood, but Remus had other things on his mind.

“I believe the time is up,” Remus announced on Wednesday, as they sat eating quietly in the kitchen. “If I must go somewhere else, I need to know now.”

Sirius swallowed his food with the healthy dose of guilt. The fact that this was still hanging in limbo was down to him. The biggest secret they had at age fifteen was now no longer a secret: with James gone and Peter undoubtedly having told the Death Eaters all about their big secrets, there was little to lose in actually explaining it to his brother. Perhaps he was anticipating a fight. The idea of a live werewolf in the house was likely off-putting for people who weren’t used to it. Though the air in the house was overly casual and more than a little awkward, it was better than at each other’s throats, wasn’t it? Besides, he hadn’t seen much of him with the intense clear out job. You could almost pretend he wasn’t there at all.

“You’re fine here,” Sirius said. When Remus looked ready to respond, “No, I haven’t said anything, but I will.”

The truth was he had little clue how to act around his brother. Any formal relationship had been broken when he’d skipped out the window and gone to James’s. The last informal time he’d seen him had been their father’s funeral, and even that, he’d run out of. It had been something he’d
thought about later, when he’d first heard Regulus was missing and after he was declared legally
dead, though apparently this had been greatly exaggerated. That at barely seventeen, Regulus still
looked like a child. He’d rationalised the misery of it; stupid idiot had gotten into bed with the
Death Eaters and then lost his father because they were careless. That would make anyone upset.
Besides, Regulus wasn’t his responsibility anymore. He didn’t want to be his responsibility
anymore, and Sirius had never been one to beg people to stay anymore than his parents had been.

But the fact remained he had believed Regulus had died, and it had been a complicated emotion at
the time, made even more complicated by the fact he was now revealed not to be dead at all. There
is a tendency to reduce people to their base traits when they’d been gone a while, and his own
memory wasn’t what it used to be, but everyone who’s lost someone they once held dearly has had
the desire for just one more conversation, one more day, and now when handed with considerably
more than that, Sirius hadn’t the slightest clue what to do. It was like being on company behaviour,
but without their parents to enforce it.

‘Do you trust him?’ McGonagall had asked him, as if his own confidence in his ability to choose
the right person to trust wasn’t shattered. He also didn’t know the answer. There had been a point
where he’d have said implicitly, of course he did, and even after that, he’d have noted that Regulus
was at least predictable. This had not been predictable. Sirius didn’t fully understand what “this”
was, but it was enough to drive him into the thick of it from somewhere safe, so it was something
important. Trust was a lot to ask in either direction; they may have been bound by blood and shared
experience, but they had come down on opposite sides of a war.

And this was the crux of the issue: admitting he had, before things had been torn apart completely,
lied. A lie of omission, but a lie nonetheless. They had never been very good about secrets, either
of them, and neither liked being lied to. The idea of admitting that was difficult. It would also
involve a little talking about James, which Regulus had never taken well to for some reason or
another. He had never trusted him much, no matter what Sirius had said, and vice versa, but James
at least tried. He trusted Sirius’s word, if nothing else.

(And look where it had gotten him and Lily.)

On another level, he didn’t want to admit it to him because Regulus was holding his own secrets so
closely to his chest that if it were possible to convince people he had simply stayed in his room for
sixteen years and no one had thought to check, he likely would have. So whatever this reluctance
was to spill the beans, it was a mutual feeling, even if it didn’t seem to do either of them any good.

At sixteen, Sirius would have hated this. Truth was more important than anything else, and even if
it was loud, angry, or hurt, it was still better to get it out and know where you stand. No matter
what. No exceptions. So then why did he feel nauseated at the thought of destroying something
that wasn’t really working anyway? He had to know at least a little of what was going on in his
brother’s head, and these days, the only way to know was to ask. He couldn’t expect honesty from
him if he wasn’t honest in return, yet the idea of being honest was frightening, for lack of a better
word. It shook him. The looming spectre of consequences enveloped the house, with the ghosts of
their parents (imagined and at least partially otherwise) never far away. But Regulus was no longer
a child anymore than he was, and they were only imprints of memory and emotion. They caused
old damage if they were allowed to.

He had never been more grateful for Remus not pressing him to speak. He clearly understood this
was difficult, if perhaps not the reasons why it was difficult. Sirius himself was having more than
enough trouble pinning those down by himself. Regulus had always held him running off as a
personal insult, then when he himself had chosen to leg it for greener (or less Death Eater infested)
pastures, he had not chosen this to be information his brother should be privy to. Secrets seemed to
have a way of hurting him and wrecking lives, long before Wormtail’s betrayal had stung him. There had been too many secrets that had blown up their faces. The chance to unburden one should be a good thing, but it was unburdening one secret among many which bogged them both down, both in their collective and individual histories and in the present day.

However, this was about Remus feeling safe and secure during a time when he couldn’t control himself or his surroundings fully. He was both a danger and in danger if he went off by himself, and while he could do it alone (and had done for far too many years), if Sirius had the choice to help, he would choose it over and over again. He couldn’t fix the problem, but if he could alleviate any of the side effects, the scars, the recovery, and everything else it entailed, he was damn well going to.

If that meant having to face an uncomfortable situation, so be it. It may even go well. He’d always gotten considerably more compliments about his canine temperament than his human one.

When he reached the topmost landing, Sirius stopped. It was childish, perhaps, but Sirius had gone this long without knocking on his brother's door, and he wasn't about to break the habit. It had always put him on the defensive too. But the idea of it felt askew, too formal... Again, the difficulty in understanding how to actually be around Regulus and treat him normally when he no longer could grasp at 'normal.' Barging in felt equally wrong. He also didn't really want to get zapped again. There wasn't time for another time out and sulk, as the sun was dipping lower as early evening crept up on them.

Under the door, Sirius slipped a note requesting a meeting as soon as possible, formal wear not required, and with a flip of his wand (a wand, his own remained in Ministry custody), the paper disappeared forcefully beneath the door. If he didn’t come and find him soon, there was always the old standby of barging in.

Having worked his way through a large portion of his (or rather Bellatrix's) copy of Secrets of the Darkest Art, combing each with a thoroughness he had not been afforded in the handful of weeks he had dedicated to his research of the Dark Lord's secret so many years ago, Regulus now sat at his desk with parchment before him and a quill in hand. A line was drawn down the middle of the page, and to the left side, Regulus was carefully penning a string of coded notes.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Known} \\
H- \text{Obj. (Spec. or Ord.)} \\
C: M \\
D: BV & ? \\
I. SL (X)
\end{align*}
\]

The book had detailed more than any other when it came to the description of a horcrux and the means to make one, but with that knowledge already locked so securely in his mind, it was not mere method that could help him now. What he needed to understand was the Dark Lord's thought process, and what other dark magic might be in play. Was it one of the Founders' objects (or more than one)? Was the other horcrux special at all, or ordinary? Could there be more than two? Would the number be of significance too, or was the Dark Lord making them as the whim struck? Somehow whims didn't seem appropriate, but he could hardly count anything as certain.

It felt strange, falling into research, once again. It had been so long since anything truly pressing had rested upon his shoulders - since the successful destruction of the locket some decade and a half prior. Following that, his life had become exceedingly mundane, and however quickly he had
embraced the escape from an overwhelming life, he felt a familiar spark lighting beneath his feet once more.

On the other side of the line, he began again from the top.

_Investigate_

- D: Other?
- HC? RD? GS?
- 2? 3? 4? 7?
- FL - found?
- K (exp.)

The train of thought was interrupted when a soft swish from behind drew his attention - a piece of paper, presumably sent under the door. Lifting his brow, Regulus set down his quill and approached the paper, picking it up with mounting curiosity.

Stifling a snort at the rather dramatic wording, Regulus shook his head, supposing the mockery of an 'invitation' was altogether still better than bursting in uninvited. Sitting down at the desk once again, Regulus took out a different (and much smaller) section of parchment to write out a formal reply of his own.

_A proper invitation? With instructions on attire, no less._

_What is the saying - Perhaps one can teach an old dog new tricks, after all._

_I suppose I can find time to meet._

Folding the note neatly, Regulus pulled out his wand, and with a silent swish, sent the note gently floating under the door, charmed to seek out Sirius, in the instance that he already wandered off. Without delay, he began carefully folding his notes and tucking them beneath the cover of his 'wizarding chess' book.

A note whooshed back within the minute.

_Study in 5._

Once he had finished skimming the new note, Regulus set it neatly upon the first. After seeing to it that all of his materials were well-hidden in plain sight and his quill, ink, and parchment were situated in their appropriate places, Regulus pushed in his chair and stepped out into the hallway, making haste to the study to determine the subject of Sirius's 'summons.'

There was no particular reason the study has been chosen above anywhere else in the house, except it had been closed up in its disuse more so than the rest of the house, and the only other truly viable for use room was the kitchen where Remus currently was. Sirius could think of little worse than doing this with an audience _again_. It had been rough enough the first time.

Sirius simply had to remind himself that he didn't need to get into the full story of his animagus disguise: he couldn't divulge Remus' involvement (though undoubtedly Regulus would have an indication of this, given Remus's circumstances), so he'd have to be careful about what he did say. Bringing James into it was going to shut the conversation down. A warning and an explanation: he could handle that without it devolving. He sat down in one of the big chairs (which weren't all that big at all, now he was full-grown) with a dusty creak. Nothing seemed to have infested since he'd cleared the drawer: it was just dusty and worn old. He put his head back against the back of the chair and shut his eyes for a moment. He didn't need to explain it, he reiterated to himself. He just
had to wait and keep a clear head.

He groaned aloud. Situations where he had to remind himself of that never went well.

Outside the door, he could hear someone decidedly not Remus. Remus was not sure footed in this place, not yet and perhaps not ever. He'd left the door open, sure Regulus would try to knock it, and he wanted to forgo the formality and launch into this before the idea of explaining it made him decide it wasn't worth it. It was worth it. A safe place for Remus, a less troublesome transformation, and back up if something went wrong. All Sirius had to do was explain another room was going to be off-limits to anything human for the night (maybe the whole floor, he didn’t want to take the risk) and why that occasionally did not include him. Providing he didn’t lose his temper when mentioning even the passing mention of Peter, should be easy.

_Do you trust me?_ He almost asked, hoping his own word would be enough without further explaining the reason why the floor was out of bounds. But if he hadn't been able to answer it himself, he wasn't sure he wanted Regulus to answer the question. He definitely didn’t truly want to ask it. There were too many secrets to even consider it.

"Will you stay on the top floor tonight?" Sirius said, in lieu of greeting. _To the point._ "Not venture downwards, not before sun up. It’s very important."

"Good evening to you too, Sirius," Regulus said wryly, a single eyebrow arching as he folded his hands in front of him, fingers threaded together loosely. "Why do you want me to stay on the top floor, exactly?"

So much for trying to stay vague. Regulus really should have gone into Ravenclaw.

"Exactly' is complicated," Sirius admitted, since he could not fully explain it even if he wanted to. "It’s not dangerous, not unless there’s a problem with the locks, and having tried to break most of them in this house at one point or another, I feel confident in them. But on the off-chance, I’d rather you stayed safely out of the way ‘til it’s over.” He took a deep breath in, and out again, trying to breach the subject. It still felt a little unreal, almost as if an apparition of their father when they were very young had wandered in and sat down. The thought managed to be both unnerving and reassuring.

"It might be noisy,” he admitted, “but it won’t be completely safe for humans until morning, and I’m afraid you’re the only person in the house at the moment who is and cannot change that status.”

Regulus leveled a scrutinizing look. “Cannot change that status… as in ‘human’ status?”

Ah, the are-you-fucking-with-me look. It was enough to make someone nostalgic. _Here we go._ "Yes, human status. That's what I wanted to warn you about," Sirius said. "Animagus. Unregistered, obviously."

There were only a few logical options one could arrive at when told that others would shortly be turning into something that wasn't human, and in light of Sirius's werewolf friend - revealed so many years ago by a bitter Severus Snape - 'animagus' was not the one that had been forming tentatively at the edges of Regulus's mind. Tracking moon phases was of no interest to him without reason, but animagi were not a safety concern unless the witch or wizard was making conscious decisions to be troublesome in animal form; why else would one note the need to lock away a danger that wasn’t a danger in the first place? Regulus had suspected Lupin’s presence in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place on mere principle, just as he would have suspected Potter or Pettigrew if
they still lived, but if what Snape had said was true, and Lupin was in fact a werewolf set to run
amok in their house, that was of exceedingly more concern than Sirius romping about as some
animal or another. Whatever the case, his brother had not been turned, as it was - and perhaps that
rush of relief ought to have been something he clung to a little longer - but bewilderment and
problem-resolution edged in its place.

Where to even start...

"Animagus," Regulus echoed in a mutter, half to himself, releasing a measured breath as his mind
reeled. Addressing lycanthropic possibilities - that was the first priority… "First off, you and I both
know being an animagus is no reason to lock and clear an area unless you are consciously planning
to be a danger to yourself and others," Regulus started again in a rather pointed tone, trying to filter
the touch of anxiety as he studied his brother's face rather like a particularly perplexing book.
Before Sirius had the chance to answer, he added, "Secondly, since when have you been an
animagus in the first place?"

For a moment, Sirius looked fit to argue but either could no think of one or decided to let it go in

The stunned silence was palpable.

“So what you’re saying,” Regulus began coolly, as lycanthropic concerns gave temporary way to a
very different sort of offense, “is that you have been an animagus for twenty years, and you are just
now seeing fit to tell me?"

Sirius gave him a carefully blank stare. "At which point was I supposed to inform you, after you
joined the Death Eaters? Or was I supposed to inform your headstone?"

“You left before your sixth year,” Regulus responded, tone growing chillier still at the deflection,
“A full year later. Don’t make this about the Death Eaters."

"A full year of avoidance and sniping," Sirius said, sourly. "I didn't know if you'd keep it to
yourself. Even discounting our parents, your taste in companions tended to leave much to be
desired."

“Do you think I just go around spilling secrets? Besides, we had better things to do than sit around
and talk about you,” Regulus said tensely. He knew it shouldn’t bother him so much to think that
his brother hadn’t trusted him, even before running off - they had been bickering for years by then,
after all - but somehow, it stung no less. Becoming an animagus was a complicated piece of magic,
and to think that Sirius could not even muster it to boast…

"I had no idea what you went around doing. Regulus. That's the point." Sirius slouched forward,
running his hand across his face. "Besides, it wasn't my secret to tell, but circumstances change a
lot in twenty years...even if I still have no idea what you go around doing. I'm telling you now."

“Right,” Regulus shifted stiffly. “Well, you never did care much about what was going on in my
life, so I suppose that is the point.” Coldly he stepped back from the chair he had been standing
beside, turning back to the still-cracked door and pulling it open again.

"You've come out with a lot of stupid shit over the years, but that might be the stupidest." Sirius
leaned his hand on on the table, seemingly ready to stand and deciding not to. "There was never a
point I didn't want to know, but there sure as hell came a point you didn't want to tell me. You
stopped trying to talk to me about anything real long before I stopped trying to talk to you. Don’t
put that on me; the door was always open."
A soft, derisive snort escaped, and Regulus’s hand lingered on the doorknob a moment longer, childhood frustrations buzzing loudly in his head. Their parents were dead - their friends were dead - there was no structure left to the crumbling ground beneath them, and Regulus could feel it give way a little bit more with every clumsy step they took. This return home had cast an awkward fog about them, a strange play at politeness, a fumbling grasp for the days before everything blew to pieces, but nearly two decades later, the debris still had not settled, and the booms echoed just as loudly as they had so long ago.

“Of course, you were a paragon of brotherly support and interest,” Regulus remarked dryly, turning his head back to glance at Sirius with eyebrows raised sarcastically, “Legendary reliability. How could I have possibly forgotten?”

"Did I say that?" Sirius snapped at him, before sitting back forcefully in the chair with a sound of frustration. "On your own, I thought I could have trusted you...But around other people, especially our parents, I didn't know what would win out if I had told you: loyalty or fear of reprisal. Or worse! You thinking it was reckless enough you could justify saying something in some misguided attempt to 'help'? Everything would have been dragged into the open, and it would have been a shitstorm." He gave a bitter snort. "Though not as big a shitstorm as this is."

Frozen in place, Regulus felt the words connect like a punch to the gut, and with all the force of being hurtled back into his own childhood, the imperious gaze of their mother was on him once again. Drawn forth from those memories was the desperate urge to gain acknowledgement from their father, darkened further by the compelling presence of Bellatrix as she funneled him ever forward on his path. Sirius spoke of fear and loyalty as if they were mutually exclusive, yet with the ghosts of their family crowding his mind, Regulus was not so sure he could have distinguished the two, for the loyalty he felt was as much love as it was fear of losing it.

Sirius had never cared much about losing their love, of course. Sirius had never understood, and on a fundamental level, perhaps he never would.

Regulus’s thoughts then drifted above to his research, to the horcruxes, to the mess they had fallen into all over again. “No, certainly not as big as this,” he agreed sourly.

"Regulus," Sirius said, tentative given the tense air that had fallen over the room. "I don’t get it - what happened to you?"

Regulus sighed heavily, twisting to lean against the frame of the door with a pinched brow. Frustration still crackled softly beneath the surface, but the ground was leveling subtly beneath his feet. “Quite a lot. You are going to have to be more specific.”

Sirius stayed silent for a moment. "Did you know there was a rumour going around you got wasted after the leavers do?"

For a moment, Regulus’s breath caught. That night rushed back like water in his lungs, suffocatingly tight in his chest: a disaster of a graduation party, a breaking point he could never return from. Vanishing into the night, he had stolen a horcrux, and he had never stopped running ever since, he supposed. With a humorless laugh, more a huff than anything, Regulus rubbed at his face, fingers pressing firm to his temple.

“I was not drunk. Just…angry, I suppose,” he corrected. Barty, Evan, Avery…fuzzy though the scene was, he remembered all too well their tones of horrified puzzlement and the firm hold on his shoulders as Barty shuffled him away. “Barty said something of the sort to excuse my disruptive commentary.”
"You don't drink," though Sirius didn't sound completely sure of his own statement. "You're not
disruptive either. You're not even ruptive. Why did - is this Crouch?"

"Yes, Crouch," Regulus responded tightly, trying to subdue the sick feeling rising again in his
stomach; but Barty was gone now, his soul snatched away, and that lurch grew more acidic the
more he thought about it. He did not want to think about it, right now.

A certain rawness scratched at his tone when he spoke again, controlled though it was. "He was my
best friend, so perhaps he was panicking that I was having some sort of mental breakdown.
Which...I suppose wasn't entirely untrue. Just not in the way he must have thought." Regulus
tensed slightly, arms crossing over his chest as he released a sigh. "In hindsight, it really was stupid
to say anything in those circumstances."

An awkward beat passed. "I hadn't realised," Sirius said, quietly unnerved. "It explains a great
deal."

"Of course you didn't realise. That would have required paying attention to my life long enough to
notice the person I spent the vast majority of my time with. It's a lot to ask, I know," Regulus
countered, unable to keep the bitter edge from his tone as he started hard at the bookcase across
from him. It was perhaps a little petty, but he could not help reeling from the sting. Even if he had
slung that very accusation just a moment before, somehow his brother's ignorance in regards to
Barty just twisted the knife deeper.

"I knew you were friends, I just didn't-" Sirius started, before he made a guttural noise of
frustration. "Almost every time I saw you, you were nose deep in a book or on the pitch, and it's
not as if you said anything! I think I spent the majority of first year talking non-stop about James. I
would never have said what happened if I'd - everything is shit or going to it. Though you had an
emotional outburst in public. You?"

Regulus crinkled his nose at the mention of James Potter, but he but his tongue, extending no
remark on the matter for the moment. "I would not necessarily call that night an 'emotional
outburst in public,'" Regulus continued, that tension lingering in his tone. "Emotional outburst is
probably overstating it, and I was speaking to my friends rather than the entire room, but I grant
that it was poorly executed, nonetheless. I don't really know if there is an effective way to
communicate disagreement of that nature, but I can mark that experience down as firmly 'not.' I
determined that much."

Considering, Sirius began tracing onto what was undoubtedly an antique table. "I don't know what
happened or what you said, but whatever it was, it was enough for people to think you'd been killed
for it, so it had to be at least minorly inflammatory. And that never works, so well done to the kid
for reading the room. That could have gotten embarrassing."

"Inflammatory is an appropriate description, yes," Regulus said, pressing his lips to a line with an
edge of discomfort ( - how dangerously, those flames could have burned -), though the edge of his
anger softened somewhat at the passing compliment to Barty, if one could call it that. Sirius knew
he was a Death Eater, clearly, considering his indelicate delivery of what had happened. His
brother was not the sort to look past the Death Eater and see the person, in his experience, but it
appeared he was making some small effort. "I didn't like it at the time, but it would have been
worse, had he not."

Sirius gave a stifled, but no less obvious laugh. "I wonder what that's like." He made a vague hand
gesture. "Can you sit down? You're giving me flashbacks standing like that."

Regulus eyed the empty chair for a moment. Just moments before, he had been half out the door
with fury, but the brunt of that anger had cooled to embers again, and it did not strike as so terrible a thing, so long as Sirius could keep his incendiary comments to a minimum.

A tall order, but the horcruxes were not going anywhere fast, so he supposed it was worth a try.

“Honestly, one of the most frustrating aspects of it all was that the shutdown was something I would have said,” Regulus said with a huff and a scrunched expression, crossing to sit in the chair across from his brother.

"When everyone is told the same lies, the shutdown gets repetitive. I think I have the same five ones memorised." Sirius's shoulders released some of the tension once he sat back down. Sitting down generally indicated a calmer tone.

“I’m willing to bet I have more memorised than you do,” Regulus leveled wryly, lifting a haughty brow and propping an elbow on the arm of the chair, his chin against the palm of his hand.

“No thanks, I don’t take bets I can’t win.” Sirius shook his head at him, but he was obviously trying not to smile over it. "It just doesn’t matter. Once you know you're being used, you can't un-know it. Either you're a tosser who can live with it, providing you get to keep the perks, or you want to do something about it, and there’s nothing to be said that can change your mind. But I can hardly fault you for trying to save your friend."

The subtle traces of humor again faded from Regulus's expression, sobering to a frown. “Apparently I should have tried a little harder,” he said with a sigh, shifting his hand to rub at his temple again.

"You can't make that kind of choice for someone else, no matter how much you want to," Sirius said, somberly. "Forcing it would only have made you like his father."

"I know." Screwing his eyes closed, Regulus released a slow and measured sigh and pictured Barty standing outside of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, expression all firm concern. Regulus had been so preoccupied with his own departure and his plan to go down stealing the locket in silence that he had fumbled his way through the argument, delegitimized his own opinions before anyone else ever opened their mouths. He never expected to see the fallout, never expected to suffer a day knowing that Barty's soul had been kissed away by dementors - Bella in Azkaban, his mother dead - and who else was gone? Evan, Wilkes, Avery, Snape, Mulciber... Sirius had not yet mentioned other losses, but Regulus wasn't sure he was ready to ask.

Though he understood the enormity of the feelings of loss, Sirius could not think of anything to say to that. After an uncomfortably quiet moment, he spoke. "I can't believe another generation has to live, or more likely die, through this. If nothing else, stopping that..." He shook his head. "It means everything."

Rubbing at his eyes, Regulus sighed again. When again he opened them, a weighty frustration twisted at the muscles in his face as he thought of the destroyed locket, still stashed at the bottom of the bag he had brought from France. He remembered well the relief he had felt when the Dark Lord fell for what he had assumed to be the only time. That false security; that belief that walking away had actually accomplished something meaningful...

Yet here he was again.

"This was supposed to be over," Regulus responded, more bitterly than he had expressly intended. Pausing for a beat, he filtered out the brunt of it and found neutrality of tone once again. "They shouldn't have to experience this now."
Sirius gave a short, strong nod of agreement. “No one should have. But you still chose to throw yourself back into this. It's not nothing.”

Lifting his eyes from the table to look at his brother, Regulus felt a flicker of comfort - some small, foreign thing that he knew would inevitably be stomped out again before too long, but it had been a very long time since Sirius had suggested any decision he made was anything short of idiotic. (Or perhaps he was still indicating it was idiotic, but at least in a way that sort of sounded like a compliment.) He did not want to care about that validation, fragile as it was in the volatile field of their damaged relationship, yet he stupidly tucked it away, nonetheless.

"There was only one right answer, with things as they are," Regulus responded mildly, lightly tapping a finger against the side of his face. Despairing resistance had thundered in his mind, the night his Mark burned, but the horcruxes were the key, and without identifying and eliminating them (should any others remain), the war might never end for any generation to come - and that simply couldn't be an option, however tempting it might be. "It would be irresponsible to leave this place to tear itself to shreds again."

“I don't suppose you feel like telling me why you left in the first place,” Sirius commented. “You looked terrible at the funeral, but I thought that was just... because it was a funeral. Or the murderous circumstances of it. Is that....why?"

Regulus hesitated in thoughtful silence, the locket burning hot in Regulus's mind - immortality for the Dark Lord, hidden from sight. To tell Sirius now would be so simple. To finally share that experience might even feel like some sort of relief. For so long, the cave haunted the back of his mind, and for so long, he had wanted to tell everyone exactly how he was planning to exact his long-stretching revenge plan. However, information was power, and the more that information spread, the less control one had over it. Sirius had opened their home to any number of individuals that Regulus could not see, and at any moment, a stranger could be standing right behind him, unseen and unheard. Sirius might even think these people trustworthy - but if they had information about the horcruxes and no reason to keep Regulus around (save for perhaps an objection from his brother, who they had clearly let rot in Azkaban), there was nothing left to leverage, and that was not a risk he was willing to take.

More eyes on a problem might increase the efficiency of its execution, but prudency in sharing that problem increased the likelihood of it being executed. Too many eyes on the horcruxes would be dangerous, and the only ones he could count on were his own.

Straightening in his seat, Regulus meet his brother's gaze again, seeming to settle his thoughts. "I had some soul-searching to do," he said at last, a pointed if masked compromise to share, "and at that time, staying would do more harm than good. Our father's death could not and cannot be reconciled with the Cause we all so aggressively touted, however thoroughly everyone wished to ignore the contradiction.” Furrowing his brow, Regulus released a huffing breath. “For a movement that was meant to protect wizarding culture, it was doing a spectacular job of dismantling that culture with unnecessary destruction and a continual disregard for magical lives of all sorts.”

"I had no idea the lengths you were willing to go to get a little privacy. Even if it's an effective way of not getting Mum to flip out at you, faking your death is a bit dramatic,” Sirius said, but his tone indicated he knew that was the pot calling calling the kettle black. "It was never about any cause, but getting Voldemort as much power as he could get his freakish hands on, so that's probably why. Why else would he try to recruit muggleborns on the sly? If I'd any doubt he was putting it on, it ended the moment I found that out."
“He tried to recruit muggleborns?” Regulus echoed, eyebrows lifting incredulously as he again propped his chin on his hand, head shaking slowly. “I did arrive at the conclusion that the Dark Lord was just using people to further some personal agenda, but contacting muggleborns and asking them to join the Death Eaters? A group that targets muggleborns? Who would ever say yes to that?”

"I don't know why anyone says yes to it. I don't think he gives a damn what their blood is if they're useful. It's all masks, so it's not like you'd get identified. You also couldn't ask for a better spy, who's going to suspect someone who's muggleborn? They've got murderously ambitious and sadistic tossers same as half and pure do. It's not all pureblood mania in the ranks." A thunderous look crossed him, but it was gone in a moment, replaced by tentative confusion. "You said muggleborn."

Again, Regulus lifted his eyebrows, this time in mild surprise. He opened his mouth to respond that Sirius had just said they were muggleborns, so of course that is what he said - only to realise the context of his brother's confusion. The last time they had both walked these halls, it was all muggles and mudbloods for Regulus, never daring for a reference more mild term, even when the brothers were alone, lest it come back to bite him. The years of disconnect had blurred so many things into a new sort of normal; how strange it was to realise how little he had noticed it in his own speech.

"Ah...I did," Regulus said, rubbing at the back of his neck, feeling a little rise of embarrassment, though it seemed silly when it wasn't as though Sirius would object to the change in terminology.

"Every time I think I've got a grip on you, you surprise me. If there weren't other people to talk about it with, I'd think it was sort of hallucination telling me what I'd want to hear." Sirius looked away, flushing either embarrassed or awkward. He obviously didn't want to see his reaction to it. "Must've been a hell of a soul search. You've grown up."

Regulus snorted softly, mouth pressing to a wry, lopsided line for a lingering moment. “It was both hell and a soul search to varying degrees at any given time,” he remarked. (Often, it had been both at once.) “But that is the second non-mocking compliment you have uttered in the span of one conversation, so I might have need to check for hallucinations, as well.”

Sirius winced. “That's not that unusual, is it?” He then waved him off. “No, I don't want to know, I'm too sober for that conversation, and I need to stay that way. I'm at least a decade too old to do the full moon plastered. I know you're pissed off, but can you be the kind of pissed off about it that also listens and steers clear?”

Sitting a little straighter in his seat again, Regulus felt a heavy discomfort, awkward and ill-footed as the shift slid them back into reality. The full moon - for a moment, Regulus had forgotten about his brother’s incompletely-explained restrictions, but the final piece of the puzzle had arrived, implying precisely what he had thought from the start.

“Told you as much,” Regulus said, though he felt more uncomfortable than angry, quite contrary to the reaction not long before. “The full moon, that is. You said that you would lock the door, but are you certain that is sufficient? I have never been in close proximity to a transformed werewolf, and I would prefer to keep it that way.”

"There's been some developments in the last decade, in terms of retaining some autonomy. I'm just a failsafe, and company," Sirius explained, before giving an eyeroll. "It's a tricky potion, but as much as I hate the bastard, your former house-mate can brew a decent potion. I can't argue with the results."
The flash across Regulus's face could not quite settle between stricken and confused before he smothered it again. “Of my former housemates who excel at brewing potions, Severus is the first to come to mind, but you could not possibly mean him.”

Regulus spared a glance backward at the open door, despite knowing there would be nothing there. Friends though they had been, Severus had been no less a Death Eater. He did not seem the sort to help Sirius or Lupin, yet the phrasing implied the most obvious potioneer. Severus Snape had always been the most obvious. It was a guilty feeling, that subtle dread in his stomach - perhaps his friend, too, had left the Death Eaters behind, yet he could not shake the prickle of uncertainty.

Looking back to Sirius with an exacting expression, he added, “Is it him? Is he here?"

Sirius made a pointed finger towards his throat, but he obviously looked less than pleased. “I wasn't joking when I said I can't tell you. But this place has a no Death Eater occupancy clause these days. If that changes….” He relaxed his hand back down onto the table. “I'm not going to tell you to stay out of the way for no good reason, but when I do, it's probably better to listen. You'll have to trust me on that front for now.”

Regulus trained his eyes on his brother, mouth pressing to a line. It has been some time since he had thought it anything short of foolish to trust a recommendation coming out of Sirius's mouth, but the tension between them had cooled to a simmer, and tentative though that reprieve might be, for once it didn't sound like an ill-placed restriction of freedom so much as a genuine warning.

Nodding, Regulus let out a huff after the silent moment passed. “I trust you.”
Chapter 5

The first formal meeting of the Order of the Phoenix was due to take place on Friday evening. Thursday had passed swiftly, sleeping through half the day and then groggily moving anything in the main hallway that could be dangerous out of the way. Sirius worked mechanically with little complaint. He had too much on his mind to protest about cleansing the house with more than fitful sighs of distaste now and then. He couldn’t seem to collect himself, from confused reflection to nervous energy in a heartbeat, and despite not having been a student in seventeen years, he was half expecting to be told off or docked points for fidgeting.

He had not been to an Order meeting in almost fourteen years. He had attended only one more after James and Lily had retreated begrudgingly into hiding, and then it had been deemed too dangerous for they did not know who to trust. Anger unfurled in his stomach every time he thought about it. The idea of having him attend the meeting itself was nerve-wracking. Though they had been people he had not been sure he could trust then, he now had to contend with the fact he was technically a convicted Death Eater to the public. While it’d had its uses, many of these people were those he would have considered friends, and the idea of being confronted with them and having to explain it (or worse, face that disbelief) was causing a horrible, nauseated feeling to hit him in waves.

Then there was the matter of the (former) Death Eater. Despite an obviously unhappy agreement to stay out of the way, Sirius did believe that he would.

(I trust you, he’d said as if it didn’t have the weight of the world behind it.)

If Snape was good for nothing else (and he was good for very little else), then the implication of his presence coupled with Regulus’s own knowledge of his (hopefully former, but you never know) allegiance would likely be enough to keep him at bay. At least, until Dumbledore could speak with him. He had still not heard anything from him, so he really hoped the old man knew what he was doing. They were all screwed if he didn’t.

Friday was a mystery dangling in front of Regulus Black, and though he had promised his brother to remain in the upper landing when the time came, he was not without plans to sate that curiosity.

Some time had passed, since last he had need to creep about unnoticed or monitor areas in absentia, but if there was one thing Regulus had found in excess during his years in France, it was time to fiddle about with spells. Life in a shop had proven as unremarkable as he always expected it would be. On quieter days, he was free to do as he pleased so long as his duties were attended to, and without fail, he did just that. More than a few of his ‘working hours’ were dedicated to refining the anchored alarm ward he had used heavily in his researching of the horcruxes, and once he was satisfied with the modifications, proved to be overkill for protecting the very shop he had been responsible for. Implementing it at home was the primary concern, naturally, as nothing was overkill for the fortifications of his own home, but year in and year out, no Death Eaters came banging down his door to try to steal the husk of a horcrux back and kill him in his sleep, so he supposed it was overdone, in that respect.

Now that he was home in England once again, the danger was more present than it had been in well over a decade, and such dangers called for a certain level of vigilance, however thoroughly the Fidelius Charm sought to thwart him. Rising with the sun, Regulus had grabbed his wand, two silver rings, and set off in a stroll through the house. He had two primary objectives for the day: One, to determine if his alarm wards could perceive what he could not, just as his mother’s portrait
so often did. Two, to monitor their vulnerable heirlooms and family trinkets on display, preparing an intervention of sorts to deter whatever thief saw fit to snatch a shelf’s worth of his belongings.

The front door was his first target, warded with its silent alarm and anchored to the first of the rings: two twisting snakes. Presuming the spell worked, the ring would vibrate for a fraction of a second whenever someone passed the threshold and stepped into the house (though it was not so easy to test in advance without looking odd, stepping outside only to step inside again).

The stairways to the lower and upper landings were his next focus, setting the lower stairs to chill that same ring upon passing through, and to warm upon scaling the stairs leading upward. With the wards in place, he stepped downward to the first step leading to the kitchen, pausing as the ring immediately cooled against his finger. The chill lingered as he lingered - not terribly precise as far as measurements went, but workable no less. Exactly how many people were in attendance was not of great concern.

Strolling up to the next landing confirmed the warming alarm was functional, as well, and it was then he turned his attention to the secondary objective of protecting their family’s small treasures. They were not of particular importance, for the most part, with only a few choice heirlooms holding any true significance, but he would not suffer a thief in his home.

Identifying the primary concerns - display cases and tables, more than anything, with few drawers containing anything more than insignificant clutter - Regulus anchored a separate alarm to the second ring, smooth and plain. With each test, touching the objects resulted in a subtle vibration that continued until the item was released. Though he could not tell if more than one thing was being grabbed at once, it at least differentiated between a touch and prolonged interaction. For now, that would have to suit. The objects in each display case were then granted a surface curse, sometimes in conjunction with whatever unpleasant curse they already had placed on them; he felt no desire to test these castings, but they would jellify the bones of the next hand to touch them, making a grip to snag them far more challenging. Perhaps the vibration alarm would not actually be necessary, which was well enough for him.

Stepping out of the room again, he saw Sirius zooming past in a blur, seemingly without noticing him. Pressing his lips to a line, Regulus watched his brother disappear down the hallway and shook his head briefly. After a beat, he started up the stairs once more, and when he reached the topmost landing, attached one final alarm ward to the twisted snake, heating the ring to something noticeably uncomfortable but not painful when prolonged, to warn him of anyone stepping up to the floor where Regulus would be staying.

With every precaution in place, Regulus settled in his room once again. Quite some time passed before the first trigger of the front door, but it was welcome, when at last it did. The landings had been going off with an irritating frequency, with the way his brother seemed to be bouncing about, but the vibration of the snake ring, coupled with the distant shrieking of their mother, brought a satisfied smile to his face.

Picking up his quill he marked one tally on the left of a small piece of parchment, and another tally on the left side.

It seemed the event would soon be starting, whatever it was.

As the first knock to the door (and subsequent screaming portrait) occurred, Sirius found himself in the unusual position of feeling nervous. This was nothing like the adrenaline before a battle, nor was it a calm before the storm. It was more akin to the week before returning to Hogwarts as a teenager, all this pent up energy and not the slightest clue what to do with any of it. He’d been out
of his old room three times, slamming the door once for good measure in sheer frustration. He'd undoubtedly irritated his younger brother thoroughly having checked on him twice, having utterly forgotten his mismanners on one such occasion and being so horrified by the fact he'd knocked that he simply walked away without saying anything.

He was being ridiculous, but knowledge of his own idiocy didn't seem to stop the persistent nag that this could go horribly wrong. You only had to look around this house to see what kind of family he had, you need only listen to the raving lunatic in the portrait or the batty house-elf for there to be little doubt there was something not quite right here. Even keeping Regulus out of the way for now until Dumbledore could speak with him, there was so much stacked against him. As much as his logical brain (if such a thing truly existed) tried to tell him that it was simply lack of other option that caused the people he had once cared deeply about to believe the worst of him, nothing in this place was going to help to prove he wasn't some traitorous monster.

He didn't look particularly sane himself. He'd managed to drag himself into fresh clothing, something he admittedly tended to forget about, but looking at himself remained jarring, and he preferred to avoid it whenever possible. But these were people he hadn't seen since he was twenty-one. No one would look the same. Though they did sound the same, as the beginnings of familiar voices began to trickle up the landings of the house along with some unfamiliar ones. He parked himself on the stairs to the upmost landing, feeling bizarrely like he was a child listening to a party downstairs and trying to figure out whether or not to go down.

He had little choice in the matter; he had to go and face them. If the Order was to truly make a difference now, they had to come together.

Besides, he wasn't giving bloody Snape the satisfaction of thinking it bothered him.

"It is upon us that this task must fall," Dumbledore was saying, just beyond the door to the kitchen. "The Minister for Magic does not allow himself to see what is right in front of him. Voldemort has returned, regardless of the denials in the media and at the Ministry."

"Surely, the Prophet-" He was almost sure that was Dedalus squeaking.

"The Prophet!" This wasn't a voice he voice he was familiar with. Someone new? "They're scandal-mongers. The things they're saying about you."

"It is not I that I worry for," Dumbledore's calm, but grim, voice replied. "They are looking to discredit anyone who speaks the truth of what happened that night. It is not the Prophet alone, either. I'm afraid I was asked to resign from Wizengamot."

"Resign?" Remus said. "On what grounds?"

"I doubt it matters," Dumbledore replied. "The fact remains we cannot rely on the usual methods of blocking another rise to power. Once again, we must call upon our own, and in this, we must operate in the utmost secrecy. Regardless of whether you choose to return after tonight, it is all I ask."

"We're not going anywhere," and Merlin, they sound young. Was that one of the Weasleys?

"Then we will attend to business," Dumbledore seemed to settle. "All of you are free to disagree or leave at any time. I ask only that you keep yourselves, and others, safe if something changes and you choose to leave us. I do not enforce obedience or blind loyalty, for we all know loyalties can change and people can grow and move on for better and worse."
There was a heavy silence. Sirius knew he should simply walk in, sit down on the seat that had no doubt remained empty next to Remus, and deal with the questions as they come.

"This is the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix," Dumbledore said, when he eventually spoke again. "It is a safe haven. There will always be someone here, and it is one of the most fortified homes in all of magical Britain."

"Whose home is it?" Vance, he was sure of it. "It doesn't look like anything I've ever seen."

"That is a question with a complicated answer," Dumbledore admitted. "And perhaps if Sirius would like to stop eavesdropping and explain himself in person, that would be most expedient."

With a deep breath and his fingers crossed, Sirius opened the door to attend his first Order meeting in over a decade.

When the topmost alarm heated his ring in warning, Regulus carefully tucked away his parchment and quill, tugging across the desk an open book that he proceeded to look very interested in. As it turned out, Sirius had a summons for him. Dumbledore wished to step outside for a moment to discuss their precarious state, and however childish it was, the whole way down the ground floor, he felt as though he was trudging to the headmaster’s office for a lecture.

(Perhaps he essentially was. Sirius had been completely useless in offering any warning about what to expect from the conversation.)

Stepping outside to see their old headmaster waiting casually on the doorstep had been jarring, and it took a great deal of self-control to keep his composure as neutral as possible. Calmly, the two men began walking across the street to the park. It seemed very open, despite the barrier of trees, but Sirius had indicated Dumbledore’s preference for the quick and the simple; Regulus did not think it a battle worth picking, as things were.

“You are looking quite healthy, for a dead man,” Dumbledore posed in his oddly cheerful way as they stepped through the gate to the park, leaving behind the deserted street.

Uncomfortably, Regulus stuck his hands deep in his pockets. “Perhaps death becomes me.”

“Or perhaps it was leaving your life behind, that was so becoming?” Dumbledore offered, lifting his eyebrows meaningfully as the gate shut behind them both.

“Perhaps,” Regulus echoed, struggling to find an appropriate answer - preferably one that would convince Dumbledore that he did not belong in Azkaban without revealing his only leverage in the same breath, but his old headmaster had always been difficult to read. “Yet the more things have changed, the more they have stayed the same.”

“Quite so,” Dumbledore said as they approached a bench. “Let us sit and discuss this precarious situation we find ourselves in, shall we?”

Silently, Regulus nodded and sat on the bench, eyes dropping awkwardly to the grass beneath their feet.

“As I understand it, you’ve undergone something of a reformation,” Dumbledore continued mildly as a bird twittered above them. “You would not be the first to claim as much, but your timing is far more interesting than most.”

Interesting was a vague word, and though the man’s tone indicated no ill will, Regulus hoped
nonetheless that it was a positive brand of interesting. “I rather hoped it wouldn’t be interesting. I would prefer not to draw attention, if you know what I mean.”

“Indeed. So long as you remain in the house, I cannot promise you will be without company,” Dumbledore began again, “But we cannot very well kick a man out of his own home.”

“Does that mean I will be able to see everyone now?” Regulus asked, lifting his eyebrows as he twisted back around to look across the street at the house, then back to Dumbledore again.

“We mustn’t get ahead of ourselves. In time, perhaps. However, a certain someone has vouched for your trustworthiness.” Regulus met Dumbledore’s eyes then, feeling a small measure of delight, however horrifying the news that everyone would remain invisible upon his return inside. The wizened wizard continued: “Perhaps you will not even notice them at all.”

“Perhaps not,” Regulus echoed again, thumbing the rings on his fingers.

Friday night brought welcome reprieve.

Though the story had been met with some skepticism (and considerably more sarcasm from Snape), Dumbledore's words held a lot of clout, and if he believed Sirius, it seemed the rest of the Order would at least tolerate it. It had been one of the reasons he'd wanted him to sign off on Regulus. He knew the weight of his word and knew if this was truly the path his brother wanted to take, he would need the help. If Dumbledore believed a bastard like Snape deserved the help, then he didn’t doubt he would help Regulus as well.

There had been a few revelations that had come out of the meeting, all unexpected but not exactly bad.

First and foremost, Dumbledore had the reckless but successful behaviour of the best of Gryffindors because he'd invited the head Auror in charge of looking for Sirius himself to the meeting. Shacklebolt seemed level-headed, accepting of the idea, and had even joked about showing him his profile some time. Sirius hadn’t expected that. There was a certain relief to being told it didn’t fit with what people said about him, though. The belief that no one had been surprised to “find out” he’d been a Death Eater had been eating at him.

Secondly, the girl was not one of Molly and Arthur's children, but rather Andromeda's daughter. That had thrown him for a loop, trying to reconcile an eight-year-old he could remember playing with not so long ago to his mind with a twenty-one-year-old punk Auror. He had not dared speak to Andromeda; she hadn’t been an Order member, and to drag her down with him would be awful. But Dora - Tonks - promised to come back when she had a day off and fill him in.

Lastly, Molly had taken to inspecting the house with a tutting that only came from mothers. Not his own, but he’d seen others over the years. When Remus had pointed out the ongoing war they were having against the house, Molly herself volunteered to come and help them with it. By volunteered, Molly had looked around the ground floor aghast and made a few comments about being able to tell there were only boys living there.

Still, she had a point. The place was a wreck, and cleaning and decontaminating the whole bloody place would take forever. He’d take all the help he could get. In fact, when he’d expressed this, it had been Moody’s idea to bring the family over. If it was going to be a safe house, let it be a safe house. Sirius wasn’t sure safe is how he’d describe it, but Remus had said the whole family were Gryffindors, so perhaps they might find it exciting. Sirius didn't mind the idea. There was more than enough space; the house was large and empty, except for Remus sporadically being there, and
Regulus, who was reliving his childhood by staying out of the way with a good book. He also couldn’t say that the Weasleys (and Hermione, who was apparently staying with them) descending upon this house wasn’t extremely funny. His mother’s painting might have to think up some new insults.

The thought cheered him immensely, as he set to cleaning up. Remus, who was still barely able to keep his eyes open so close to the full, he banished upstairs to get some rest.

Dumbledore did not return to the house. Sirius found he hadn’t expected him to. They’d sorted out a patrol schedule, everyone was on the same page (Regulus aside), and there had been only one item of business left: the boy himself. He’d watched with a pang of jealousy as they went outside, but he doubted it would be a pleasant discussion, so he got back to working his way through. The hall was in disarray - Tonks had gone smack into Remus and taken half the trinkets on the main table, the umbrella stand, and a particularly ghastly photograph with her. Merlin, there was a lot of junk in this place.

"Watch out for the umbrella stand," Sirius told Regulus as he came through the door, as quietly he could. "Either that elf is obsessed with it being there and it was tripped over, or it just always seems to end up kicked there accidentally."

“With how often we hear from our mother’s portrait, I am inclined to think your invisible friends are very clumsy,” Regulus responded quietly, sparing a brief glance to the side, where the curtains rested still over the painting.

Our mother.

In any other circumstance, Sirius would have taken it as an insult to be reminded of his relation to the wreck behind the curtain, but from Regulus, it was different. Regulus had spent years emphasising the exclusion, and the novelty of hearing it removed had yet to wear thin. He had done the same two nights before, talking about their father with shared experience and wry humour. Though Grimmauld Place would never feel like his home, it did brand a certain nostalgia to it to acknowledge a mutual past.

"Sometimes, it's me. Mornings are still not my area of expertise," Sirius admitted, as he adjusted a fussing painting the right way up. He was actually a little impressed with how clumsy Tonks seemed to be. "Besides, they can't help it if you're the only one she doesn't scream at. Why would she break a lifetime habit simply due to her death?" He looked around, sure he'd seen another crystalline snake on that table before catching a glimpse of something moving near the front door. "Grab that, will you? I think it's making a break for it."

Crinkling his nose, Regulus looked toward the crystalline snake laying on the floor, just a pace away from the door. "I have noticed it isn't the first. An entire shelf was cleared one day while I was reading," he said, standing to retrieve the statuette. "There are some sticky fingers among us, as well."

While some of it was just being shoved into bags and put in the attic so it didn't try to kill anyone while they weren't looking, Sirius would lay a bet that Dung had something to do with that. For one, if it'd been him, Sirius is sure there would have been an argument since Regulus could see him, and Remus would likely have been a bit more selective.


“Well. I, for one, only steal from people who deserve it,” Regulus remarked in wry tones of his own, lifting his brow haughtily as he cast a silent (temporary) sticking charm on the bottom of the
crystalline snake and placed it firmly on the table once again. “Unacceptable.”

Sirius snorted, checking around the room. It looked more or less as dingy as ever, but at least it was a normal sort of dingy and dark, rather than looking like an erumpent had just charged through here. It would do. “You’ve gotten fussy about your felonies in your old age,” he said. “Did you manage to reach an accord on your trip back to reality?”

“With Professor Dumbledore?” Regulus asked, giving the table and surrounding area one last examination before deeming it restored. “I would prefer to see the people milling about my own home, but I am not to be evicted, so there is that.”

"You cannot be evicted." Although Sirius had offered it as headquarters, the house was still very much his in accordance with magical inheritance law. At least, it was until his brother managed to get his life together and go and revise his status from dead to alive. As long as that was true, the statement remained true. "The only true danger is if Narcissa decided to visit, but given the state of the place, I doubt she has in a decade.” It made it the perfect safe house for anyone trying not to get themselves killed. Sirius would have prefered the straight on approach, but he was trying to make the best of things. "Just don't draw attention, and I'm sure it'll be alright. It’s your home."

Regulus nodded thoughtfully, pausing for a quiet moment, as if considering some silent remark and deciding against it. Sparing a glance aside to his brother, he settled for a lofty lift to his tone. “I will try to keep my rambunctious behavior under control.”

Sirius gave him a look, then decided against commenting about it. Regulus, for all of his strict adherence to pleasantries, was such a brat at times. It was almost enough to make him fun. “I can’t promise the same. There’ll be a higher volume of people around, but the top floor will remain off-limits.” He didn’t really want the kids going through what was left of his own childhood things either, lest they come up with something uncomfortable to explain, or worse, decide to inform Harry. “It’s temporary.”

“The increased volume of people or the protection of the top floor?”

"The people," Sirius said, grimly.

He'd heard a little of the Weasleys, both through Harry and Remus, and seen some himself. They seemed a decent sort. However, he didn't imagine they’d get on particularly well. Regulus had never had much patience for fiery people, seemingly finding them quite exasperating. The stories about the twins that Remus had reiterated had been relayed with both fondness and exasperation, as he declared them talented but utterly uninterested in academic achievements. Sirius himself could relate. Then there was Ron, who had shown such an intense loyalty that Sirius was quite fond of him, and there was a girl as well, though all he'd been told of that was that she'd had a Voldemort run in and lived to tell the tale. There would also be Arthur, whom he was relatively sure was the child of another tapestry blastee, and Molly, who seemed to take it upon herself to mother anyone within reaching distance. Bill had told him conspiratorially that the reason she was giving him a distasteful look was little to do with his perceived history and more that she was clearly dying to tell him to get a haircut. The scowl when she overheard meant he was probably even right.

(Distantly, he wondered how exactly Regulus would respond to that type of behaviour. He very much doubted he'd ever been mothered a day in his life, so much as smothered and controlled. At least Sirius himself had experienced Mrs. Potter, and with a pang of sadness, he realised he did fact pity his younger brother for never having even that. He supposed if things continued as they were, perhaps he might find out.)

"A little privacy isn't too much to ask," Sirius concluded.
"That's ironic, coming from you," Regulus said with a subtle flicker of amusement tugging at the corner of his mouth. "But appreciated, all the same. I'm quite certain I even heard a knock on my door, earlier today…"

"You must have imagined it," Sirius replied darkly. He refused to dwell on such an unfortunate and terrible mistake as that. "But I thought I should warn you nonetheless. Besides, this place needs all the help it can get to stop looking like a decrepit mausoleum."

"The mess has indeed gotten away from us, over the years," Regulus said in agreement, eying a patch of grime bordering a peeling corner of wallpaper. "So long as don't touch things they oughtn't be touching."

"They all know you don't like touching," Sirius smirked, unable to refrain from making the joke. "Everyone who has ever been around you for more than a brief moment knows how you feel about touching."

"I was referring to objects around the house," Regulus responded pointedly, "but the point of personal space stands, as well."

"I thought sarcasm was a bastion of the Slytherin house," Sirius replied, just as pointedly. He didn't want to get into a fight over it. He supposed from Regulus's point of view, they were taking some of his heritage and things he genuinely cared about. Sirius doubted it was a feeling he would ever understand. "I'll pass it on, but I can't guarantee anyone will listen. I couldn't exactly tell everyone about you without breaking my promise to warn you before informing a Death Eater of your current place of residence." That was a thought. "Where the hell were you, by the way? I think Narcissa tore the damn country apart."

"Not in England," Regulus responded simply, nose twitching slightly as he eyed the curtained portrait again, seeming for a brief moment like he might fall into thought, but as quickly as the look had settled, it was gone again. "That is as specific as I am willing to get, all things considered."

The mental image of Regulus on the beach, with some ridiculous fruity alcoholic drink and working on his tan sprung into Sirius's mind unbidden, and he had to suppress a laugh at it. He hadn't truly expected a direct answer, but he had to test those boundaries and see where they stood. He hadn't expected an answer about their father's funeral either, but this one had been freely given. About to respond, Sirius simply followed his eyeline and felt himself frown. Long ago, the night he'd left, he had told his mother that her two greatest accomplishments had been himself - the delinquent vigilante - and a scared kid. Apparently the scared kid lived on in the thirty-three-(almost thirty-four, his birthday was less than a fortnight away)-year-old version, as even the mention of his leaving caused a reaction he knew well from childhood: the quick glance to their parents, grandparents, whomever to check he was doing as he was supposed to. Except their mother had been gone ten years. It was only a portrait, even if it was a portrait that tended to get to him more often than he would like.

"It's not really her," Sirius said, in a soft tone. Whether he was reassuring his brother or himself, he wasn't sure. "It only reacts in one frozen emotion. It won't suddenly start screaming at you if it hasn't already, and even if it did, it's not your mother."

"I know," Regulus said uncomfortably, avoiding Sirius’s eyes as his arms folded loosely across his chest. With a steadying shift in tone, he spoke again, "Have our visitors returned to their respective residences, then, or should I retreat upstairs again?"

"We're alone. For now." Sirius shrugged, but looked up to the second floor. "And wisdom is the
difference between comprehending something and understanding it, little brother." Good advice, even if he was utterly naff at actually following it himself. But as far as Regulus knew, he was currently on show to Merlin knows who. It's not something he should have tried to breach here.

“How uncharacteristically profound of you.” With an awkward shift, Regulus mirrored the glance up to the ceiling, though he knew he would see nothing of consequence. “I cannot say I am a fan of being unable to determine when there are or are not people around,” he said, drumming his fingers lightly against his arm. “But thank you for keeping the details contained.”

Sirius opened his mouth to inform him he was an exceptionally profound person, thanks, when the thought occurred. How the hell would he know what kind of person he was now? His frame of reference was for the sixteen-year-old he had been twenty years ago. In the few short years between legging it and his imprisonment, his life had changed drastically, and it had changed him. They had both had other lives, which had been set aside or crumbled apart in the face of the war, yet they were both once again in the ancestral home of their family house. It was easy to forget how much things had changed.

("You said muggleborn."

"I did.")

"I'm not sixteen anymore," Sirius said, despite the fact he often felt as if he'd been stuck at sixteen forever, stuck in this house. "You are not the only person who's changed. Though you haven't changed that much. You have the same nervous ticks. I'd have thought Bellatrix would have kicked that out of you."

Fingers pausing self-consciously in their tapping, Regulus crinkled his nose, as if the memory itself had an unpleasant smell. "I would not say it was for a lack of trying, but I suppose there were higher priorities to focus on, at that time."

Despite himself, Sirius found that he wanted to ask him about it. There were questions that had haunted him when he believed Regulus had died, ones he had bemoaned the lack of ability to get an answer for, and with the option to ask, he kept hinting at them without simply sitting Regulus down and asking him what he wanted to know. Had he already been involved with the Death Eaters before Sirius had left? Was it Bellatrix who had gotten him involved, or one of his friends? Watching him sag whenever Crouch's name cropped up, his allusions to guilt over his choices, struck an uncomfortable familiarity. Had he hurt someone? Had it been guilt driving him away, as he'd theorised at the time? How the hell do you ask someone if their soul remains intact?

The hallway wasn't the place for such discussions. What could he really even say to that? That he was sorry he left him alone to face their sadistic cousin? With their unbalanced mother? Against Voldemort?

"There are still higher priorities than your need to fidget," Sirius settled on instead. There was work to be done, before everyone got here. There wasn't time to wallow in the past. "I don't believe it would have mattered. You're just not cut out to be monstrous, however hard you try at it." He sighed, heavy in the suffocating house again. "I've got work to do."

"As do I," Regulus returned with a nod, expression distancing as he pressed his lips to a line; and without further word, he stepped back and began the walk back up to his room.

Locked away once again, Regulus stared at the book split open before him, absorbing very few of the words on the page as he absentely doodled along the edge of his notes, quill softly scritching.
Occasionally, the rings on his fingers clued him to some movement or another, but it held little value, in the moment.

‘You’re just not cut out to be monstrous, however hard you try at it.’ His brother’s words ought to have been a comfort, starkly different as they were from that snowy night so many years ago. (Monstrous, Sirius had called him then, as they each spit their venom across the bone-white mask between them.) Though his talent for being his parents’ perfect son had never been in question, life as a Death Eater had never suited him as well as some (himself included) might have hoped; yet the gnawing guilt in his stomach offered no reprieve, for he had succeeded in more than he would dare admit.

Somehow, ‘succeeded’ did not feel like the right word for it.

When again his eyes dropped to the parchment held under his wrist, he saw the inky start of a bold swirl, fading to subtle scratches up the edge as the ink faded - small flames, more familiar than he would have liked.

Pressing his lips to a line, Regulus folded his notes again and stuck them in his book, closing it with a solid *thunk.*
Chapter 6

The sun had not yet risen when Regulus woke. Dressed and donning the two silver rings, he wandered down to their father’s study (technically their study now, yet he could not shake the association) to browse for another title of interest. He had long-since finished scouring *Secrets of the Darkest Art* with no further expansion upon what he had already learned about the horcruxes over a decade ago; now, he found he had little else to go on. In truth, Regulus doubted anything in their immediate family library was going to be helpful, but the well of ideas had quickly run dry, and until he was struck with a plan for gathering information about the Death Eaters without interacting with the Death Eaters, he would re-read every book in the house, if he must.

A sacrifice he was willing to make, time and time again.

Quietly, the door creaked open. Pausing his finger along the spine of a book on the shelf he was scanning, he turned to see Kreacher standing in the doorway with a gently glowing lamp.

“Would Master Regulus like some tea while he reads?” the house-elf asked in his raspy voice.

Regulus nodded with a smile. “That would be wonderful, thank you.”

When the elf had disappeared with a *crack*, Regulus turned his attention back to the bookshelf, letting out a soft, measured breath. Perhaps a text on less direct information-gathering might be beneficial - hidden means of recording what people were saying, writing, doing… He could not very well stroll into any secured places himself, but perhaps with the right plan…

Pausing in his search, he pulled one of the books from the shelf. *The Art of Concealment* - as intriguing a title as any. Taking it to the nearest chair, he cracked open the book and began scanning the table of contents for areas of interest. Objects, related wards, spells, potions. The subject matter was broad but did not seem altogether unhelpful. He was turning to the first chapter when Kreacher appeared again with a crack and a cup of tea, and he had been absorbed for some 30 minutes when he felt the incessant vibration of the twisting serpent ring, indicating a sudden flood of visitors that he had not processed quickly enough to count. Their mother’s telltale scream to follow further confirmed his conclusion.

The ring gave no indication of anyone scaling the stairs yet. Regulus felt grateful for it, once again, however imprecise. Taking his cup and his book in hand, Regulus slipped from the study and made straight for the staircase leading up, climbing each step as quickly and quietly as his feet would carrying him until he reached the top, tucking around the corner to listen as he heard his brother’s voice floating up from the ground floor.

No one could ever have accused Sirius of being a morning person. It would have surprised literally no one who knew him to find that, despite rising early to do a check over of the long empty rooms, he’d been dozing into his coffee when he heard three sets of noises in succession: first, he heard the bustle of what he imagined was the Weasley children; then he heard Molly trying to get them to quiet down; and then, inevitably, his mother’s portrait. With a sigh, Sirius came upstairs upon a scene in the hall that he would never have imagined as a child: Molly Weasley was berating what he supposed was the twins that he’d heard a little about from Remus, his mother was screeching about traitors befouling the house again, there was a giant ginger furball hissing at the portrait from Hermione’s arms while she tried to calm him down, and behind her, he could see Ron and a ginger-haired girl carrying owl cages. The image was enough to make him smile despite the old hag going off on once again.
"Give me a hand with the curtains!" he yelled to Ron, who abandoned his cage to give him a hand with the shrieking portrait.

"Now everyone be quiet!" Mrs Weasley whispered harshly.

"Oh!" Hermione cried, as Crookshanks leapt from her arms, growled at the curtains and fled up the stairs.

"Quiet, dear," Mrs Weasley reminded her, exasperated.

Hermione looked chagrined, staring at the stairs.

After a tense moment, the noise stopped and Sirius sighed with heavy relief. "Welcome to Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place."

The serpent ring chilled as his brother’s voice grew gradually dimmer, suggesting someone was going down to the kitchen for whatever reason. (Breakfast, perhaps?) Regulus wasn't actually certain what the ring would do if someone tried to go upstairs while another went down, but now was not the time to risk assumptions. Number Twelve Grimmauld Place was Regulus's home - Sirius himself had admitted as much - but he wasn't sure how tetchy Sirius would get about eavesdropping, even if his brother's voice did carry. As it was, he could only hope they did not continue up to the next landing. Perhaps there would be some benefit in designating an alarm for the study, too, and for the other floors, though the easiest alerts to distinguish were running out. Some creativity would be in order, it seemed.

Stepping out into the hallway and making a line for the staircase leading yet another floor up, his eyes drifted to see a massive ginger cat with a squashed face and amber eyes peering down at him a little too intelligently from the landing above. (The jolt he gave left him grateful that no one had quite scaled the stairs, though he could still hear vaguely hear Sirius's voice.) The cat must belong to one of the invisible people milling about downstairs. Perhaps animals weren’t included in the Fidelius Charm.

Soft-footedly, Regulus walked up the stairs to the third floor landing.

“Hello,” he said politely, voice no louder than a whisper.

The cat peered a moment longer - then, as if deeming Regulus to be acceptable company, approached, just within arm’s reach. After permitting a brief investigation of his fingers, Regulus scratched tentatively behind the cat’s ears and neck. Friendly enough, it seemed.

“You have quite a majestic coat on you,” he added quietly, unable to describe the cat as particularly handsome, but it seemed a rude remark to make, even to a cat. The keenness in that gaze left him feeling as if the animal might actually be offended by such a remark, but perhaps he was just imagining things, isolated as they were in this house.

Settling on the top step, Regulus finished the last sip of his tea and set down his book, using a free hand to scratch at the back of the cat’s neck.

Mrs Weasley ("Molly!" she'd corrected him twice now) had headed down into the kitchens. It seemed that they’d been sent with a large amount of groceries and healing supplies, so she wanted to make sure everything was put away. Sirius said thank you - he had some manners, despite what some people thought of him - but warned her Kreacher would probably just take things out and put them in other places.
"There's a house-elf here?" Hermione asked, clearly upset by her tone.

There was a collective grown from the lads.

"I mean, I'm just saying-" Hermione started.

"Don't start with SPEW again," Ron said irritably.

"It's not SPEW!" Hermione argued. "It's the Society for the Promotion of Elvish Welfare!"

"You might be a bit late for these ones," the ginger-haired girl called back. Given that she had gone up a few steps on the staircase, Sirius could guess why before she said it.

"Is that-" Hermione asked once she joined her. She sounded exceptionally disturbed. It reminded Sirius of James's reaction the first time he'd seen it.

"Yeah," Sirius said. It was a little macabre. "My Great Aunt liked to lob their heads off when they started to spill her tea."

"That's horrible!"

Sirius couldn't argue with that. "Better get you lot settled upstairs," he said, in lieu of addressing it.

Hermione didn't look happy, but all of them trotted up the stairs to the first floor with a certain grim fascination. He supposed from the outside, it did all look very peculiar.

"This place is mental," said one of the twins, though he had no idea which was which. He didn't sound disturbed, or disgusted. If anything, he sounded a bit excited.

_Gryffindors_, Sirius thought with affection. "I've always thought so."

"Is that whose it is?" Fred or George asked. "Your Great Aunt?"

"In a manner of speaking," Sirius said. It had been the place Phineas and his sisters had grown up, then his children, and theirs, until his parents. "This is the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black." At their blank stares to his blatant sarcasm, he added, "It's my parents' house."

"Your parents live here?" Hermione asked, tentatively.

"They did," Sirius said. "They've been dead for years."

"I'm sorry," she replied.

"Don't be," Sirius replied shortly. "I'm not."

There was a certain wave of discomfort that fell on the room, so Sirius moved onwards to the doors. He avoided the study, bathroom, and drawing room and opened the door to one of the many spare rooms. Though this house had once been filled with children, by the time of their parents, it had dwindled to the barren state it had fallen to, even then. "You girls should be alright in here," Sirius said, as luggage flew itself in with a flick of his wand. "The rest of us'll head upstairs."

"I don't see Crookshanks," Hermione said.

"He might be on the next landing," Sirius said, beckoning up another flight. He situated Ron into the room with Phineas's painting, warning him to ignore him if he got mouthy. The rest would need to go to the third floor, but it was mostly empty up there anyway.
"What's in there?" Ron asked, about the door across from his.

"Lupin, when he's here," Sirius said. "That reminds me, don't go going into locked rooms. They're locked for a reason."

"Professor Lupin is here?" George or Fred asked. "Brilliant!"

"Professor Lupin," Sirius said, still amused by the label. "Yes, he's here and about, but don't disturb him."

"Is this Order business?" Ron asked.

Sirius was a little taken aback. He hadn’t realised the children would necessarily know, but of course they would! Otherwise, they’d be in the same boat as Regulus. Dumbledore had to tell them that this was the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix.

“Don’t be angry,” Hermione spoke up. “It’s just all so mysterious, and no one will tell us anything.”

“I’m not angry,” Sirius said, and he wasn’t. If anything, he was either impressed by their resourcefulness or bemused by the Order’s lack of discretion. “I just can’t tell you anything.”

“Why not?” a twin asked.

“Because we’re kids,” Ron replied darkly.

“Not because you’re kids,” Sirius said, frustrated by his own inability to explain this properly. “Your age has nothing to do with it. It’s simply that what you don’t know, you can’t be forced to tell.”

There was a moment where that seemed to sink in, before Ron spoke up. “I wouldn’t!”

Having seen the boy’s devotion to Harry and heard about his actions in their first year, Sirius found himself believing him. That somehow made it feel a little worse. He softened his tone a little. “Then you would likely be badly hurt, or killed. Would you wish a loss of a son on your parents? On your siblings? On your friends?”

That seemed to get the point across a little better, but he feared he’d now worried them. They were still children. While he’d had his first encounters with death at a year or two older than most of them, the hope was that they could cut Voldemort off at the post, and that this would be a world none of them would ever have to truly experience.

“It’s not your courage, nor your strength, that I’m doubting,” Sirius said, knowing in their shoes it would be what he was thinking. “It’s that while Voldemort—” a collective shudder happened, but he pressed on. “No one was supposed to survive knowing he was back, but Harry did. We’ve got a heads up, and that means that there is a chance we can stop things getting as bad as they were. We can stop it before the war ever gets to the point where you will have to bury the people you love, or simply have them never come home.” He took a breath, trying not to think of his own experiences. “But if the worst happens, you won’t want to know details. You’ll want to know no matter what, they’re safe.”

Sirius shook himself, as he watched them all try to process that line of thought. He had a feeling he’d get it from Molly later, but it was important they understood.

“There’s more bedrooms on the next floor,” Sirius said, mostly just to cut the tension. “The library
is up there as well. I know it’s OWL year, so you can use it if you want to.”

While it didn’t brighten up everyone, it seemed to do the trick for Hermione. “Really?”

He nodded. “Just be careful about the books, they can be malevolent. If in doubt, ask someone first.” Actually, while he thought about it…”Watch out for the company, as well.”

“People in the Order?” she asked.

“Probably not,” Sirius said. “More than likely you’ll find my brother in there.”

“You have a brother?” Hermione asked.

“I do,” Sirius said, and he at least felt more confident in that statement these days than he had once. “But he can’t see you, so just don’t bother him, and he won’t bother you.”

“He can’t see us?” the other girl replied. “Is he...alive?”

That was a can of worms he was refusing to get into. “He’s not a ghost, but it’s complicated,” Sirius admitted. “He’s just not on the charm...”

“Ginny,” the girl supplied.

“Ginny,” he repeated, with a nod. “It might change, but for now, he doesn’t see you, but you can see him.”

“Why isn’t he on the charm?” Hermione asked.

“Because despite being an intelligent lad, he’s an idiot,” Sirius replied, with a shrug. “He’ll grow out of it.”

“Mum’s been saying that about them for years,” Ron said, giving his head a jerk towards the twins who beamed with pride at the fact it clearly hadn’t happened yet.

From the floor above, Regulus crinkled his nose in annoyance, half-tempted to give up his position in objection, but cluing into his eavesdropping was probably worse. Even prefaced with an acknowledgement of intelligence, "idiot" was hardly a compliment. Unsurprising, as far as descriptions went, but no less annoying for it. Even so, whatever charming descriptions remained, Regulus supposed he ought to wander back to his room for the time being. If Sirius was divvying out rooms to this "Ginny" and whoever else was down there, he had no guarantee they wouldn’t move to the bedrooms further up, and there was no alarm in place for the third landing.

Looking down to the cat, he offered it another friendly rub on the head. “I must be going, but it was lovely to meet you.” Picking up his book again to tuck it under arm and retrieving the empty teacup he had set aside, Regulus stood and quietly walked to the final set of stairs. His brother's voice dimmed with each step he took upward, fading until Regulus was once again shut away in his room.

Such was the glamorous life of vigilantes, Sirius got back to cleaning the place out. However, it was a little more enjoyable when the kids decided (sometimes under duress) to join in, if only for someone to commiserate with. The place was slowly but surely starting to at least look a little more inhabitable and having Molly around at least meant the quality of the food went up. The kids spent their own time to themselves, though the twins (who he was still having trouble telling apart) did
seem to spend a lot of the time planning something. He supposed he and Remus and James had been the same at their age. Still, Molly was a formidable woman, and for all their bravado, they tended to listen eventually.

Of course, that was how the jellied arm incident occurred.

There had been a few minor injuries and upsets in clearing out the house. There'd been a boggart incident on Monday, which had meant a giant spider had appeared briefly before it escaped off into the rest of the house. Sirius tried to make a mental note to give a little warning to both Remus and Regulus on that one. He somewhat doubted his brother’s childhood boggart was still in effect. There'd been the incident in the drawing room, where one of the books had latched onto Hermione and drawn blood from fingernails before they'd gotten it off. But the jellied arm incident had happened when (Fred?) had tried to look at something in the cabinets. Despite the previous warning, there had been the sound of the trinket hitting the floor while Fred greatly resembled a jumper flapping in the wind on a washing line.

Of course, he found this hysterical and (George?) had grabbed one, as well, so they would naturally match. Then came them attempting to fight with them, drip them over their sister (who'd squealed and hexed them for their trouble), and lean them off the stairs so their mother would walk into them. It had been worth the portraits going off for the reaction alone. Sirius's stomach was still hurting an hour later, when he went up to feed Buckbeak.

Going past the stairs to the upper landing, a thought hit him: one of these things was not like the others. The curses had tried to bleed, pluck and injure on the other objects. This was more like a prank. Could Regulus have...? They'd certainly had a conversation about it.

Leaning on one of the tables, he scribbled onto the notepad he'd taken to carrying with him as his preferred method of getting his brother’s attention. There would be no repeats nor mentions of the knocking incident. With a tap of his wand, he sent the note up the stairs ahead of him with only the words 'Knock, knock' scrawled on it.

A pause - and a note whooshing back, within a minute: 'Come in.'

It could almost be thought of as them experiencing some sort of regression to childhood, this game of passing notes, but Sirius would not complain about it. It might be the safest way for them to interact without getting under each other’s skin too much for comfort.

Sirius opened the door without preamble; he'd given him enough warning. "Have you been at the drawing room cabinets?"

Regulus was sitting at his desk, cleared of everything but a generally nondescript looking book. Turning one of his rings with the pad of his thumb, he looked over to where Sirius was standing in the doorway. "In my opinion, the more important question is whether any of your invisible friends have been rustling about in them," he said pointedly, propping an arm on the back of his chair to settle into his shift.

"I don't believe our dearest mother would ever prank someone for mucking about her cabinets,” Sirius pointed out. "That leaves you."

"It is not a prank," Regulus corrected curtly, "It is a deterrent. I could have gone for the one that makes the offender's fingers fall off, but I thought that might be a bit aggressive for an initial warning."

"It's a non-lethal means of exacting revenge. Sounds like a prank to me." Sirius shrugged, but he
couldn't suppress the smile for long. It was actually fun to see him doing things like this. It's the kind of stuff he would have loved to see him do when they were kids. "As long as they can be reattached, go ahead and do what you like. I haven't laughed like that in..." He shook his head, "I don't remember the last time I laughed like that."

"It wasn't supposed to be funny," Regulus said dryly, though his expression was more akin to exasperation than any deep irritation. "Tell them to stop touching the cabinets."

"I don't think that's going to work," Sirius admitted. Even if he wanted to, the image of them running around and trying to annoy each other was a good one. It was about time someone had some fun in this house. Besides, it was an easy fix. "They're having too much fun. I'm going to have to check they don't try and do with something someone else has cursed. One of the kids already got her fingernails pulled off."

Regulus crinkled his nose. "There are children in the house? Are you certain that is the wisest idea?"

"There have been children in this house for almost a millenia," Sirius pointed out. It was a strange thought, the idea that there may not be any more children here, and that he and Regulus were the last generation to do so. Unless there was something his brother wasn't telling him, of course.

(There was always something he wasn't telling him.)

"I know that," Regulus said, rolling his eyes, "But those were children from our family, so we generally have the sense not to touch things when warned that those objects will probably try to attack us. I would not have expected your invisible friends to be the sort to bring their children into a house that literally bites people's fingernails off, but perhaps I am making undue assumptions."

"I guarantee you that many children over the years have lost their fingers this way. At least two I'm certain of." There was something so ridiculous about Regulus's ability to assume anyone who wasn't brought up the way they were was a heathen and unintelligent while their house only bred little adults. He was living proof this wasn't true.

"Anyway, it's probably safer in here for them than out there." They were there when Harry had brought the boy’s body back, had heard the story tumble out, and no one was meant to know. If Voldemort truly wanted no one know he had returned, then those children were in terrible danger. "Everyone in this house is only here because they're screwed if Voldemort ever finds out they're here. Do you really believe I would subject another child to this mess if the danger weren't real?"

For a moment, Regulus peered back at him with his lips still pursed, but as the moment passed, he seemed to decide the argument was based in some degree of logic. "If that is the case, then yes, it is safer here, even for people who cannot follow instructions," Regulus granted mildly, and with a put upon tone, added, "They're probably all Gryffindors, aren't they?"

"You don't really want me to answer that," Sirius said, which probably told him the answer anyway.

Regulus sighed. “I thought as much.”

While most of the Weasleys seemed to be having fun playing with the variety of curses, Hermione seemed to have taken up residence in the library with Crookshanks. Sirius did remember the cat informing him he had a very bright girl to take care of him (or something to that effect, translating animal to human was not an exact thing) and bright people cared about their exam results. It had
been one of the ways he had known (thought he had known) Regulus would not return: he would never willingly give up his exam results. Even Sirius himself had studied a little more than usual in his OWL year, even if most of it had come easily to him.

"Oh, sorry, excuse me, I just need to-"

Sirius heard Hermione in the library when he was heading down the stairs, and peeked in expecting Remus to be up and in there from her polite tone. Instead, he should not have been surprised to see Regulus in there with his head deep into another book. Hermione was trying to move past him to get one of the books without pulling them down on him, but didn't seem to be having much success. He supposed it hadn't occurred to her to summon it. He'd noticed it hadn't occurred to her to summon it. He'd noticed it a fair bit with Lily as well; their first instinct was not to use magic.

"There's no need to be polite about it," Sirius said, as the girl startled and flushed with clear embarrassment. "He can't hear it."

The expression on Regulus's face shifted from confused to mildly annoyed, shifting a brief glance around the room, as if to assess whether anything had shifted about in any obvious way while he had been reading. Settling his gaze on Sirius, he lifted his brow and said dryly, "Sirius, just because you don't have any manners doesn't mean other people shouldn't." Looking back down to his book, he added, "Whoever else is in here, your politeness is both noted and appreciated."

For a moment, Hermione didn't seem to know where to look. Sirius supposed if she wasn't used to their usual exasperated dynamic, it might be quite difficult to respond to it. She seemed to settle and decide on a very unsure, "You're welcome?"

Sirius rolled his eyes; he was definitely too old to be passing on messages from teenage girls. He'd been too old to do that when he was Hermione's age. "You're welcome, apparently." Sirius repeated, with no small amount of amusement. "What are you trying to get?"

"I thought I saw Confronting the Faceless," Hermione said, making a vague movement to the books.

"You're just bypassing OWLs and going straight for the NEWT level, aren't you?" There was an extensive library of both standard dark arts, hexes, and curses here as Sirius himself knew. He'd gone through all of them himself when he was younger. He could only vaguely remember the title as having some work on Dementors in it. There were no prizes for guessing why that stuck in his mind.

Sirius turned his attention back to his brother, "Can you move to the left? Actually, grab Confronting the Faceless from behind you, will you? It's a lot less likely to attack you than her."

Tearing his eyes from the page again, Regulus twisted around to the bookshelf and scanned the titles. Only a few seconds passed before he carefully plucked the requested book and turned back around, setting it on the table in front of him. "There you go. Certainly an unconventional choice for an OWL student, but valuable information, nonetheless."

Hermione reached forward to take the book, which didn't seem to have any particular desire to hurt her. "Thank you," she said, apparently once again ignoring the fact he couldn't hear her. "It's just that we learned about the Unforgivable last year with Professor Moody, except it wasn't him at all, and if they come up at OWL, well-"

Sirius couldn't help himself. He snorted. "You're worried a Death Eater didn't teach the Unforgivable curses thoroughly enough?" He bent down to pet Crookshanks, who had appeared
from nowhere to wind around his ankles. "I seem to remember you having all O's. Do you remember Unforgivables coming up much?"

Regulus propped an elbow and rested his chin in the palm, lightly tapping a finger against his temple as his eyes fell to his book once again. An OWL student wouldn’t have taken the exam yet, implying that it was Regulus he was speaking to, however ambiguous. "No, not in the examinations." After a beat, the dawn flash of realisation rose on his face in a furrow, and he looked up to Sirius again. "Wait- Why was this student learning Unforgivables from a Death Eater?"

With a sudden swift clarity, Sirius realised he hadn't explained the circumstances of Crouch being at Hogwarts beyond that he put Harry's name in the cup and that he was Kissed there. He felt like kicking himself. There was no way he could have this conversation in front of Hermione. While a lovely girl, she was also bright enough to put things together, and he'd prefer not to have the 'so-my-idiot-brother-joined-the-Death-Eaters-when-he-was-your-age' conversation with the kids before Harry was here. Once would be enough.

"There's been one or two Death Eaters teaching at Hogwarts," Sirius said, evasively.

He had not expected Hermione to interrupt. "Three."

*Three?* Who was he missing? "I wasn't counting Karkaroff."

"Neither was I," Hermione said, before looking a little shifty. "I mean, if what everyone says about Professor Snape is true."

"I'm including him," Sirius said, racking his brains trying to think of a third. "Who's the third?"

"Professor Quirrell," Hermione said. "He was our Defense teacher in our first year."

The name didn't sound familiar at all. "You're sure?"

"You-Know-Who was using his body. We don't truly know if it was him, but considering he was growing out the back of his head..." Hermione said. "It was in first year, when he was trying to get the philosopher's stone."

This part was familiar; Sirius had heard that Voldemort had come to Hogwarts to try and take the stone, and that Lily giving her life had taken him down. What he had not realised was that Voldemort had apparently been smuggled in the body of a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. That position was ridiculous.

"Out the back of his head," Sirius repeated flatly.

Hermione nodded.

Sirius then remembered how negatively Regulus tended to react (now) when left out of the conversation and tried to shake it off. "I didn't know there was another one," he told him. "Two was bad enough."

"Three Death Eaters have taught at Hogwarts over the course of this OWL student's schooling thus far, one of which was outright teaching the Unforgivables?" Regulus recapped with a lifted brow. "Hogwarts sure has changed since we were in school."

"So much for Hogwarts being safe," Sirius agreed.
"Not outright," Hermione corrected. "Just how they worked."

"He still cast them in front of you." Sirius said with a shrug, before he realised Hermione had mumbled something else. "What?"

"On us," Hermione said, tentatively. "The imperius, to show how you can fight it."

Sirius looked at his brother briefly, before taking in one deep breath and letting it go. He couldn't lose his temper over this. He was not going to completely lose it over the fact that Hogwarts, which was supposed to be safe, had students having the imperius cast on them. He knew if he tried to talk about it now, he'd explode at him; how could someone Regulus seemed so damned attached to cast one of the worst curses in existence on children?

And one of your best friends turned out to be a mass murderer a snide voice in his head reminded him. He forced the feeling down.

"There's lunch in the kitchen, Hermione," he said, unable to keep the coldness out of his voice. He needed to get out of the room now, and he'd feel better if the children were downstairs. "You should go eat. You can take the book with you."

The poor girl was clearly glad of the reprieve.

Wanting to cut off the question he knew was coming, Sirius waved Regulus off. “Ask me later.” Later, he may not even scream at him about it.

Regulus had opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again, crinkling his nose with a nod to Sirius and a look that suggested he would be certain to do just that, at some point. "Good luck with your studying," he said to the air as much as to the person he could not see, dropping his eyes to his book once again.

Regulus had no conscious memory of a single birthday within the walls of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. The summertime was for holidays at the beach, where all of the most important purebloods settled on the sands of Porth Iago, and as far back as he could remember, the progression of his childhood had been marked in the halls of their summer home. Adulthood brought forth the complications of defection, and with it a certain break in annual traditions, but he was home again, now, a decade and a half later. Nontraditional, still, though he was uncertain whether or not something still counted as a tradition if one had not engaged in that tradition for nearly half of one's life. In such distinctions, he found he was still a bit fuzzy.

“Kreacher is happy to see Master Regulus home for his birthday,” the house elf had croaked cheerfully as Regulus settled at the table for breakfast, early that morning.

A flood of warmth had rushed in at the sentiment, silly as it was, but there was something nostalgic in the elf’s well wishes. Regulus could almost pretend like it was something approaching a normal birthday, if not for the increasingly frequent movement of items, reminding him time and time again that he was not as alone as he might like. The rings, on the other hand, had grown too complicated to track, with invisible people going to and fro like they owned the place. He dreaded to go back to relative blindness, but he was nearly as blind with it triggering constantly. More adjustments would be needed, if these people were staying much longer.

The alarms for the display cases were still informative, and they had triggered twice since he finished breakfast. Apparently these Gryffindor children were just as difficult to deter as Sirius had suggested they would be. Inflated hands, dexterity-cancelling numbness, arms turning to wood,
even the temporary finger removal curse that Sirius had essentially given him permission to implement. Today, the offending hand would be flying to stick to the nearest part of them, most likely the other hand or potentially a smack in the face. Regulus was strongly considering removing the curses and writing a note telling them they should touch everything in sight to try and break their cycle when nothing happened, but he wasn’t quite sure he could muster the words, even in jest.

The portraits lining the hall were starting to lazily stir as he was passing towards the staircase leading upwards to the library. The curtains draped over his mother were heavy with stillness, but he still swept past quickly without a look. They had never talked much, when she was alive, and he hated how much he wanted to talk to her now. Not that ghoulish version of her - but his mum. He hadn’t a clue what he would say: Even before he had darted off into the night, Regulus had never known what to say beyond reports of the sorts of accomplishments he thought she would want to hear, but he could not even recall the last words he had said to her. It must have been parting words over Easter, his mind buzzing with the Dark Lord’s mystery set before him. She had been somewhere at the graduation party for him and his peers, but he had stuck close to his friends, unable to face her.

He supposed she was never told of the treacherous words he’s spoken to his friends that night, or her portrait would not be half so gentle with him. At least Barty and the others had granted him that, ornery as he’d been.

Portraits of his grandfathers had caught his attention some time ago, but he had yet to draw attention to himself. They seemed a little more lucid than his mother, if significantly more sleepy than he recalled them being in life, and as tempting as it sometimes felt to send an owl to Narcissa, Regulus wasn’t sure if he was actually ready for a lucid conversation with any member of his family besides Sirius (and even those were hit and miss). Swiftly, he had swept by them, as well.

Mid-morning brought a letter-by-owl from France - birthday wishes scrawled out by his potioneer friend Julien, and fortunately devoid of any blithe remarks about the state of England. (Perhaps the village had settled back into the assumption that rumors of the Dark Lord’s return were as fabricated as everyone always hoped. Regulus couldn't decide if that was better or worse.) So consuming were his memories in England that the letter from France had been jarring, simple though it was. The sentiment was welcome, yet it felt like a piece trying to fit into the wrong puzzle - like a birthday wish to someone else who shared his looks, his speech, his entrance into the world. (A birthday wish to Rian.) Carefully Regulus folded the letter and slipped it into his pocket.

The remainder of the morning was spent in the library, continuing to thumb through the concealment tome he had pulled from the shelf a few mornings before. An occasional shift in the room suggested someone else was shuffling about between the bookshelves and the table (if the chair pushing itself in and out then neatly back in again was any indication); Regulus wondered if it was the well-mannered OWL student again, but it was hard to tell by the reading selection piling up on the table.

Butting against his leg, the ginger cat (Crookshanks was its name), looked up at him with those startling yellow eyes. Shifting his position to prop the book on his leg, he held the book at a comfortable reading angle with one hand and reached down to scratch Crookshanks’s head with the other. He was a good cat, Regulus had settled, and welcome as another visible resident. (Somehow, Regulus suspected Crookshanks would still be among the more preferred residents, even if he wasn’t the only one visible.)

By the time morning and lunch had passed without incident, Regulus was beginning to think the
invisible states weren’t so bad if it meant a quiet and uneventful birthday, but the thought did not last long.

He had removed his attention for only a moment while Kreacher refilled his tea and disappeared down to the kitchen again, but when Regulus’s eyes return to the cake his elf had provided, a significant piece was missing from the far side. (Taking things without permission appeared to be a consistent problem, in this house.) Slanting his mouth, he lifted his brow and shot a look in Sirius’s direction, as the only visible person in the room. Whoever had taken the piece appeared to have pulled the slice (or slices) into the Fidelius Charm with them, because it was nowhere to be seen on the table. “I don’t recall saying your invisible friends could partake in my birthday cake.”

Sirius swivelled to look at the offending item, then raised his eyebrows with a snort. He shifted his gaze slightly. “Clear off, the both of you. You have your own little brother to drive crazy.” There was a beat of silence. “Normally, yes, but a man's birthday cake should be sacrosanct. Especially if he's been dead for a decade and a half.”

Regulus nodded. "Thank you. Sirius, you can have a piece." Thoughtfully, he paused for a beat. "And perhaps the polite OWL student from the library."

“Quit flirting, you're old enough to be her father,” Sirius mock-scolded, taking a slice and pointing it in the direction of... something. “Unlike most things in this house, he doesn't bite. You can go ahead.”

Rolling his eyes, Regulus shook his head. (For all that had changed, some things apparently would always stay the same.) "You aren't that funny, you know. And your cake privileges can still be revoked," he said dryly.

“Bit late now,” Sirius shrugged. “Though I think she'd prefer it if you talked to that bloody elf about not calling her names.”

“Does she call him any names?” Regulus asked with his brow lifted, eyes trained keenly on Sirius to watch for hints of a fib. Polite though the child was reported to be, one could never tell how far that politeness would extend. (He would not tell Kreacher to be friendly to those who are unfriendly to him, that much was certain.)

"Only the one he was given," Sirius replied, before waving his hand a little up and down and wincing. "Stop. I'm not relaying all of that. Cleaning is actually one step up from discussing house elf welfare reforms. Write it down, leave it in the library, I'm sure he'll take a look at it.

“Hm…” Regulus started, eyes flicking between his brother and the seemingly empty chair he had been addressing. He could not hear what she was chattering about, but it sounded as if at least one other person was being decent to Kreacher. Leaning forward as if to talk around Sirius (though there was nothing to see when he did), he added, “Take it as fair warning that if you are hoping to lure him into engaging even peripherally with anything containing the words ‘house-elf’ and ‘welfare’ in the same sentence, you will only be disappointed. I tried for the better part of 15 years to convince him to be kind to one house-elf, clearly with very little success.” Leaning back again, he took a bite of the cake.

Sirius gave him a look of disdain before deadpanning, "Don't be so hard yourself. Your debating skill when you were still blowing spit bubbles lacked some of the later subtle understandings, so I wouldn’t count those years."

“Thoughtful as that allowance might be, I never blew spit bubbles,” Regulus replied lightly, neatly carving off a corner of his cake with the fork. “I’m pretty certain you’re making that up.”
"Despite what I usually say, you were not born an old man," Sirius reminded him, eying the precise carving with mostly fond exasperation. "You can ask one of the girls when they're speaking to you. Andromeda's old enough to remember, at least." He looked back to the chair. "No, her mum.” Beat. “She's keeping her nose clean, so I wouldn't expect so.”

Regulus let out a huff of air, and the rush of memory was bittersweet. It had been so long since he’d seen their cousins, but he suspected for at least two of the three, infant spit bubbles were an unlikely topic of conversation, though for different reasons now that might have been the case years before. (Then there was Andromeda…) He’d been a child, still in his first year at school, when she (...shamed the family, ran off with a muggle, faced disownment for straying from the path...)

When Regulus spoke, the tone was quiet and thoughtful. “It has been awhile,” he said with a slight shake of the head.

Sirius seemed to study him for a long moment before his expression changed. “Come upstairs for a minute,” he asked him. He indicated to the seemingly empty chair. “I'm sure she'll guard your cake for you. We shouldn't be long.”

Regulus nodded distantly, then stood to follow.

Sirius led the way up to their mother’s room without comment, but stopped directly outside it as if a thought had just occurred. “Do you remember your Care of Magical Creatures?” he asked, carefully.

“Yes. Reasonably well, I would say,” Regulus started with some degree of wariness, jarring him from the thoughtful haze. “Why?”

“Just remember to be polite and let him decide what he wants to do, and you’ll get on great,” Sirius reasoned, before opening the door slowly to reveal that the large bed and dresser had been removed and been replaced by a large, grey and slightly fluffy hippogriff.

For a staggering moment, Regulus just stared at the tucked wings and stray feathers, eyes soon catching and subsequently locking with the creature as it lifted its head at their entrance. “You… got me a hippogriff?” he asked uncertainly under his breath.

"Don't be ridiculous," Sirius rolled his eyes, giving the creature a few moments before going and petting his feathers. "Hippogriffs are notoriously difficult to rear. Buckbeak's here same reason as the rest of us, Death Eaters. He got on the wrong side of a Death Eater after his kid decided to be an asshole to him, so they tried to kill him. Since you get on fine with Crookshanks, I thought you might get on with him. He's very bright, very loyal. Never forgets people." He lay his hand still on his feathers. "You could use a little more of that in your life."

With a hippogriff in their mother’s bedroom, Regulus was not certain what he was supposed to assume, but he opted to let the remark slide in light of what at least sounded like a well-meaning extension. Slowly, he approached Buckbeak without breaking eye contact. “Cats are a bit different than hippogriffs, but I understand what you are saying.”

The hippogriff stood then with a brief flap of his wings, as if adjusting himself. Slowly, Regulus bowed, nerves knotting as the creature’s piercing gaze held.

A terrifying beat passed, and another - then Buckbeak bowed in return.

Immediately, Regulus felt those nerves start to loosen again. “I suppose it's lucky I paid attention
in class. The only other hippogriff I've met is that figurine from when we were little kids. I imagine the toy version was a little more forgiving if you mess up,” he said as he straightened, though there was a twinge of fascination as he extended a hand and inched forward to tentatively stroke Buckbeak's feathered head. Meeting the hippogriff’s gaze again with slightly less tension, he added, “Let's not get killed by Death Eaters together, then, shall we?”

“Good all round advice. When things are better, you should try flying with him.” Sirius let go of Buckbeak, satisfied it had gone well enough he didn't have to worry. "It'd be a more fun birthday, since you don't get the beach this year. Maybe next year."

“Flying on a hippogriff…” Regulus murmured with a shake off his head, rubbing a hand over the hippogriff’s beak. “This gets more and more surreal by the day.”

"We're in Mum's room, petting a hippogriff, in a house I should definitely not be allowed back into, with my dead little brother on his birthday while invisible people try to get each other slapped by touching the cabinet." Sirius couldn't contain a snort. "How much more surreal do you expect it to get?"

A small, wry smile cracked the line of Regulus's mouth. “I think we might have actually reached the limit.”

Sirius let his smile slip a little. "Let's hope you still feel that way in a few weeks."

“I'm sure something else will come up, as it always does,” Regulus said mildly, releasing a huff of air. “I supposed we shall see.”
Regulus was reading in the study when the note appeared at the edge of the small side-table beside his chair, folded neatly with his name printed on the outside. It was with a certain measure of curiosity that he temporarily set aside his book and plucked the note from the table, unfolding the parchment to reveal a rather unexpectedly sizable block of writing. Skimming the contents immediately dispelled that surprise once again: Hermione, most likely, the OWL student who apparently liked the study at least as much as he did and had been discussing house-elves with Sirius the day before.

Apparently, when his brother had instructed her to write him a letter about house-elf welfare, she had taken the recommendation to heart.

> An enslavement of a fellow magical species should not stand, regardless of if they seem happy to do it. All magical people, human and otherwise, should have right to comfortable working conditions, fair wages, and the choice not to do something rather than being bound by an archaic magic that strips them of this. All creatures with sentient and coherent thought should be treated as such! The treatment of house-elves in the magical world is often appalling, and they have no legal right to challenge it. They are intelligent and should have an equal voice in the laws that govern them as magical people do.

So earnest, it was, that he permitted the flicker of a wry smile tugging up at the corner of his mouth. He had spared comparatively little thought to acting on house-elves beyond his relationship with Kreacher, however terrible he thought it was to mistreat a magical being that tried so hard to assist you and make you happy. The point had never seemed worth pressing amongst the social company he had once kept, but this girl was nothing if not forward on the subject.

He was silently summoning a quill, parchment, and a sealed well of ink from their father’s old desk when the memory of another conversation struck him, also involving the OWL student. Death Eaters teaching at Hogwarts -- Death Eaters teaching Unforgivables at Hogwarts, for that matter. The subject had slipped his mind in light of birthday festivities, but it was a curious bit of information, and however informative it might be to ask the student about her Death Eater professors, Sirius was very much the only person he felt even remotely comfortable with when discussing the subject. (Even then, ‘comfortable’ did not feel like quite the right word for it.)

The question might slip his mind again if he permitted too much involvement in his study activities, easy as it was to get absorbed once more. He was not certain if Hermione was still in the room, but in the case that she was, he did not want to leave without any word at all. Politeness called for politeness in return, after all, and she was one of the few who seemed to bother. Neatly he wrote out a short note in response:

> Your dedication to this cause is evident. Kreacher is very important to me,
Carefully he folded the note on that same table, labeling it with her name before standing up to search out Sirius.

Strange though it was to see his brother actively engaged in cleaning, it was no longer a surprise to walk into the drawing room and see Sirius tackling some task or another (sometimes literally, though today, it was only a scouring spell).

"Sirius," he began, pausing in the doorway and examining the room for a comparison point, should anything start moving. "Do you have a moment to discuss controversial Hogwarts professors? You assured me such a conversation was forthcoming, the other day."

For a moment, it seemed as if Sirius might outright ignore him. Then he sighed heavily, hopping off the back of the drawing room couch and indicating outside of the room. There was a distinct air that if the doorway had not been blocked, he would simply have walked right through it and expected to be followed. "Upstairs then, there's people traipsing all over the place down here."

Regulus nodded without a word and stepped back from the doorway to allow his brother to pass in front to lead the way. From Regulus's view of it, the room they wandered to was as crowded (or rather uncrowded) as the drawing room, but as he often did these days, Regulus opted to trust that Sirius was being truthful about the lack of invisible occupants running about within. When the door shut behind them again, he lifted his brow.

"So, Death Eaters teaching at Hogwarts, then?" Regulus began again, "What have I missed?"

"Sixteen years, give or take." Sirius deadpanned, before flopping on the chair with his usual lack of posture. He bit back a sneer. "Are we counting the potions master here? I believe he's still technically a card carrying member."

"That depends on who the Hogwarts potions master is," Regulus responded, strolling over to the chair across from him and sitting down. Slughorn had never seemed the Death Eater type, connected though he was...

"Was that after you?" Sirius said, pausing for a moment. "Doesn’t matter, it’s Snape. He took over as Slytherin’s head of house as well after Slughorn retired."

Regulus snorted softly. "Severus Snape became a professor?" Propping his elbow on the arm of the chair, he fit his chin atop his hand with a look of mild bafflement. "Interesting choice. Intelligent, certainly, but I wasn’t under the impression he even liked children all that much."

"Oh, he despises the children. They've got horror stories." Sirius gave a snort of utter disgust about the subject matter. "But it kept him out of Azkaban when it all went down, and he's useful even if he's a total prick."

Sirius put up one his fingers and pulled one down. "Then Karkaroff was up there for the Triwizard, and some bloke called Quirrell a couple of years back, Defense teacher. Literally had Voldemort coming out the back of his head." Then another two as he spoke. "Then Crouch. That was the Unforgivables."

The look of mild curiosity focused to a point as Sirius finished his list, and Regulus dropped his hand to sit up a bit straighter. "Barty was a professor?" He was not even certain where to start with
the line of questioning on that one. He knew such news ought to be troubling, regardless of the Death Eater in question, but he found it almost comical to imagine, Barty at the front of a Hogwarts class, lecturing on the Unforgivable Curses like you might any other spell (control - torment - elimination). Demonstrations of dancing rats. Climbing on furniture. The grouchy expression on his brother's face indicated he did not find the image half so amusing, so Regulus made an effort to hold his face in neutrality. “Bold choice for an Azkaban escapee,” he settled.

"No one knew he had." Sirius huffed. There was an unusual tentative tone that didn't match the massive clenches and unclenches he was doing with his finger. "Dunno if you've come across this in your multitude of books, but did you know dementors are blind? They can read health states, but they can't distinguish between two people beyond that. Crouch pulled a switch, shoved his kid under the Imperius and invisibility and went on with his life. Until Voldemort showed up, or what was left of him. After that, it just took polyjuice and applying for the position. Not all that bold."

“Ahh…” Regulus nodded thoughtfully as he absorbed the explanation. “Polyjuice. That sounds much more logical,” he granted. Once again, he rested his chin on his propped hand. “Let me see if I am understanding all of this correctly. So Barty's father switched him… with his mother, wasn’t it? Then placed him under the Imperius… I wouldn't expect his father to lift the curse, so does that mean Barty figured out how to resist it?” At that, a look of unfiltered curiosity rose on his face.

Sirius raised his eyebrows. "I mean Voldemort literally showed up at the door and imperiused Bartemius Crouch, knocking out the one he'd been using for a decade."

Regulus crinkled his nose. “Not a house call I would want… So the Dark Lord imperiused Barty Senior, releasing the curse on Barty Junior?” Regulus clarified, his expression pinching. Again, guilt prickled at the back of his mind. (When he left, he hadn't thought…) “A decade under the curse… That's terrible…” Shaking his head, Regulus let loose a sigh and rubbed at his face.

"I'd feel a lot worse for him if he hadn't proceeded to cast it on a bunch of kids, try to murder my godson, and raise up a Dark Lord," Sirius replied sourly. "Let alone show how to cast them."

Regulus bristled. “Barty did not deserve to be imperiused for a decade,” he said firmly, his tone a touch chillier, though as he continued, a degree of neutrality returned. “However, I can agree that he should not have done any of those things. To have the Dark Lord back after all this time is incredibly frustrating, to say the least.” Crinkling his nose again, Regulus shook his head and added with a sigh, “On the bright side, at least it was probably just the Imperius that he was casting. I highly doubt he would cast the other two on any of the students.”

"Just the Imperius," Sirius said, lips curling into a look of utter distaste. "Which is it, is it something terrible that he shouldn't have had cast on him or is it just the removal of a person's agency?"

“Ten years is different than what was probably nothing more than a demonstration,” Regulus responded curtly. “We even used to cast it on each other to practice resisting, so I can assure you it doesn't hurt. I'm not saying anyone should be casting Unforgivables on children, but I'm sure they're fine.”

Sirius stared at him for a moment before leaning forward on his elbows, fidgeting uncomfortably in some attempt to collect himself. "You never got very far in resisting it, did you?” he said, finally with a grim tone. "Or you'd know it does hurt."

“We only had two weeks, so we were not fully successful, but it didn't 'hurt' to resist,” Regulus responded in a matter-of-fact (if prickly) tone. “The curse pushes back, of course, but it isn't 'painful,' per se.”
"You were friends playing games with it, that's why it didn't hurt. If you'd been forced into doing something you desperately didn't want to, you'd say it hurt then." Sirius studied him, as if trying to work something out. "Hang on. Two weeks until what?" He gave a dry huff that might have masqueraded as a laugh if you were feeling generous. "Two weeks until you had to return to school. You were fucking with Unforgivables while you were still in school?"

Regulus crinkled his nose uncomfortably. "Not while in school -- technically, it was a holiday," he noted contrarily, though he knew well what his brother meant, and before Sirius had the chance to respond, he spoke again, "When did you think I learned them? I left the same night the train brought us back. There wasn’t much opportunity at the graduation party, though I suppose I can see how that wouldn’t be completely out of the realm of possibility..." Pressing his lips to a firm line, he rubbed at his temple.

"I didn't," Sirius said quietly. "I didn't think you'd learned them."

Shifting uncomfortably in his seat, Regulus seemed to develop a sudden interest in the grains of the wooden table between them, still rubbing a spot on his temple as the tension pulled taut in the quiet, "Well, I would have preferred not to, but it is what it is."

"Then why the hell did you?" Despite his words, Sirius hadn't raised his voice. He looked up, his own way of demanding answers, "You're not a sadist. I've never seen you get angry enough to want to wipe someone from existence. So why did you?"

Regulus did not lift his eyes, pretending not to notice the shift in his brother's posture. "Because Bella thought it would make a charming Christmas curriculum?" he answered with a touch of bitterness, calm though his words were. Lighthearted memories of pat-a-cake rats and experimental imperiusing had given way to a darker set, to flickering scenes of blood and rot, to chilling screeches and the jarring stillness of the Killing Curse. The heart of his brother's question was far more complicated, far more uncomfortable than a matter of lesson-planning--

(--but how could he even begin to explain something like that to Sirius?)

"You always do everything Bellatrix tells you to do? Torturing and killing animals because she said so?" Sirius scoffed, before his voice dropped low again. "Regulus, I'm going to need you to tell me right now that there is not a person out there that you've used a torture curse on and be telling the truth."

Regulus visibly winced, and immediately he cursed his treacherous muscles for their betrayal. ('Because she said so' -- as if that wasn't compelling enough.) "Never on a person, no," he muttered quietly, his voice strained. "I felt guilty enough about that stupid rat." Bellatrix's scornful remarks had blurred and faded with the years, but her piercing stare and the sickening anxiety those words had yanked forth were all too sharp in his memories. "I was a bit of a disappointment, in that respect."

With his usual inappropriate reaction for the moment, Sirius couldn't help but laugh a little. "You know she's the disappointment, don't you?" he said, quite obviously trying not to smile over it. "She's the one still stupid enough to screeching about her loyalty to Voldemort like it means something. It doesn't. One of the oldest damn houses in the magical world and she's spent her life worshiping a jumped up half-blood that went to school with Mum." He couldn't seem to help but snigger at that thought. "Disappointed doesn't cover it! Her father must be rolling in his grave."

The sudden jolt in mood might have been startling as it cut through the suffocating tension, but it was Sirius's remark about the Dark Lord that drew Regulus's gaze up again, the air of misery shifting into razor-keen puzzlement. "Half-blood?"
"Muggle father." Sirius shrugged, though he was obviously still preoccupied in his own amusement at the whole idea. "Mother went right back to Salazar himself, apparently, but he was given his father's name and seems really pissed off every time Dumbledore uses it."

For a moment, Regulus merely stared as the anger bubbled slowly in his chest and flickered on his face -- a staggering lie of omission, if he'd ever heard one. Perhaps such a discovery oughtn't be surprising when he'd learned long ago that the whole 'Cause' was more about furthering the Dark Lord's own immortality and subjugation goals rather than promoting traditionalism, but he had been unprepared for the fact that the Dark Lord himself had a muggle father. Even with a maternal line trickling down from-

-Slytherin.

Subtly, Regulus's eyes widened in dawning realisation. Salazar Slytherin's locket -- it had personal significance -- and perhaps it would mean nothing, but perhaps it would mean something, and what had been pooled frustration just moments before (and abject misery, moments before that), he was instead fighting the rising thrill of a new thread to tug.

Regulus's eyes narrowed just slightly in thought as he locked his gaze with Sirius's again. "What is his name?"

"Riddle. Or Tom, if you're Dumbledore and you're feeling sassy." Sirius cocked his head a little to one side. "If you're trying to track down information on him, I'm not sure how useful it'd be now but you can try the kids. One of them had his diary from when he was a student, but apparently it was haunted and Harry ended up destroying it."

(Tom Riddle...) "Haunted how?" Regulus asked, sitting up straighter still and trying mask the sheer flood of intrigue crashing in his head. (A diary from Tom Riddle's -- from the Dark Lord's -- childhood -- could it-) "Which kids, specifically?" he asked, measuring his tone carefully.

Sirius stopped, leaning his shoulders back. "I don't know how. Everything I have is second-hand. I didn't even see Peter until after it'd already happened, and I'm not sure it makes much sense. The diary had a manifestation which tried to kill Harry, and--" He gave Regulus a look. "Which kids have I been careless enough to name where you can hear it?"

'Manifestation' sounded promising, and Regulus fought a smile. "Hermione and Ginny," Regulus responded simply, though his mind was still reeling. Finally, there was something new to chase down. If these children really had destroyed this 'haunted diary' of the Dark Lord's, and if it really could be what he thought it was -- did they know what it was? Or was it little more than a bizarre strike of chance?

"That makes things easier," Sirius admitted, either rolling his eyes at Regulus or himself. "I got the story from Ginny. She didn't know who it was, so she talked to him for months. Until he started being able to control her, make her do things, and she wouldn't really know they were happening. Somehow I don't think she enjoyed the lack of agency as much as you seemed to. If someone knows something, it's probably her." He made a noise of consideration. "This would be a hell of a lot easier if you could just talk to them."

'It wasn't enjoyment, Regulus wanted to object, (not strictly), but it didn't seem worth the remark. Instead, he nodded distantly, the tiniest quirk of a smile tugging at the corner before he smothered it with a thoughtful twist of his mouth. "It would be much easier, certainly, though I cannot say I have been a fan of this 'invisibility' situation, from the start."

Brimming with purpose, Regulus stood. "If you will excuse me-" he started, then paused, a hand
lingering on the back of the chair he had been sitting in just seconds before. "This conversation will remain private, yes?" he said, though his exacting stare was more a statement than a true question, making some grasping attempt to mask that creeping vulnerability. (Perhaps it had been wrong to admit it - or perhaps it had been right?) "It would be incredibly frustrating to go to Azkaban now."

"You mean you're not eager to see our dearest cousin again?" Sirius rolled his eyes in an exaggerated manner. "Don't be an idiot."

This time, Regulus didn't smother the little hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth before turning to walk out the door, up to his room and his books and his notes. He was not certain what to do with the warm feeling of -- what was it, comfort? acceptance? -- flicking off embers in his chest. Trying to communicate with Sirius about his time as a Death Eater was a volatile affair -- a shot in the dark where honesty was likely to backfire aggressively in his face -- but uncomfortable though it had been, they had come out relatively unscathed.

Even so, his brother had been so surprised to discover Regulus had learned the Unforgivables… Sirius had thought better of him, in that, better than the truth of it, and perhaps there were some realities better left untread. Those lines his brother set were still a mystery, more strict than he might expect, and also more forgiving, and altogether unpredictable to him. (What would Sirius think of the Fire, of the waters of Tinworth? That much, he felt certain he did not want to know.)

But for all the yanking discomfort of their conversation -- those stomach-churning memories of his cousin's teaching and the painful longing for a best friend he would never speak to again -- the pattering thrill of discovery was thrumming steady in his head. When again he was seated at his desk, Regulus pulled out his notes, separated by their respective columns. On the left, he began to add to the list he had started some time before:

```
Known

H- Obj. (Spec., or Ord.)
  C: M
  D: BV & ?

  1. SL (X)
  2. Unk. (used?)
  3. TRD? TR → DL (TR: UPN SJEEMF) (X - HP)
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Shifting his attention to the right column, again he began to notate the newest information to consider:

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Investigate

  -D: Other?
  -HC? RD? GS?
  -2? 3? 4? 7?
  -FL - found?
  -K (exp.) - after SL
  -Re-use?
  -G (exp.) - TRD
  -TR - SS?
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Gathering more information on that diary could be telling. By his brother's description, second-hand though it was, the diary sounded suspiciously like a horcrux, even if 'haunted' seemed a silly
descriptor for a fragment of the Dark Lord’s soul. Perhaps there was another process to consider that he had yet to come across, but he would cross that bridge if it came. A diary from his childhood (how strange it was, to imagine the Dark Lord ever being a child), a locket from a great ancestor such as Slytherin… Perhaps a bit of digging would turn up others. Could there be more? How far might this extend?

If nothing else, it was a trail to follow and a purpose to pursue. It seemed these invisible people could be useful, after all.

That had not gone how Sirius had expected.

Crouch was a touchy subject between the two of them. Sirius hadn't realised the extent of the friendship, or that there had been more than a passing acquaintance, so he'd been off his game ever since he realised his brother had a best friend that wasn't bound and translated into three languages. He hadn't expected him to willingly discuss any of the Death Eater aspects at all, let alone Bellatrix or the Unforgivables. He tried to think of himself in that position, without the scalding betrayal Wormtail had blazed through their friendship, but he couldn't. He couldn't grasp it.

Regulus obviously hadn't been able to grasp the gravity of the Imperius either, which was worrying. Though the more he thought about it (and in the mindless cleaning, he’d thought about little else) then the more it made sense. He’d often called Regulus their parents’ little parrot, their puppet, in his youth. They could manoeuvre him with the right word here or there. It was easy to dismiss it as him being soft in the head, but the dawning realisation that he may legitimately not understand that refusal is an option was both going to make things more difficult with the Order and something that tempted him to set off the bloody portrait just to he could have an excuse to scream at the old hag.

But he had suspected this was an issue when they were young, hadn't he? Sirius had always known he was frightened of something seemingly intangible, and he'd tried to help while he was there. But he hadn't been there. Regulus had faced the weight of it and buckled under it. Whatever he'd done (the Imperius, the Cruciatus, the 
Avada Kedavra), there was a part of blame that belonged with him. Christmas holidays...had that been after he’d taken the mask off him? Could he have prevented him ever knowing it if he’d gone with James’ (only somewhat joking) suggestion he should just go and get him, and not take no for an answer? But wouldn’t that have made him no better than the rest of the family? It was always about what they needed, not what he was choosing. And when given his free choice, Regulus made the choice to come back into danger and do the right thing. It had to count for something.

"Are you planning on clearing that out?" Remus' voice interrupted his thoughts.

Sirius all at once realised he'd been standing in front of the open wardrobe for some time. "Sorry," he said. "Just thinking."

"Harry?" Remus asked. It was a logical conclusion to make. His birthday was only days away.

Sirius shook his head. "Regulus. I'm going to ask Dumbledore about admitting him to the ward."
He said it before he'd even thought it through, and perhaps that was obvious since Remus asked, "Are you sure?"

"No," Sirius told him, slamming the door closed had enough that dust fell over him. "But he knows something that I think he's not supposed to. I don't know what it is, but he gets excited about it and then tries to shut it down. I don't think he'll trust until he can at least have the option to see who he's trusting."

"And the Order members?" Remus asked.

He could practically hear the you've been wrong before.

"Everyone has a choice," Sirius said, swallowing down hard. "But I don't think he's an immediate danger to anyone and remains in danger while he's here without that knowledge. Trust takes time, and he's a bloody Slytherin, they don't know how to make the first step." After a beat of silence, he said, "Do you think I'm wrong?"

"I don't know," Remus said, with a bittersweet smile. "But if it's important to you, ask. Nothing is set in stone."

Sirius sighed. "That's what I'm afraid of."

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"I do not make decisions for the Order. Everyone here speaks with an equal voice, and you are asking a lot of them."

It wasn't as if Sirius wasn't aware of that. He asked them not only to accept him, having seen this house, but adding Regulus on top of that was bound to be tricky.

"I don't agree," Sirius said, trying to keep his own voice steady. "Yes, everyone in the Order should have an equal voice, but they don't. People look to you above all else, so it's you I'm asking."

Dumbledore appeared to consider it. "You are asking them to accept a Death Eater into their headquarters."

"It's his home," Sirius pointed out, shifting his head to nod to one of the many house crests scattered around Grimmauld Place. "And you've done it before."

"In extraordinary circumstances," Dumbledore reminded him.

"Trust is an extraordinary circumstance," Sirius replied.

That earned him a smile, which he had to suppress a thrill of glee about. "I will not give my opinion either way," Dumbledore appeared to concede it. "But I shall open the question."

"To the people in the house?" Sirius asked.

"To the Order," Dumbledore clarified. "A chance for equal input, if nothing else."

Sirius worried his lip for a moment. "Then there's a conversation I need to have first."

Dumbledore looked him over, in that omniscient sort of way that made him feel as if he couldn't
Several days had passed since he had approached Sirius about the Death Eater professors of Hogwarts (and experienced a rather different conversation than he had been expecting), and still, Regulus had yet to decide the best way to approach this 'Ginny' when she spent rather less time in the study than the invisible OWL student Hermione did. In the meantime, he was busying himself with related tasks and explorations. Sitting at his desk, he was thumbing through a text on communication enchantments (nothing about haunted diaries thus far, but one never knew) when his bedroom door thundered with insistent knocking.

"Do my ears deceive me, or is that a knock?" Regulus asked as he placed a bookmark in place, shut the book, and opened a drawer to set it temporarily inside.

"Can you be a prick about it later and just say come in?" came Sirius' annoyed voice. "I'm on a time crunch, and I don't want my arms turning to wood in the meantime."

With a little smirk, Regulus waved the door open with his wand. "Come in. How can I help you?"

Sirius came in, and shut the door hard behind him. Even so, he kept his voice down while he jittered. "I don't know what it is that's put a fire under you, but I'm trusting that it's important enough that you should speak to the kids at the least. But I'm not their parents, and even if I were, I dunno if I'd take them out of the ward." His words came out breathless, a little rushed and as if he'd been rehearsing them a little. "That leaves pulling you into the ward, but if that happens, it has to be your choice."

Regulus lifted his brow, the smirk having faded to a more polite expression of attention upon his brother's entrance. "I am certainly in favour of being able to see the people living in my home, and that sounds to be the way to do it."

"I don't want you to answer it lightly. It's not just about seeing people around - it's who you see, it's what you may see and," Sirius took a breath before continuing, "who will know you're on that ward."

The words carried a certain weight, and though the specifics could not be explained (due to that very ward, no doubt), Regulus could suspect, at least, the manner of people he would meet, were he to be included in their secret. Sirius had called it a safe house for enemies of the Dark Lord, but if that had been its only function, Sirius either could not have said it at all, or Regulus would have been pulled into the ward already. He might have never experienced a Fidelius Charm, but he knew enough about it to know you could only speak around the issue, at best. Something more was going on, he suspected -- and given his brother's previous allegiance with the vigilantes, he suspected it rather confidently -- but what exactly that connection was, he could only guess.

Sirius was not wrong to point out the seriousness of the decision, and there was a certain bliss in ignorance when the truth so often endangered one's life even further, but he could not settle to leave rocks unturned now. The risk was high, no matter how he approached this task, and as it was, a great wall stood between him and the solutions he sought. If there was information to be gained from these people, if there was progress to be made in his goals, then it would be irresponsible to

hide anything. "I suggest you do it quickly. The meeting must begin on time."
toss that information away.

(And in truth, he was sick to the core of not being able to see those who could freely see him.)

After a moment of thoughtful silence, Regulus nodded. "I know. My decision remains the same."

Sirius didn't look surprised at that, merely nodding. "I don't know how long this'll be, but I'll be back."

Following the question came a barrage of noise as everyone seemed to begin to talk at once. Sirius winced; he'd known this would be bad. He was always one of the first ones to blast Death Eaters, including sneering present company who looked only bored at what Sirius was sure had to be a revelation. What an asshole.

"He isn't in the Order," pointed out Emmeline.

"Do you really think this is wise?" Sturgis added.

"It's not much of a safe house if we can't guarantee its safety," Kingsley said, giving him a shrug.

"I don't mean to be rude," Hestia said, looking almost as if she was going to try raising her hand first. "But wasn't your brother a Death Eater?"

"There's been a Death Eater wandering about Headquarters?" Bill asked, looking to Dora - Tonks - who merely shrugged at him. It stood to reason that Andromeda would have told her at the time, so perhaps she wasn't shocked.

"Not to mention cursing the children!" Molly squawked.

From beside him, Sirius felt Remus shift to look at him rather than saw it. "Curse the children?"

"Jinxing. He asked them not to go near the cabinets, and they keep doing it," Sirius shrugged, nonchalant. "I didn't stop it because when Hermione did it, she lost a couple of finger nails on something one of my grandparents must have cursed. A little deterrent didn't seem like a bad idea."

"Except it didn't deter them!" Molly was clearly pretty annoyed about the whole thing. "Now they're touching everything!"

"He hasn't had much experience of Gryffindors," Sirius offered, unable to stop the grin threatening to spread.

"Or Weasleys," Bill added. "It's not hurting them?"

"Sticking charms, jelly arms, one very strange wooden incident," Sirius listed off, sure he was missing them. "He's not trying to hurt them. He's not a sadist."

"But is a Death Eater," Emmeline seemed to be almost asking.

"He's not very good at saying no," Sirius admitted, knowing this would be a flaw they wouldn't like very much. If cornered, it didn't bode well. "I won't apologise for his mistakes, but he's trying to do something about them. He still got out of the Death Eaters. No mean feat, for an eighteen year
"Wouldn't being on the charm prevent him from saying anything?" Kingsley said, thoughtfully.

With a heavy sigh, Dumbledore stood. "We put it to vote, and abide by that."

Wherever Sirius had gone, that time away had apparently locked in the decision to share the secret tied to the house -- a decision that wasted no time in its execution. Within the hour, Regulus was shuffled off of the property, and within moments, the oft irritating state of invisibility would be lifted.

There was always the rise some underlying prickle of nervousness when called to speak to Albus Dumbledore, one on one. Such an occasion had been rare, as a student, and had remained so, now that Regulus was an adult sharing his ancient ancestral home with a slew of mostly unknown individuals. In many ways, that suited Regulus well enough, despite his brother's complaints (all overheard, of course) about the old wizard's elusiveness as of late, but today, Professor Dumbledore was gracing them all with his presence -- and gracing Regulus with sight, so to say.

Looking around at the bookshelves, the table of sweets, the sleeping phoenix, Regulus felt a rush of childish and altogether bitter nostalgia. The last time he had stood in this room, it was to herald news of his father's death. (A careless death, an unnecessary one, and something his old comrades had yet to pay their penance for, as far as he was concerned). Now he stood as a dead man, himself, faced with vastly different circumstances.

"Would you care for a lemon drop?" For a moment it seemed as though the words were floating down like a disembodied peddler of sweets, only seconds later, Dumbledore had appeared from around a bookcase on the upper landing and started to walk down the stairs to where Regulus had appeared through the fireplace.

"No, I'm quite alright," Regulus responded mildly, eying the empty portrait where Phineas Nigellus Black sometimes napped the days away. (Quite different circumstances these were, indeed, yet he felt the echo. He wondered if the old man was doing it on purpose.)

Again Regulus turned his attention to Dumbledore, when the elder wizard at last reached him. "I trust your brother has told you what you are doing here?"

"Yes."

"Then we shall waste no more time," Dumbledore said, folding his hands loosely. "Number Twelve Grimmauld Place is your home, and it is a safe house to those who would flee Lord Voldemort's wrath, but under the protection of the Fidelius Charm, it acts too as the headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix." (At that, Regulus straightened his posture, though his expression was not one of particular surprise.) "Not every person within this charm is a full acting member, but every one of them -- including yourself now -- is bound to the necessary silence. No magical coercion can pull it from your lips. You retain full access to your home, as has been the case, with the exception of our meetings, which you will be asked to abstain from." (In truth, Regulus had a niggling feeling that it was a little less 'asked' and a little more 'required,' but he would dedicate more thought to that later.) "Do you have any questions?"

Regulus had a great many questions, but as it was, none seemed to apply to the fact that the Order
of the Phoenix had planted its headquarters within the walls of one of the oldest and least muggle-tolerant Houses across wizardkind. Of course Sirius would have liked the irony of that. It was no wonder their mother was so upset all the time.

"No, I think that just about covers it," Regulus said, his brow lifting with a slight shake of the head.

The conversation came to a swift conclusion then, with a dismissing word of farewell from Dumbledore before he disappeared up the stairs once again. With the secret revealed, there was little else to be said, for it seemed Professor Dumbledore had much to attend to in these hectic times. Perhaps the abruptness ought to have been more offensive, but as it was, Regulus did not mind the swift dismissal. Back at home (at the Order headquarters), a new channel of information was opening up, and he had wasted enough time already, himself.

With a toss of powder and a burst of green flames, Regulus stepped from Hogwarts back home to London, once again. (Now, he would finally see these headquarters for what they were.)

When Regulus Black had left Number Twelve Grimmauld Place just moments before, the air had been still with the serenity of silence and relative solitude. In her life and in her death, his mother had often been the loudest thing within its ancient walls, but as Regulus stepped out from the fireplace and into the drawing room, the barrage of sound was staggering, hitting him like a roaring thump to the eardrums.

"FRED! GEORGE!" A woman's voice was shouting from another room, but it was not his mother's, for once. "IF I FIND ANOTHER ONE OF THESE--"

"BLOOD TRAITORS, BEFOULING THE HOUSE OF MY FATHERS--" (Ah- There was his mother.) Subtly, Regulus cringed.

"We're going to be entrepreneurs, Mum!" a teenage boy with fire-red hair was declaring with a face-splitting grin, mirrored in every way by the twin boy standing beside him in the drawing room doorway. Regulus doubted the boys’ mother would be able to hear him over the sound of Regulus's own mother, but the one who had shouted to her (Fred or George, he supposed) did not seem terribly bothered by the prospect. Instead, the same boy looked straight at Regulus, meeting his eyes with and even wider grin. "Ah! Judging by the look of horror, I guess he can see us now!"

With a crinkle of the nose, Regulus turned his attention Sirius, who appeared to be tending to some curtains alongside a man that Regulus could only assume was Lupin. Standing over by the cabinets was another teenaged boy who looked to be a little younger than the other two but had a mop of hair that blazed just as red.

Lifting his brow, Regulus caught his brother's eyes and deadpanned, "Can I still take it back?"

"No, you'll just have to work on your lack of impulse control," Sirius replied, clearly finding himself hilarious.

Regulus sighed. "A recurring problem, as it turns out," he said dryly, though his tone was laced with a certain appreciation for the irony. (A lack of impulse control, indeed. That was his problem.) Never could Regulus recall a time when so much chaos plowed through Number Twelve Grimmauld Place -- perhaps such chaos never had, even in generations long past when they family was large and intact -- but it wasn't just his childhood home that he stood in, now.

Now, he stood in the headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix.
For a detailed account of Regulus and Barty experimenting with Unforgivables, please read these lines are begging me to cross in the series tag.
Chapter 8

Sirius fled the drawing room to go and deal with his mother.

Remus had been helping him clear out what he suspected (and was currently confirming) was yet more doxies. They'd festered all over the place in here, and the usual methods weren't getting the job done at all. Remus was the professor; he ought to know how to deal with the pests.

Speaking of, the house was in chaos when Regulus had reappeared from his excursion to Hogwarts. Sirius was trying not to feel bitter about that. After a month inside these walls, he was about ready to start tearing them down. In all fairness to the current inhabitants, the house had been in a state of chaos for a couple of weeks now, and the only real difference was that Regulus was now aware of it. Fred (or perhaps George, he would have to ask Remus if there was a way of telling the two apart when they weren't wearing identifying clothes) had been correct in his assessment of his younger brother’s face: he really had looked somewhat horrified. Removing their mother’s screeches seemed like one way to diminish the din, if nothing else.

"Remus, you remember my idiot brother," Sirius said offhandedly, when he made it back up the stairs after a fierce battle of the curtains.

Remus dropped the drawing room curtain from his hand, giving Sirius a look of disbelief murked by incredulousness and a desire to roll his eyes, expressed seamlessly without words. "Even if we hadn't co-existed under the same roof for the last month, I would still remember your brother," he said, "We all sat three tables to the left of him for six years."

The 'you're being ridiculous' was left unsaid, but it was left unsaid in a really loud and obvious way.

"And can you stop referring to me as your 'idiot brother'?" Regulus piped in, glancing away from the strangers in the room to spare Sirius an eye roll of his own.

"There are worse things I could describe you as." Sirius shrugged it off. It was bound to be a bit awkward.

Remus sighed. "I think everyone could benefit from a hot drink and a break. Sirius, do you want to give me a hand?"

Remus wanted to serve hot drinks in the middle of one of the biggest heatwaves in Britain, yet Sirius was the ridiculous one of them? "Alright," Sirius allowed, hoping his own bemused look communicated that he thought it was a barmy idea. "I think the girls are upstairs."

He was sure that one way or another, this was bound to be one of Regulus' first stops. They were one step closer to getting to the bottom of this.

"So..." Regulus began, peering over his cup of tea to eye the three ginger-haired boys, the younger one settling into a break while the other two moved about. "Which one of you hooligans keeps touching the cabinets?"

A pair of identical grins spread across the twins. "Hooligans?" said one of them. "Do you suppose he means us?"

"We did go through the cabinets-" replied the other.
"-and the drawers-" the first twin interjected.

"-not to mention that weird looking box, but we couldn't get into that," the second admitted. "Loved the wooden arms. That was a decent bit of spellwork!"

Regulus did not drop his gaze as he took a sip of his tea. Though the remark was a compliment, he still could not decide whether to take it as such when that had hardly been the intention of it.

"Gryffindors are endlessly baffling," he remarked with a shake of the head. Baffling, yet nonetheless consistent with Sirius's description of the situation. Mentally, he made a note to watch these twins a little more closely, just in case there was some sort of effective deterrent. (In only these first few minutes, he had begun to fear there might not be.)

They seemed rather pleased by his comment. "If we're baffling Slytherins, we must be doing something right."

"I think even for Gryffindor, those two are a special case." Remus shook his head as they headed out, resuming talking about how to stop vomiting long enough to bite something or other. "I wouldn't pay it too much mind."

"He's a point," Sirius said, flopping on the lounger with his feet up under him. Somehow, he didn't manage to spill his drink all over himself either. "Dunno how you managed to teach those two."

"With great care, and water spells at the ready in case something exploded." Remus smiled. "We will try to keep all pyrotechnics to a minimum."

"That sounds exhausting," Regulus said, watching the doorway as the boys' voices started to fade down the hallway. Again, he turned back to his brother and Remus with a shake of the head.

"A small price to pay for another year at Hogwarts," Remus replied, with genuine affection. "There are few things that feel as satisfying as coming home again."

With a shift of his gaze, he turned to the remaining ginger-haired boy. "Have you had your letters yet?"

"I don't think so," he replied with a shrug. "Can you get owls here?"

Regulus looked to the boy, easier to notice in the absence of the rowdier twins. (He had now officially opened his mouth without seeming immediately terrible, which was a good start.) "Yes," he then answered, "I obviously have not had the opportunity to test it within the bounds of the charm, but as far as I am aware, owls can find us just fine."

"Dumbledore would have found a way regardless," Sirius assured him, putting the cup down. It looked suspiciously more like butterbeer than tea. "My sixth year letter came with no address save for 'adjacent to Mr. Potter'. How he knew that, I'll never know."

(A flush of anger prickled at the back of Regulus's mind, and it was with great effort that he tried to smother the scowl forming readily on his face, settling on an unnecessarily long sip of his nearly-finished tea to give his mouth something else to do. Sirius's insensitivity knew no limits, particularly when it came to the insufferable Mr. Potter.)

As it was, the others did not seem to notice.

"He is a Gryffindor," Remus was saying as he smiled into his cup, "and therefore baffling."
"Speaking of," Sirius said, leaning forward onto his knees before pulling himself up. "Do you know what happened to the diary your sister had?"

"No," the boy crinkled his nose. "You'd have to ask her."

Interest flickered in Regulus’s eyes, and subtly he looked up again. The tea had done little to lessen his irritation, but to harp on the late James Potter would risk detracting from the conversation's current course, and locking in his source for that diary was priority for the moment.

"Ginny, right?" Regulus clarified, glancing between Sirius and the red-haired boy.

"Yeah," the teenager responded with a frown. "Have you met her already?"

"She was mentioned earlier, and I deducted as much," Regulus responded with a confident sort of vagueness, though any mention by name had been a little more than 'earlier' and the most immediate mention had not been by name, but it hardly seemed a detail to dwell on. The boy's frown was telling, and even if the mention of Potter was still grating at the back of his mind, he did not want to punish Sirius for his helpful identity confirmations, small though they were. "Speaking of meeting people, I am going to go investigate just how many people have been living in my house." Looking to Remus with a tip of the head, he added, "Thank you for the tea. If you will excuse me..."

Regulus called for Kreacher when he stood, passing along his now-empty teacup for washing before slipping swiftly out the door. When Sirius had come back up from their mother's portrait, he had mentioned 'the girls' being upstairs. Ginny was presumably a girl, so it seemed as good a place as any to start, even if there was technically more than one 'upstairs' to consider.

As he walked up to the landing above, Regulus noted to himself that the unfamiliar residents he had thus far encountered appeared to be members of the same family, given their resemblance. The Order of the Phoenix had other members -- even without confirmation, he was confident of that much -- but it seemed that only this family of gingers remained. (One particular family of gingers stood out prominently in his mind, but he thought it best not to think to hard on that suspicion just yet.)

Regardless of who they were, now that Regulus could see them, he could navigate them, study them -- and study them studying himself, which was a vast improvement over the uncertain month of blindness. Most importantly, he had a direct line to possible horcrux information, and he would far prefer to speak that conversation than risk writing it down as some observable permanent product. Information was as delicate as it was precious, and he could not risk carelessness.

Coming to an open door, Regulus heard a pair of voices -- presumably 'the girls,' from the sound of it. From inside, one of them (a bushy-haired brunette) seemed to notice him, recognition flashing on her face as the conversation stalled.

"Pardon me for interrupting," he started politely as he approached the door, looking between them -- the brunette, and another with the same fire-red mane as the boys he'd seen in the drawing room. If Ginny was that boy's sister, he had a reasonable guess as to which was which, and yet he said: 'I'm looking for a 'Ginny,' and Sirius said she was likely to be up here. I presume it is one of you two?"

The two girls exchanged a curious look. The ginger-haired girl raised her hand in a half-hearted wave. 'I'm Ginny,' she said in a measured sort of voice before gesturing to the girl beside her. "That's Hermione."
"Is something wrong?" Hermione asked.

(Hermione -- the polite library-dweller who liked to talk about house-elves.) Regulus took note. "Nothing of immediate concern," he answered mildly, then with a glance to Ginny, he added, "At the risk of sounding overly blunt, I've heard that you had an experience with a 'haunted diary,' and I was wondering if I might be able to ask you more about that. I wouldn't call my brother a particularly reliable first-hand account, much less a second-hand one."

Ginny appeared to recoil, but then collected herself in the space of a moment. "What do you want to know?" she said, if a little more forcefully than strictly necessary.

Regulus's mouth turned down slightly at the recoil, watching as she clearly smothered down an onslaught of unpleasant associations. Her tone was bordering on combative, but he felt no need to rise to a bicker. Unpleasant experiences with the Dark Lord were something he could relate to a little too well, and she was still a child. She could not be any older than he'd been when he joined the Death Eaters so many years ago -- most likely younger, from the look of her, though it was hard to say.

"Clearly this is an uncomfortable conversation for you. I'm afraid Sirius was scarce on such details," Regulus said with a crinkle of the nose, though his tone was no less sincere when he added, "I apologise for the insensitivity. I've been away for awhile, and I am attempting to gain an understanding of what has been happening. Sirius mentioned this diary belonged to a schoolboy named Tom Riddle... a boy who apparently went on to become a murderous, self-serving megalomaniac." The words were treacherous in these walls, and he half-expected some curse to fly through the house like a homing spell, but strangely enough, nothing happened. "Considering its author, I was unsure if describing it as 'haunted' was dramatic or literal, and if literal, what exactly the nature of its haunting was."

Ginny seemed to consider it for a moment, before letting her shoulders drop some of their tension. "I didn't know what it was," she said, the ghost of the defensive tone still there. "I thought it was just a diary, then just a ghost in one. I wrote in it, and he wrote back. Then I started losing time...and there were the messages about the heir of Slytherin. I started to put it together after Hagrid's roosters were strangled and I woke up covered in feathers."

As she trailed off, Hermione jumped in. "You didn't know what you were doing!" she said fiercely.

"I still did them," Ginny said, miserably. "I just didn't remember. By then, Tom had gotten scary, and I tried to get rid of the diary. But when I saw Harry had found it, I took it back." She flushed, clearly more embarrassed than anything else. "I did try to stop him, but he was too strong."

"He told Harry he'd been draining her life to make himself a real body," Hermione clarified.

"I don't know what kind of haunting you'd call that," Ginny said, regaining some of her bravado.

As the girls spoke, Regulus's frown deepened. (Draining life to make himself a real body- Was that how a horcrux worked? If Regulus had worn the locket, used the locket, kept the locket close, would it have-) Face pinching, he tried to smother the threat of a cringe, however hot the anger might burn in his chest.

"The worst kind," Regulus settled with a bitter edge. "And to do so to a child is particularly detestable." Shaking his head, he fought to cool the mounting frustration. Mulling in disgust was a hyperfocused examination of information he already he knew, and he could not get lost in the known when so much was yet unknown. "But it was destroyed, wasn't it?" he continued, trying to modulate the degree of curiosity, "If it - he - was growing strong, how were you able to destroy it
in the end?"

"I didn't," Ginny said, simply. "Harry did."

"It was basilisk venom," Hermione explained, stepping in again. "After he killed it, he used the
tooth to tear the book."

Regulus nodded thoughtfully. Basilisk venom -- he had used same through sheer trial and error
(and more hard-earned money than he might have preferred), though not from a tooth.

"Dare I ask where you got a basilisk fang?" he asked, lifting his brow just slightly.

"From the basilisk," Ginny replied, as if that were obvious.

Regulus pressed his lips to a line, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. "I will be more specific, then.
Where did you get the basilisk? Or has Care of Magical Creatures changed that much, too?"

The girls exchanged a look, but this time, it was Hermione that spoke. "He opened the Chamber of
Secrets," she said, carefully. "And released a basilisk from it to attack muggleborn students."

"I opened it," Ginny corrected her.

"Yes, but he was using you to do it!" Hermione cried, with a tone of exasperation. "Besides, if
Harry hadn't insisted he could hear someone talking in the walls, I would never have figured it out.
Honestly, who'd have thought Slytherin would stash a giant, pureblood maniacal snake in
Hogwarts?" She turned her attention to Regulus. "Everyone thought Harry was trying to hurt them,
that he'd gone crazy. But it turns out he could just hear the basilisk in the pipes. It bit him, when he
went after - well, Ginny - so he was able to get a fang."

“A basilisk in Hogwarts in the Chamber of Secrets... I assumed that was just a legend,” Regulus
muttered with a shake off the head. He'd heard the tale of Slytherin's monster before, but even if it
had been true, he would have thought it'd be dead by now. ( Petty though the thought was, he also
doubted that the basilisk itself had any actual opinions on blood purity, but somehow it didn't seem
an appropriate point to make at the moment.) “Fortunate that you all made it out relatively
unscathed, from the look of it.

"Riddle was gone when I woke up," Ginny said, slumping forward with a bemused look.
"Dumbledore told us when we got out of the chamber that the real You-Know-Who was off in
Albania and that hardly anyone knew Riddle and he were the same person. He'd just left part of
himself behind when he was sixteen."

"Wasn't that where he killed that woman from Ministry last year?" Hermione interjected suddenly.
"I wonder what was so important about Albania."

"That Dumbledore's not in Albania?" Ginny quipped.

“Not the worst strategy,” Regulus granted with a huff. (His own time abroad had permitted him to
avoid the worst of his problems with the utmost effectiveness, but returning to it all seemed to be
going rather less well for him than it apparently was for the resurrected Dark Lord. Such was life.)
Albania struck him as no more or less random than any other country outside of the UK, but he
supposed it mightn’t hurt to look into, in case the remains of some trail had survived.

Tucking away their experiences and speculations alike, Regulus looked between the two girls. He
still could not tell if they knew exactly what they had destroyed. Perhaps they realised it in part, for
they knew it was part of the Dark Lord left behind -- yet it was vague, and their manner was not
particularly secretive. Perhaps they ought to be more secretive, given the Dark Lord's successful return, but he would not spit in the face of helpful behavior. Sirius had provided a skeleton of the story, but the details were even more informative than he had allowed himself to hope. Trails to explore, a near-matched destruction method, a legend come to life... Perhaps there were other horcruxes out there, controlling unknown people even now, as with the diary; or perhaps they were hidden away, as the locket had been.

A final curiosity remained, nudging at the back of his mind.

“That is quite a remarkable story,” Regulus continued, “and not the typical Hogwarts experience, I must say. How did you come across a diary owned by Tom Riddle in the first place, if you don't mind me asking?”

"I found it among my year one spellbooks," Ginny shrugged, giving Hermione an unreadable look. "Lucius Malfoy slipped it into them when we ran into them in Flourish and Blotts. He practically admitted it, since no one could prove it."

Recognition flickered in Regulus's expression before he could smother it -- and with that flicker, a sinking feeling. Perhaps Lucius had not known what the diary was, just as Regulus had not known the truth of the locket until he tore relentlessly into his extensive research, but it did not bode well, if the Malfoy family was entangled now, too. (Cissa- and Draco-)

"I see..." he responded simply, voice trailing off for only a fleeting moment before he spoke again. "Thank you for your thorough explanation, unpleasant though the memories might be. It was quite illuminating."

For a moment, it almost looked like Hermione was going to put her hand up and only just about managed to stay the impulse. "Why do you want to know about the diary?" she asked. "Everyone seems more worried about him being back now, and the memory was destroyed. It seems a strange thing to get hung up on."

"Becoming too fixated on the blinding anxieties of the present teaches you nothing of the greater context,” Regulus responded, his tone as mild as it was firm. “He is back, and quite frankly, there is nothing we can immediately do about that, incensing though it might be. As it is, I would rather understand the context I am returning to than talk about how fretful it is."

"We're not fretting," Ginny crossed her arms. "He wasn't brought back from a memory this time." Hermione frowned at him. "It was a spell. Flesh, blood and bone. That's why he can touch Harry now." Ginny was staring at her, and the girl suddenly flushed red. "I just wanted to research it, but I haven't seen anything with the same requirements. It...must be very dark."

"Potentially important information, as I imagine you would agree, if you are putting such efforts into research. You ask why I would question, but how, I ask, am I to know such things without asking those questions?" Regulus posed, his tone pointed but not unkind as he lifted his brow. It was not an entirely candid presentation of his motives, but half-stated though his intentions might be, he felt no need to shy from them. In that, at least, he felt an unshakable confidence. "Even if I were proficient in Legilimency, I cannot imagine anyone would prefer that. The great beast of ignorance would devour those who take it as a companion, and I do not intend to bait its bite." (Not again, not anymore-) "Perhaps the knowledge seems obvious to you, having lived through it, but it is not so common to those who have not."
"I ask because it means you're not in the Order," Hermione replied, more statement than fact. "Or you'd already know a lot of this. You're just under the charm, the same way we are. Aren't you?"

"You are quite right. I'm not a member," Regulus said, instilling a bit more confidence into his voice than he felt, sensing the invisible finger pointed squarely in his direction. (Careful navigation was in order. The last thing he wanted to do was set off suspicions when not even a day had passed.) "The Order of the Phoenix is using my house as their meeting hall and summer home, and I have been accepting that invasion of privacy for a month now." Pausing only a beat, he pressed his fingers firmly to his temple and spoke again, even as she was opening her mouth to respond, "Fragile trust is hard-won for us all, in these times, but you don't have the monopoly on grudges. I'm not happy about this resurrection either, and quite honestly, I'm tired of being blind." (Blind to the inhabitants in his home, blind to the Dark Lord's contingency plans for his contingency plans, blind to the fates of his family and friends, blind to an adolescence of misplaced faith-)

Uncomfortably, he let a well-worn sigh escape unwrangled. "And for that reason, I do thank you for humouring my questions. In hindsight, perhaps I should have waited to ask about the diary, but I did not realise it was quite so intense an experience. That is the trouble with second- and third-hand information, I suppose."

“We don't like not knowing what's going on either,” Ginny said, an obvious olive branch in a tense moment. It didn't stop frustration from slipping into her voice. “And people don't usually answer if we ask.”

"It is a terrible feeling, being dismissed," Regulus granted, and though his face was neutral, he too had a subtle edge to the tone.

“Erm, Mr. Black,” Hermione started, before letting herself trail off for a moment. “What you were saying before...is that why you asked about Death Eaters teaching Defense?"

(‘Mr. Black,’ she'd called him -- how strange that sounded, when it wasn't coming from a professor, nor directed towards his father.)

Sixteen years was a long time.

"Yes," Regulus responded with a tip of the head, and it was true, at least in part. "Even with the constant turnover of the position, three in four years seemed an unusually high ratio, considering ours were zero out of seven, in our school days. Probably." A thoughtful expression tugged his mouth to the side. "I suppose I can't guarantee that, but none we were aware of, at least. Things have changed quite a lot."

“Only two defense professors,” Hermione corrected. “Professor Lupin and Lockhart aren't.”

"Ah, that's right," Regulus said thoughtfully with a nod. Severus was the potions master, after all. "Yet the point still stands. I would rather know than not know, and as it turns out, there is a great deal to know." Again, he tipped his head to each of them in turn. "On that note, I must excuse myself. It was a pleasure to meet you both."

And how surreal, the day (week- month-) continued to be.

Falling into the familiar grooves of this new pattern, Regulus made haste to his room after parting ways with the girls, turning over the details of the conversation. The resurrection spell (flesh bone blood, flesh bone blood, flesh bone blood), the chamber, the basilisk, even Albania -- what was key and what was extraneous was hard to say, but when at last he had settled at his bedroom desk again, he scrawled it all.
Known

H- Obj. (Spec. or Ord.)
  C: M
  D: BV & ?
  E: Pos.

1. SL (X) - BV, no pos.
2. Unk. (used?) - spell (GMFTI CPOF CMPPE)
3. TRD? TR → DL (TR: UPN SJEEMF) (X - HP) - BV, pos. (G)
   M (16) → TRD
   LM → G

Investigate

-D: Other?
-HC? RD? GS?
-2? 3? 4? 7?
-FL - found?
-K (exp.) - after SL
-Re-use?
-G (exp.) - TRD (X)
-TR - SS?
-COS (DIBNCFPJPG TFDSFUT) → B
-BMCBOJB?

As he’d hoped, this chaos might well be worth it.

Another day, another crash, another screaming fit from his mother. Sirius was starting to get pissed off with that fucking portrait, screeching like a banshee under the cruciatus every damn time anyone so much as stubbed their toe or walked into something. It had begun to wear thin. Even screaming back at her, once a valued activity of his youth, had become incredibly tiresome. Still, the desire to set it on fire or break the wall down had yet to manifest into action, so he considered that a true reflection of some exceptional self-control. But it was every day. It could be several times a day. At the very least, someone needed to find a way to silence her or move her before he lost all of that self-control and just did something stupid.

Today's offender was a harried looking Tonks, whose apologies were drowned out by the mad ravings of desecration, but she certainly looked sorry, and that helped a little.

"I'm really sorry, mate." Tonks said, probably still a little too loud, but he couldn't blame her. His own ears were ringing.

He beckoned her upstairs, but since Kreacher was (as usual) nowhere to be found, he made the tea himself and brought it up to her. Despite what Remus called the oregano incident, he could manage. It was only when he was putting out some of McGonagall's biscuits that he noticed she had a backpack.

"Been busy?" Sirius asked, indicating it.

"Oh, yeah, I'm helping Kingsley out." She beamed, crunching into her shortbread. Knowing that Kingsley's main job was tracking down Dangerous Mass Murderer Sirius Black, he snorted at that.
"He's had some fun looking over the old case files. Nice eyelinier by the way, mate."
That startled a laugh out of him. "It was the seventies!"

"You sound proper old when you say stuff like that," Tonks grinned, as Sirius revolved. "Anyway, we got them to open up your old flat. Did you know the Ministry's had it watched?"

"Remus mentioned," Sirius confirmed.

"Anyway, I managed to knock some things over, so I was able to grab a couple of things. It's not much, but..." As she trailed off, Tonks pulled out of the back a hodgepodge of random things. By the looks of it from his own fuzzy memory, she grabbed things from the desk in his old bedroom. (With a stab, he realised how badly he missed it.)

Sirius sat down at the table and began picking the items. The most useful was an old pocket knife he hadn't realised wasn't in his pocket when he was arrested, a few letters (with a stuck breath, he recognised both James and Lily's writing from the mashed up pile), a postcard he was pretty sure was from Mrs. Potter's trip to Amsterdam in '77, a couple of clips from newspapers he could no longer remember why he kept, and best of all, a few photographs: himself and James mucking about, Harry on the broomstick he'd gotten him for his first birthday, a bunch of them huddled in a ridiculous-looking fort they were all too big for after he'd moved into the flat. For a moment, he couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't result in something horribly embarrassing happening.

"Thank you," he managed eventually, touched she'd even thought to do it.

The moment was broken by a fresh wave of Walburga Black's form of havoc. Sirius wasn't sure what had set her off this time, but he knew he was going to lose his mind if he had to do it again. He leaned forward and hit his head against the table a couple of times.

"Does she ever sound happy?" Tonks asked.

"No, art imitates life and the closest thing-" Sirius stopped, realising that he could in fact ask. He looked to Tonks. "Hang on."

He walked across the landing to find his brother, because he supposed if there was anything that had ever supposed to make his mother happy, it was him. "Can you please try to calm her down? That's the fourth time today," he asked, trying to remain earnest. He hadn't the reserves for it. He fiddled with the letters and photographs in his hands, turning them over in a nervous tick. "I'm just pissing her off more."

Regulus looked up, then down to mark his place. "I will see what I can do," he responded, shifting so his back was to the portrait.

It was quick work, calming their mother. The moment her younger son came into view, Walburga Black's screams decayed to mournful mutters as rapidly and predictably as they had come to expect over the course of their cooped up month. A strange look passed over Regulus's face as he calmly pulled the curtains closed again, and it was only then that he turned his attention back to Sirius.

"You're welcome," Regulus said preemptively, shifting so his back was to the portrait.

"Blimey," came Tonks' loud whisper. Sirius turned around to see her half hanging over the bannisters of the landing overlooking the hall. "How'd you do that?"

"By virtue of being her son," Sirius jumped in before Regulus could respond. He looked a little out of sorts; perhaps he shouldn't have disturbed him after all. With Molly taking the younger children out to collect things, it was one of the few relatively quiet days, and he did know Regulus prefered...
quiet days whenever possible.

Some combative words seemed to be dancing on the tip of Regulus's tongue as he glanced at his brother, yet he ultimately decided against them as his eyes drifted up to the landing above. He was examining the spikey, bubblegum-pink mop of hair when at last he spoke, "Who might you be?"

With all the usual grace of an enthusiastic erumpet in a china shop, Tonks charged down the stairs. It was possible she was a little curious about Regulus too. Since she had been running around on Order business, she hadn't had as much time to stalk around Grimmauld Place watching what he was up to.

"Wotcher," Tonks grinned. "I'm Tonks."

Given that this wouldn't actually answer the question, Sirius sighed. "That's Nymphadora Tonks," he explained. "That's Andromeda’s kid."

Tonks turned around sharply to look at Sirius, but slammed into him instead. "Don't call me - oh, sorry!" she said, as the haul he'd been holding scattered itself along the stairs.

"CHILD OF MUD, SHAME OF MY BLOOD."

Immediately, Regulus winced at the sudden barrage from behind him, and whatever jarred and conflicted feelings had been tangling up in the realisation that this strangely dressed person was Andromeda's daughter were instead redirected to their shouting mother once again. (He could not help but wonder if these two were the primary culprits.)

Pointedly, Regulus looked between them with a wave of his hand as they scrambled to gather the fallen items. "Go on. I will pick those up in a minute," he tried to say over the shrieks, "She is unlikely to stop while you're both just standing there."

The portrait was clawing when he turned back again -- and endlessly unnerving display --and he steeled himself again to cool her ire.

"Mum, it's alright," he soothed, though he could not meet her eyes, and it was unclear if she could even hear him over her own voice. A few more seconds passed before Walburga Black began to calm again, and when he glanced back over his shoulder, Regulus saw that both Andromeda's daughter and Sirius alike had vanished from sight, leaving a small spread of papers and photos on the floor, as instructed. With a sigh, Regulus took the curtains in hand and carefully pulled them closed again before setting to clean the floor.

To peek at another person's spread of photos and letters was impolite, Regulus knew, but he could not help the way his eyes took in the unfamiliar handwriting, nor the way each moving photograph drew his gaze, if briefly. Potter and his ilk, from the looks of it, and hardly anything Regulus was interested in experiencing voluntary. When at last the floor was clear (of parchment and photographs, at least), Regulus stood again and peeked inside the nearest room, where Sirius and Tonks had ducked from sight, each holding a small amount of the mess, themselves. Wordlessly, he held out his own.

"Cheers," Tonks said, dropping her own things (thankfully) onto the table. A few letters scattered, along with the paper clippings. When she made a move to take the pile from Regulus, Sirius swiftly dropped his own top of hers and hastily took it before she could. How she got through auror training being that uncoordinated, he had absolutely no idea. Neither of her parents were that uncoordinated.
In the disarray, Sirius noticed one thing sticking out amongst the parchment. He reached forward and picked up a faded white envelope with his own name on it, looking it over with suspicion for a beat before seemingly deciding something. He held it out to his younger brother. "You might want this. I don't have a use for it anymore."

For a fleeting moment, Regulus privately considered the unlikelihood that there could possibly be a letter or photograph from any pile of Sirius's things that he would want, but as his eyes flicked down to the extended envelope, a rush of familiarity struck like crashing waves.

"That is Cissa's stationary, isn't it?" Regulus was asking even as he took the envelope, though he needn't have wasted the breath. He recognised her delicate handwriting immediately, a nostalgic call back to letters sent to him at school after she had graduated, but Narcissa and Sirius had never gotten along particularly well, even before his disownment.

Pulling out the parchment, Regulus’s eyes found the date, and immediately, his heart wrenched. The 26th of November, 1979.

'Sirius,

Regulus is missing. It has been four months now. If you are hiding him somewhere, if this is some sort of a joke, we have long passed any point of humour. Send him home where he belongs.

In the case that you are not responsible, I ask instead:
if he has contacted you at all, even in passing, you must tell me.
It will only make it worse if you are keeping it to yourself.
He is still so young, and this has been a terrible year in every way.
We thought he might've wanted some time alone, but he would not have just left, not like this.
No one has seen or heard from him since he came back from school.
Any information, even the lack of information, could be something.

I would not ask this lightly. If you have any shred of decency, you will do this for him.

N.M.'

Like a punch in the gut, her letter had stolen the breath from Regulus's lungs, and he stared uncomfortably at the neat script and earnest words. The acidic burn of guilt rose immediately, and even as he folded the parchment back into careful thirds, he couldn't quite lift his eyes.

Sirius, perhaps realising his possible misstep, lowered his tone to reply. "I know you were close."
Were, not are, which was unlikely to help matters. "I thought you'd want to have something of hers, something that indicated her giving a damn."

Regulus nodded, carefully slipping the letter back into the envelope and trying to rearrange his expression to something more neutral. Narcissa had cared -- even after months of nothing, she had cared and hoped and held on, and though on some level he'd known they must have mourned, it was a level he made every effort to ignore. To cause suffering for his family, the very people he wanted to please and protect, felt deeply wrong… yet to stay for their sakes would have been even more wrong, if in a different way.

In November of 1979, she had been desperate to find him, but how did she feel now, in 1995? If he were to reach out and soften the years of his absence, would she respond with relief and care, or was this frantic letter the last words of love his cousin would have for him?
“A thoughtful consideration,” Regulus granted, though he still was uncertain of how to meet his brother’s eyes -- nor Andromeda’s daughter, standing beside him, full-grown. Regulus did not think himself a traitor to his blood so much as a defector from the lies of the Dark Lord, but would Narcissa be able to make that distinction? Would Bellatrix?

He did not want to know, not really, yet temptation tingled in his fingers as he slipped the envelope into his pocket.

There was an awkward moment where no one said anything. Despite all being related, they were still strangers to each other in many ways, and there were a lot of things unsaid between the lines of their family tree. However, before a reasonable response could be fathomed, a large silvery bird flew in the door as if it owned the place and hovered in front of Tonks.

*MINISTRY OWL HAS BEEN SPOTTED AT PRIVET DRIVE.*

*STAND BY.*

Something icy dropped down in Sirius's stomach, and his throat clenched. *Harry.* The Ministry didn't believe him, that much was clear, and with the Prophet ridiculing him, it could mean anything. What if he was in danger? What if Voldemort had found him?

He looked to Tonks, who must have made the same connection. "I'll go find out what's going on," she promised, sounding more serious than he had ever known her to sound.

Quick as a flash, she bolted down the stairs and slammed the door hard enough that for the sixth time that day, the screams of Walburga Black resumed.

Again, Regulus screwed up his face at the shrieks, but if nothing else, the sudden chaos had broken the tension enough for him to spare a look to his brother. "I take it something important is happening?"

"Have you ever known a letter from the Ministry to be a good thing?" Sirius replied, bouncing a little on the balls of his feet. What the hell was he supposed to do? He wasn't built for waiting around to see what the Ministry was going to accuse Harry of now.

There was another sound of fluttering, but instead of Emmeline's patronus, an owl suddenly burst through the chimney half covered in grit and grime and not looking very happy about it. It didn't look like one of the Weasleys, nor was it Hedwig, but it stopped on the table for him to retrieve the note none the less.

'Harry's been called up for use of underage magic and expelled. MLEP on their way to take his wand. Tonks is stalling them. Dumbledore's just arrived at the Ministry.

*AW’*

"What the hell is going on out there?" Sirius growled, more at himself and his own uselessness cooped up in this blasted house than anything else. Why would Harry use magic? He knows he's not meant to. He knows he's supposed to keep his head down this summer. *But maybe he hadn't meant to,* Sirius reasoned, thinking back to his own teenage years here. How many times had he done accidental magic in the heat of the moment? Even before he'd left, things had literally been exploding. Surely he couldn't be expelled for something like that!

"Have you got a quill on you?" he asked.
"Not literally on me, but I can see if we have one in here," Regulus said, brow furrowing slightly as he walked to a desk nearby, pulling open one of the drawers to find a small set of quills and tightly sealed inkwells. Placing one of each on the desk, he added, "Do I get to ask why, or is this going to be one of those things everyone is terribly mysterious about?"

Sirius took the quill, and ripped a piece of the parchment from one of the old letters still left on the table. Harry just needed to stay put and Dumbledore would sort this out. It was his school, not the Ministry's and he had the final word on it. He scribbled a note to Harry, before registering the question. "I don't think you want to talk about Harry," he said, as he gave it to the owl who whooshed off in a hurry.

"Ah," Regulus responded, extending no further word on the subject, though his gaze followed each agitated movement carefully, caught in tension of a different sort.

"Why is it than when the only two people around consist of the person not involved and the one who can't bloody leave that all hell breaks loose?" Sirius asked, irritably pulling all of the papers into one messy pile. He hated not knowing what was going on. In this way, he knew his brother was not dissimilar. It had to be driving him crazy.

Another swift flapping of swings was followed by the appearance of a snowy owl, a much more welcome sight than the others. If Harry was sending Hedwig, then he was probably alright. Dumbledore would sort it out. He was just overreacting. Realising he could still hear the screeching from downstairs, Sirius thought wryly to himself that dramatic overreactions did run in the family. Even the quietest of the lot had faked his own death.

There were three letters, one for Ron and another for Hermione along with his own. He set them down the table. They could get them when they returned (which had to be soon, or Hedwig would have gone to find them, or at least nipped him for taking theirs) and tore into his own.

'I've just been attacked by dementors and I might be expelled from Hogwarts. I want to know what's going on and when I'm going to get out of here.'

The air went out of the room. In a numb sort of way, he realised that he must have sat down because he could taste the dust still in the air from doing so. He's fine, he thought purposefully to himself. He's absolutely fine. He wrote, so he must be fine. In all truth, he sounded pissed off. Pissed off was good. Nothing like being pissed off if you're dealing with dementors because there's damn all they can do about that particular emotion. He should know. Distantly, he was aware that he was reacting publicly, even if that public was only Regulus, there was still some long standing urge not to let him see anything like that.

Sirius shook his head, trying to shake off the feeling of cold that persisted. "Looks like he's recruited the dementors," Sirius said, a little hoarse and trying his best to hide it. "You'll -- you'll want to add that to whatever it is you're trying to figure out."

"Lovely," Regulus remarked in a dry tone that implied quite the opposite. "What is a resurrection party without soul-sucking dementors?"

Sirius snorted, and if you were feeling generous, the quick twitch could have passed for a smile as well. "The better question," he started, speaking as he thought, "is if they're drawing to Voldemort, who's keeping Azkaban?"

Regulus's expression distanced at the words, sticking a hand in his pocket where he had slipped Narcissa’s letter just a few minutes before. “That is a better question,” he echoed with a nod.
Sirius really needed to see Dumbledore. There would be a meeting, he was sure of it now. Someone had to go and get Harry out of there. If the dementors had gone rogue, then they were about to get an influx of Death Eaters, and if it was a solitary dementor, then someone sent it after Harry personally. One way or another, Harry was right: they needed to know what was going on, and Harry himself needed to be here where he could see him.

Regulus had expected a degree of change and abnormal happenings, once the magical blindfold was lifted and the invisible people became recognisable within the house just as he, Sirius, and Kreacher had been all along, but when he rounded a corner to see their resident group of children huddled along the railing with some strange, stretching, rubbery-looking object, Regulus acknowledged to himself, once more, that the only thing he could expect with these people was the unexpected.

“Sounds like they’re going to get Harry,” one of the twins said. He was holding the rubbery object to his ear.

“Do you think they’ll let us come to?” the younger boy -- Ron, he had gathered -- was asking.

The Order must be having a meeting. Regulus had gathered as much from the series of shrieks they’d been graced with not to long before. If he had to guess (and as it was, he did have to guess), such a meeting was most likely about the dementors Sirius had mentioned the day before, though naturally, Regulus was not to be privy to the details. These children seemed to be discussing something of the sort, as well, but not directly with each other, and that in itself was a point of curiosity.

Regulus had stilled his pace, but before he could backtrack again, Hermione had noticed him with a startle from her position opposite. To pull back now was pointless, so instead he said, “What exactly is he holding to his ear?”

There was a sudden scattering amongst the children, though the twins held their place, seemingly unfazed by the appearance of someone new. They really did appear to be completely unflappable. While Ron and Hermione had the decency to look sheepish, it looked for a moment that Ginny might claim there was nothing against their ears despite glaring evidence to the contrary.

Instead, she placed a finger to her lips. "Shhhh!" she hissed, waving her hand.

“No need to panic. I’m not going to tattle on you,” Regulus said, and his voice quieted in turn, however small his contribution to the scramble might have been. “But my question still stands.”

In lieu of answering, Ginny simply pointed over the edge of the bannister. The long, flesh-like strings extended from the ear of each twin and twisted down where the entrance to the doorway to the kitchen was.

"We just want to know what's happening," Hermione said in a loud whisper.

"Don't be thick," one of the twins told Ron before making a noise of frustration. They had clearly decided to leave the newcomer to the girls. "Blast Snape, his voice is too low."

“Snape is down there, then?” Regulus asked, more as a statement than a true question. Severus Snape -- an old friend, living and breathing, and yet the thought of him wandering about the house (about the headquarters, too, though Regulus was unsure which was worse) made Regulus more nervous than anything. So uncertain, these steps were, and though Severus must have given them some reason to believe he was an ally trustworthy enough to join their band of vigilantes, the blank
void of the past 16 years could only be filled by braving a conversation with Severus himself...

"Everyone's here," said Ron, before getting walloped on the arm by one of his other brothers and lowering his voice. "Well?"

"Nothing," the twin nearest him whispered, shaking his head. “Can’t even hear Snape’s dulcet tones anymore.”

"Is the meeting over?" Hermione asked, glancing over the bannister furtively.

"Either that or Mum's found the extendables again," the same twin replied, dropping the tube from his ear.

"So is Harry coming here or isn't he?" Ron asked, voice rising in the sheer frustration.

"I'd say so," said the other twin.

Regulus pressed his lips to a line, unsure of how he felt about a Potter breaching the walls of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place again, after over two decades free of the lot. Even so, it sounded as though Harry Potter was quite securely situated in the center of every dramatic step in the Dark Lord’s plan, as of late -- and with each step, he was managing to come out alive.

That, at the very least, was worth taking notice of.
Chapter 9

In the earliest years of his self-imposed exile, Regulus dedicated a great deal of thought to what he would say to his friends and family, were he to see them again. Some musings were almost hopeful (and others, still, too devastating to bear), but each pricked with a bittersweet edge -- one he had forcibly dulled, year after year, until he stopped thinking about it much at all. “Rian” had begun to accept that perhaps his former life truly was behind him, a hazy past belonging to someone else, but Regulus had come to know better.

Narcissa and her son might be out of reach; Barty might be gone in all but body; his mother may be reduced to an unnerving shadow of herself; but Regulus had long-since deducted Severus Snape’s involvement in the activities taking place within Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, and with their invisibility lifted, that barrier had at last crumbled. However bizarre it might be to imagine the circumstances leading Severus to join the Order of the Phoenix, his (former?) friend was nonetheless an active member, involved in the meetings behind those closed doors. Regulus had yet to glean the full nature of Severus’s current alignment, but there was a small, flickering hope that perhaps he was not the only one in the entirety of his social group that had thought better of the Dark Lord’s plan -- while maintaining that position even now, as the Dark Lord made his return.

Trust remained too steep an expectation with his research (and his life) hanging in the balance, subject to the whims of one loose tongue or one wrong word spoken, but there was no hiding away now, not from anyone in this house.

This particular Order meeting had been punctuated with an unfamiliar barrel of shouts (“SO YOU HAVEN’T BEEN IN THE MEETINGS, BIG DEAL! YOU’VE STILL BEEN HERE, HAVEN’T YOU?” and “WHO SAVED THE PHILOSOPHER’S STONE?” and “WHO GOT RID OF RIDDLE?” and “WHO HAD TO GET PAST DRAGONS AND SPHINXES” and the like) that he could only deduce was Potter’s son Harry. The foul mood had been sufficient to reach Regulus in the study, even with the door closed, but whatever ire had lit a fire beneath him seemed to cool before too long. It would be terribly unlucky if the boy intended to make a competition of it with Molly Weasley and his mother’s portrait, but at least the shouting had been relatively short-lived.

His mind remained on Severus, attending the meeting below, and when he heard the sound of adult voices floating up from the ground floor, he set his book aside for later.

Stragglers were wandering out from the dining room when Regulus ventured down to the ground level, some faces familiar and some unfamiliar, but even as he etched their faces (and in certain cases, their scowls) into his mind, it was Severus that he leveled his attention to, surrounded by several people who were only now wandering off towards the kitchen. The years had whittled at his friend, as it had whittled at them all, but there was no mistaking the profile or the ink-black hair, falling in the exact same style it had sixteen years ago. His footsteps seemed to draw Severus’s attention in turn, though the other man’s expression betrayed no surprise. Were it anyone else, the complete lack of reaction would seem suspicious, but Severus had never been one for displays, unnerving though it was.

“You are looking very alive today,” Snape said dryly, gaze flicking over Regulus and settling on his face.

“I am feeling very alive today,” Regulus responded, clasping his hands behind his back as he stilled his approach. “I’d quite like to keep it that way, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course.”
Regulus watched the way Severus was watching the others slipping downstairs. There was a clear discomfort in his stance, the look of a man who would rather be examining the glass-enclosed cabinets than interacting with other humans, and in a strange way, Regulus found that more comforting than any warm welcome could have managed. The past was a field of jagged shards, one that they were all tiptoeing through with varying degrees of success. There was a great deal to say, and when again their eyes met, he sensed that Severus was as disinterested in laying it all out with an audience as he was.

“I have to admit these were not the circumstances I would have expected, having you over as a guest at my house,” Regulus said carefully, lifting his brow with a wry twist of the mouth.

“Many things have turned out differently than one might have imagined,” Severus drawled in response, the words as devoid of meaning as Regulus's own had been.

A certain tension pulled taut in the following silence. Why are you here? Regulus's measured stare asked silently, but with a sweep of his cloak, Severus was soon brushing past, cutting through the conversation like a knife. “Until next time,” he said in a tone of finality.

“Severus,” Regulus called out to the back of his friend’s head, shifting his stance toward the door. “It's good to see you.” The sentiment was complicated, tangled up in everything that could go wrong, but it was about as true as any expression he could manage. There had been more than one unfriendly face, but Severus -- Death Eater though he was, or had been -- was not one of them.

Or at least it had been no more unfriendly than normal.

For a moment, Severus lingered, then offered a stilted nod in return. “Your safe return was a fortunate surprise,” he said, and however grumpy his disposition, Regulus believed him. If luck looked upon him kindly, maybe his friend even meant it personally, rather than in the context of Death Eaters who loved a good hunt.

“Take care,” Regulus said with a nod, and in a matter of seconds, the door had shut behind Severus with a thud. The thought of wandering down into the kitchens felt unbearably uncomfortably, even if the meeting was over; it was back to the books, for now. Kreacher would undoubtedly bring him something, later...

Sirius had been right on both accounts: a group from the Order (not him, naturally) went to get Harry only a couple of days later and a meeting kicked off while those not in the guard waited. At least Remus had gone; Harry probably had enough sense to be wary of large groups of people coming to get him. He'd have preferred to go, but he hadn't flown a broom in a long time as it was, let alone fought on one. Even if he wasn't a wanted man, he'd probably just be a liability in a fire fight.

That didn't mean he was happy about it.

Snape talking about the dangers of undercover work to a rapt audience was not helping matters. He just about managed to contain his eye-rolling, until Mrs Weasley cleared them out so she could cook without some of the more culinary challenged members attempting to help, though said she was going to tell the kids to go wash up first. Perhaps he hadn't covered his own irritation well enough, since Remus offered to see off Snape immediately. Tonks offered a heartbeat behind, which was worth it if only for the look of utter disgust on Snape's face at being told "Come on, Prof." He couldn't help the snort that escaped, but he gave them their breathing room. He could go and check on Harry in a minute.
Then there was a crash in the front hall (as there usually was if Tonks was in it), and with the charm to stop the kids from listening in lifted, the dulcet tones of Walburga Black filled the air like she was standing in the kitchen. Sirius couldn't help the noise of frustration. Was it his imagination or was it getting worse? He stomped up the stairs purposefully and found Remus trying to get the damn curtains closed and Molly Weasley running up and down the hall trying to keep his long dead but unfortunately less than silent ancestry from joining the foray. He flew straight away to give Remus a hand, screaming at the old bat back because old habits died pretty hard, but with a tremendous effort, they managed to get the screaming to stop.

Only then did he notice that the hallway was considerably more crowded than he'd expected. Along with the Weasley children and Hermione stood Harry, wincing and covering his ears with his hands. Other than that, he looked well enough. A bit peaky, but encountering his mother did that to the best of people.

“Hello, Harry,” Sirius said grimly, “I see you’ve met my mother.”

He watched as Harry did a bit of a double-take. “Your — ?”

“My dear old mum, yeah,” said Sirius. He tried not to grimace at the look of disbelief, both warmed by the fact no one could look at the wreck of a woman in the portrait and connect her to him and a little embarrassed by the fact that he had to tell Harry otherwise. “We’ve been trying to get her down for a month but we think she put a Permanent Sticking Charm on the back of the canvas. Let’s get downstairs, quick, before they all wake up again.”

“But what’s a portrait of your mother doing here?” Harry asked, as they headed down to the kitchen.

“Hasn’t anyone told you? This was my parents’ house,” said Sirius, bitterly. “But at the time, I figured I was the last Black left, so it was mine.” Harry looked like he was about to say something but Sirius waved him off. “Long story, I’ll tell you later. Anyway, I offered the place to Dumbledore for headquarters — about the only useful thing I’ve been able to do.”

Molly, Arthur, and Bill greeted Harry with enthusiasm the moment they went into the kitchen. Dung was also half asleep there, but given Molly was less than pleased with him, it made introductions a bit short. They were interrupted by Hermione’s cat, who wound around Harry’s legs in greeting before settling happily on his lap in look of a petting.

Sirius was happy to oblige. “Had a good summer so far?”

“No, it’s been lousy,” said Harry, moodily. He sounded every bit as fed up as Sirius thought he might.

Sirius cracked a grin. “Don’t know what you’re complaining about, myself.”

The look on Harry’s face was worth it. “What?”

“Personally, I’d have welcomed a dementor attack. A deadly struggle for my soul would have broken the monotony nicely.” Sirius said, less sarcastic than he expected to be. “You think you’ve had it bad, at least you’ve been able to get out and about, stretch your legs, get into a few fights.” He stopped to give Crookshanks more room to wind his tail. He could relate. Tails could be so difficult to find a good resting place for. “I’ve been stuck inside for a month.”

“How come?” asked Harry, frowning.

“Because the Ministry of Magic’s still after me, and Voldemort will know all about me being an
Animagus by now, Wormtail will have told him, so my big disguise is useless.” Sirius made a face at the mention of it, tone flat and sounding less than pleased with any of it. “There’s not much I can do for the Order of the Phoenix . . . or so Dumbledore feels.”

Harry seemed to calm a little at that. He had no idea if Dumbledore had even spoken to the boy since that night, come to think of it.

“At least you’ve known what’s been going on,”

Probably not, then.

Sirius snorted. “Oh yeah,” he said sarcastically. “Listening to Snape’s reports, having to take all his snide hints that he’s out there risking his life while I’m sat on my backside here having a nice comfortable time, asking me how the cleaning’s going —”

“What cleaning?” asked Harry.

“Trying to make this place fit for human habitation,” said Sirius, waving a hand around the kitchen. The whole place had been a wreck, though it was slowly improving. In terms of habitation, if not decor. “No one’s lived here for ten years, not since my dear mother died, unless you count her old house-elf, and he’s gone round the twist.”

“Sirius?” Mundungus piped up, examining an empty goblet. “This solid silver, mate?”

“Yes,” said Sirius, making a face. “Finest fifteenth century goblin-wrought silver, embossed with the Black family crest.”

“That’d come off, though,” muttered Mundungus, polishing it with his cuff.

Remembering the counter-measures his brother had put in place, Sirius shrugged. “So might your fingers if you’re caught trying to take it.”

If there was one thing Sirius had never been good at, and would admit to being terrible at, was climbing out of his own bad moods. After dinner, the only thing that caused any uptick in the threatening storm of his own emotional state was that he was sure that despite Molly being downright shrill about the children knowing anything, Harry had likely just told them without delay. He didn't mind much; they should know if they're old enough to ask. Last time, kids their age were being recruited.

Speaking of, he could hear the sounds of the wireless when heading past the study. He could hear the news announcements, if you could call them news, of more Ministry meddling and covering their own arses rather than getting out there and doing something that mattered. At least someone should, if they had the ability.

Sirius knew that he ought to at least explain that Harry would stay here. He didn't look forward to them being in a room together; not because he thought he was James, thank you Molly, but because Harry was a lot like his parents, and he was in a damned shit mood himself. He was entitled to be. No one had been able to tell him anything, and he’d been through a lot in a short space of time. It had to be driving him up the wall. He may not have been in the Order, but he had faced down Voldemort more than anyone else had and survived it. At least he was better equipped to deal with it now.

Sirius poked his head around the door to the study. To his complete and utter lack of surprise, there was Regulus absorbed in another book. He didn't think it was possible to become a larger swot than
the fourteen-year-old version had been, but that was his younger brother for him, loved proving him wrong.

"Were you downstairs earlier?" he asked, without preamble.

"Briefly," Regulus responded without looking up as he neatly folded over a piece of parchment tucked halfway under his book; and just a beat later, he clasped his hands together and lifted his eyes to grant a more focused attention. “Exchanged greetings of little substance with Severus for a moment, though I was downstairs for no more than a few minutes.”

"There's always little substance when it comes to Severus," Sirius replied, more automatically than anything else. The problem at the moment was that there wasn't 'little substance’ to it. Loathe as he was to admit it, these meetings, this information he brought in, it was important to the Order. It didn't mean he had to like it or the poor excuse of a person who delivered it. Regulus was opening his mouth to responded -- punctuated with an eye roll -- when Sirius spoke again: "Harry's here."

Again, Regulus closed his mouth, but only for a moment, his expression shifting to one of measured curiosity. "Was he the one trying to out-shout our mother?"

"No, that was me." Sirius quirked his head, a little confused. "You'd think you'd be used to hearing that by now. It’s happened often enough."

"I know what you sound like," Regulus said pointedly, though the slant of his mouth remained more thoughtful than anything else. "I would never doubt your capacity to shriek, but last time I checked, you haven't faced off against dragons and sphinxes. I could not tell who exactly he was shouting at, but he sounded very angry with them for arriving here before he did."

“Yeah, that was probably him, then. At that point, you probably knew more about the Order than he did, and he's the one who was there. ” Sirius admitted, though he was a bit curious about that himself. He hadn't heard anything. “I didn't hear; we've had to ward the room. The kids are creative.”

Regulus inclined his head. “I noticed,” he remarked with a lift of the brow, as much to the final statement as the ones preceding it. “Will he be joining our growing list of guests, then?"

"I didn't think you'd approve of fifteen-year-olds listening in on vigilantism." Sirius said, cooly. Of course, the upside of them listening was they tended to talk about it, and Regulus wasn't stupid. He liked to have as much information as possible, always had. "It's only three weeks until school starts. Assuming they don't actually expel him for conjuring a patronus. Ungrateful."

“Didn’t you mention there are dementors roaming about?" Regulus asked, expression keen as it was thoughtful. He paused a beat before adding, “I suppose there is supposed to be a restriction on underage magic, but if one is being attacked by a dementor, I would expect that to qualify as an extenuating circumstance.”

"Yeah, that's not what they're going to try and nail him on. It'll be his cousin being there, him not being magical even if he already knows it exists so it shouldn't a breach of statute. Not that they'll care." Not that the Ministry needed a reason to put Harry down. They wanted anyone discredited who said Voldemort was back, and this was just an excuse they were gaging for. Still, Sirius couldn't imagine a day would come when Dumbledore could be told what to do and not to do about that school. "Voldemort really ought to consider giving Fudge some sort of prize. He's doing such an excellent job of keeping him hidden and screwing anyone who says otherwise. The Prophet is making me nostalgic for the time they almost burnt it down."
“I noticed that too. What I don't understand is why Fudge is trying so hard to keep it quiet,” Regulus said with a shake of the head, leaning back in his chair. “Sometimes information is sensitive, certainly, but masking this particular bit of information only gives the Dark Lord an advantage. Ignoring the state of things will leave people vulnerable. Seems foolish.”

"You're a bit behind on your politics." Sirius replied grimly. "Actually, it sort of comes down to what happened with your mate. You know Crouch had his eyes on Minister, right?’ That had to be something he knew even before he left. Briefly, he wondered what Crouch must have thought of his own son hanging about with one of the oldest families who were known for their Dark magic, while he was trying to distance himself and hammer anything to do with it. Regulus had shown a strong disdain for the man, which Sirius could relate to even if it wasn't from his own experiences. But perhaps it wasn't loyalty that coloured it. It could have been first hand experience. Crouch had been greasing the right people up for quite a few years at that point. "His rates of capture and kill as head of the Department of Law Enforcement were through the roof, largely because some of it was fabricated.” At that, Regulus's expression immediately soured. “But that ruthlessness makes you popular when people are frightened. Then it came out about his kid."

Sirius shook his head. All things fed into each other. "Some of it because they don't believe he didn't know, some of them because sending your child to Azkaban caused any parent worth a damn to recoil in horror but mostly, the war was over and people weren't scared anymore. Either way, he was out as a successor and in stepped Fudge. He's there for the photo ops, the money and the perks. He senses blood in the water and knows that if people figure out Voldemort is back then it's only a matter of time before they want someone ruthless again. Someone powerful. Not a beaurocrat. If he near pissed his pants over me asking about the crossword, he's not going to survive even the most pathetic of Death Eaters aimed at him. If he can paint Dumbledore as an absent minded dodder and Harry as a histrionic teenager, he thinks he keeps the job and no one will know he's not up to snuff.”

“So he would rather deny it and look foolish when the Dark Lord ultimately reveals himself, all the while breeding mistrust and malcontent,” Regulus said, drumming his fingers lightly on the backs of his hands. “A temporary solution, I suppose, but quite short-sighted -- and incredibly irresponsible, at that. I wouldn't have wanted Barty's father in charge, but lying about the state of things isn't doing the wizarding world any favors either.” Crinkling his nose, he added, “The Ministry is too unwieldy a beast to trust anyway, but they seem to be making a nuisance of themselves in the complete opposite direction as they did before. Inconvenient, to say the least.”

"No one wants to believe it.” Sirius reasoned quietly. Not no one, he supposed, there would be those who'd flock to Voldemort and his followers for ambition, protection, and a chance to destroy lives. But if nothing else, Regulus was living proof that idiot kids who signed up hoping to get something out of it - a conversation they were yet to have and not one he was going to do sober if he could help it - they wouldn't really want Voldemort back. They may not have gotten nailed for it, may have built up lives and people who may not unjustly suffer for the stupid mistakes made when they were all kids. At the time, they hadn't felt like kids, but hindsight is a terrible thing. "It requires strength of character to face something you can ignore. Given the choice, most people are not you. They'd rather stick their heads in the sand than acknowledge what's happening and try to stop it. It makes everyone's job around here a lot harder.”

For a moment, Regulus’s stare held with a strange flicker in his eyes -- and again he nodded, after a beat. “Indeed. Sometimes, you just have to do things yourself.”

"If you want it done right," Sirius agreed, letting some of the tension out of his shoulders. He hadn't realised how wound up he'd been about the whole stupid Ministry and how ineffectual everything felt. "Speaking of that, I haven't had the chance to explain you to Harry yet. I'll do it tomorrow if
Ron doesn't beat me to the punch; it's been a rough few days and it'll be easier if he gets some rest.

Regulus nodded. “If you could drop the ‘idiot brother’ descriptor, I would appreciate it.”

"I make no promises," Sirius shrugged. "It's a lot easier than saying being a Seeker, Captain, Prefect and aiming for O-straight NEWTS wasn't enough so you decided to add an extra-curricular that was all the rage at the time."

At that, Regulus wrinkled his nose. “I prefer ‘motivated.’”

"I prefer bonkers, but he's already been screamed and clawed at by our dearest mother. Don't want him thinking you're going to do that." Sirius made a face at the thought. It was almost funny, the idea of Regulus behaving like that but he found that the image was sadly more unsettling than humorous. Still, it was a legitimate concern he was going to get on like Snape does. "You're not going to be a prick, are you?"

With a subtle eye roll, Regulus tipped his head to the side, and when again he met his brother's eyes, he responded, “I will make every effort at civility to the extent that it is reciprocated.”

"Then I'm sure it'll be fine," Sirius said, hoping it was true.

With all the pressures of a resurrected Dark Lord and the stressors of a volatile (if gradually mending) reconnection with his brother, Regulus had taken little time for leisure in the past month. Reading the garbage published in the Daily Prophet as of late could arguably be considered a source of dark amusement, and the occasional report of quidditch scores were a bright patch amidst a lot of rubbish reporting, but it was not until his ears caught the familiar lilt of an announcer coming from the drawing room that Regulus realised just how deeply he had missed the British quidditch circuit.

“And Falcons Chaser Eloise Timms swoops around a cluster barreling her way,” the announcer said with a crackling energy, “Parker blocks the oncoming bludger - and Timms scores!” A muffled rumble of cheers rang out from the wireless, and when Regulus poked his head into the drawing room, he saw the kids spread about the various furniture.

The twins (Weasleys, he had since confirmed) were seated on a sofa that was situated by the piano, surrounded by what looked like random objects and sweets, and Hermione was offset a bit further with a book. Huddled around the wireless itself were Ron and Ginny, as well as another -- a teenage boy who required no introduction, distinctive as his messy mop of jet-black hair was, even from the back.

Regulus’s stomach lurched, but he forcefully held his face in a neutral expression. Logically, he knew it wasn’t James Potter sitting casually in the drawing room, listening to a quidditch match. James Potter was dead, had been for a decade and a half, and the reports (both official and from those within the house) conflicted so spectacularly that Regulus had no idea what to expect. Was Harry Potter arrogant and attention-seeking, or was he persistent and resourceful in the face of the strangest series of school years to date? Sirius would probably be angry with him if he knew how much Regulus truly wanted it to be the former so he could detest the kid without guilt, but whatever had brought forth the initial shouting, Harry Potter seemed to have calmed now. His brother had said he would talk to the boy -- perhaps whatever Sirius had said soothed him.

("You're not going to be a prick, are you?"
“I will make every effort at civility to the extent that it is reciprocated.”)
Heavily, Regulus sighed.

“There’s another for the Falcons,” the dark-haired boy -- Potter’s kid -- was saying from his arm chair, “Though I’m not sure if even the seeker can pull them out of this one.”

From the doorway, Regulus loosely crossed his arms across his chest. “Who are the Falcons playing?”

The collective room, save for Hermione who remained absorbed in her book, turned their heads to the door.

"The Harpies," Ginny replied, before turning her attention back to the wireless. "And they’re not going to win. You can't get past Gwenog Jones!"

"Traitor," Ron mumbled sourly.

"You're not still sore about them flattening the Cannons, are you?" Ginny rolled her eyes in an exaggerated way.

"My own sister!" he replied.

"They'd have to down a cauldron of felix felicis to stand even half a chance!" Ginny said, pointing to the wireless in a vindicated way as the Harpies got the quaffle.

"What's a felix felicis?" Harry asked, finally speaking up. He was staring, as if trying to work something out and not being able to place it.

"It makes you lucky," Hermione piped up from her corner, looking up with a small wave of greetings. "It's banned in any magical game or sport under regulation by the International Confederation of Wizards' Quidditch Committee."

"Shhhhh!" came the collective reply for the inseparable twins.

A hush fell over the room again, save for the announcer’s animated play-by-play. Throughout the squabble, Regulus’s eyes had lingered on Harry, still fighting the uncomfortable likeness to James, distinguished only by the startlingly green eyes and the zigzag scar on his forehead. Even the quality of his voice wasn’t so different, but somehow, the tone and manner of his delivery was less grating. That much, Regulus could grant. (The lack of familiarity with felix felicis was a little surprising, but perhaps potions was not the boy’s forte.)

Looking at Harry wasn’t doing much for his mood, but the bookshelves had been his original target; he had scarcely approached and scanned the book spines when another roar from the wireless drew his gaze once again. Regulus could not say how long the game had been carrying on before he’d arrived, but the snitch was caught, locking in a 250-40 win for the Harpies. Glancing again to the cluster around the wireless, he noted Ginny’s satisfied grin.

“It sounds like the Harpies are doing quite well,” Regulus said as he pulled out a somewhat ominous-looking book on charms. “I prefer the Magpies, but that was quite a win. The Harpies seeker is relatively new, isn’t she?”

"They're a lock in this year," Ginny boasted proudly, willfully ignoring the glares from her brothers who were making disreputable remarks upon the Magpies. (From the bookcase, Regulus leveled a scowl of his own in their direction, but when Ginny spoke again, he returned his attention to the preferred line of conversation.) "Everyone's saying it."
"Wood won't like that, will he?" said one of the twins. "Their keeper looks down for the count, he might actually get a chance to play."

"Who's replacing him as Captain?" Harry asked, getting up onto wobbly legs.

"Angelina," said the other twin.

"Nice one," Harry commented. "Does that mean we'll have tryouts this year?"

"She can't be as bad Wood," the twin replied. "But yeah, we've got a title to defend. Dunno if we can find anyone decent."

"He was a good Keeper." Hermione, perhaps realising the insular nature of the discussion, offered an explanation. "The Gryffindor Captain, he’s now a reserve for Puddlemere. Harry, Fred and George are all on the team."

"Thank you, Hermione" Regulus said with a wry quirk of the mouth, "What positions?"

Hermione, pleased with the recognition, went back to her book.

"Beaters," The twins said in unison, as if they could be anything else.

"I'm a seeker," Harry said, some of the awkwardness creeping back in.

Lifting his brow, Regulus returned his attention to Harry, noting again -- with a lingering bafflement -- that Harry seemed more uncomfortable than boastful about his position on the team. A jarring image, with that face of his, and Regulus was uncertain how he was ever going to get used to it. Perhaps the impossible had occurred and James Potter had merely sired a cautious child...but more likely Sirius had said something during that little chat he'd spoke of. Sirius’s remark about relaying the extent Regulus’s ‘extracurriculars’ to Harry had seemed to be in jest, considering the sensitivity of his own adolescent misguidance, but sometimes it was difficult to tell what was meant as a joke and what wasn’t.

Regardless of the reason, whatever was causing the visible discomfort wasn’t manifesting in hostility, so for now, perhaps it wasn’t terribly important.

“I was a seeker too, when I was in school,” Regulus responded, careful to keep his tone casual.

"You were a seeker?" Harry asked.

Regulus nodded. “Second through seventh. How long have you been playing?” His eyes flicked to acknowledge all three, though he was admittedly more curious about piecing together this strange Potter child.

"We've been there since our second year, haven't we George?" the twin - presumably Fred - replied for them all. "Not all of us can be as special as Harry and get drafted as a first year."


At that, a flicker of legitimate surprise flashed in Regulus’s expression, and when he looked back to Harry, a single eyebrow was lifted. A seeker in his first year...?

Harry shrugged, face colouring a little. "I'm a good flyer."

‘A good flyer,’ he had said. Regulus suspected preferential treatment was at play; there had been any number of remarkable flyers over the years, and Regulus doubted this kid was truly the best in
100 years. More likely, he was a treasured ‘Boy Who Lived’ who was also a good flyer, perhaps even a remarkable flyer himself, but the kid had the decency to look at least a little embarrassed about it, so Regulus let the remark slide with no more than a soft “Hm.”

"Assuming he's not expelled," Fred pointed out.

"And that he doesn't get offed by Death Eaters before the House Cup is over," George responded, looking at Harry. "You'll break McGonagall's heart."

"Yeah, thanks." Harry said, dryly. "I'd hate for a war to get in the way of the house cup."

George gave a cheers with his cup. "That's the spirit."

“War has a way of doing that,” Regulus said, mouth pressing slightly as he shook his head. Ironically, the Death Eaters had been thoroughly distracting during his own final quidditch season. The first half of the year for one reason, and the second half, for quite another… “Hopefully we can end this one swiftly.”

"I'd settle for no more Death Eater professors," Ron added. "Though Malfoy the amazing bouncing ferret was worth Moody."

"Crouch, not Moody," Hermione corrected, without looking up.

"Crouch, yeah." Ron waved her off.

“Hold on a moment,” Regulus cut in, holding up a hand. “Bouncing ferret?” The Malfoy in question was certainly Draco, and he knew he ought to be furious at the thought of anyone turning his young cousin into an animal against his will -- but the Crouch in question was certainly Barty. (In his mind’s eye, he saw his friend sitting on the bed across from his own in their dorm room, shadowed by the late hour and flippantly threatening to turn Baddock into a toad and use him for the NEWT exam, if he was bothering Regulus too terribly.) Such a memory, in itself, should probably bring forth more of a moral quandary than it did, but instead, it just made his chest ache.

“Can’t imagine he liked that very much,” Regulus added after a beat that had felt a bit longer in his head, and his tone managed to be a little more sympathetic than the conflicting twitch of his expression had been as he shook his head. “Draco, that is. The transfiguring party in question probably did.”

"He shouldn't have tried to hex Harry when his back was turned," Ron answered, clearly trying to contain his own laughter because he was trying to sound indignant.

"Most unsportsmanlike," George added.

Regulus pressed his lips together more firmly, fighting the urge to look over at the tapestry hanging on the wall. Taking the word of Gryffindors was, in his experience, an unfair bend against the members of the Slytherin House, and in that match up, he was more inclined to want to give Draco the benefit of the doubt, but there would be no fact-checking here, and Draco was as separated from him as he’d always been. Plenty of his Slytherin friends would not have blinked at a hex from behind, so it was far from absurd -- but nonetheless, he did not like the shadows it cast over what he was still hoping his cousin would be.

“I see,” Regulus settled with a nod.

"No matter what, we'll definitely have a Death Eater professor." At the blank look, he added, "Snape."
There was a murmur of bemused assent.

"I'd settle for going back," Harry griped. "Even if I have to have Snape."

Regulus let out a huff of air, permitting a mildly baffled expression to lift his brow once again. “Honestly, I’m not certain I will ever get used to the fact that Severus Snape actually became a professor.”

"I dunno if professor is what I'd call him," Ron said, darkly. "Remember when he filled in for Lupin and spent the whole lesson going on about what a terrible job he was doing?"

"Or when he got really annoyed with Hermione for knowing all the answers when he wanted to tell us we were all useless and gave her detention for answering too many questions," Harry added.

"Then there was him taking points for reading a library book when not in the library," Hermione added, obviously a little proud but with a frustrated shake of her head. “I do think he made that up.”

The distant expression on Regulus’s face had sharpened again. “I’m not surprised about Lupin, all things considered, but detention for answering questions and losing points for reading library books outside of the library?” With a little snort, Regulus folded his arms and lightly tapped a finger on the book he was still holding. “Assuming that your re-telling is an accurate representation of the situation,” (and quite an assumption that was, in the presence of a gaggle of Gryffindors), “then he definitely made that up. I would have been a veritable burden to our House if either of those things were actual rules, and truthfully, he would have been too.”

Petty though it was, absurdities of that nature were the sort of thing Regulus might have tried to justify docking points for during his fifth year when he was at furious war with the Gryffindor House -- or more specifically, his freshly disowned brother, and by extension, Lupin -- but that was quite different, and all parties involved had ceased their childish barrage before the year’s end. Regulus got the distinct impression that Severus had yet to do so in his own war against James Potter. “Seems a bit backwards,” Regulus added.

"What d'you mean, all things considered?" Fred asked.

"They went to school together," Harry offered by way of explanation. "Snape and Lupin and Sirius and my dad. They didn't get on."

"He kept that quiet. Is that why he told everyone about him coming over a bit furry once a month?" George interjected.

"I think that was because Sirius wasn't Kissed," Harry went a little paler at the mention of the dementors. By the bookcase, Regulus, too, paled at the thought. Regulus never had wished the dementors on his brother on even his angriest day, and it was terribly uncomfortable to think about a friend -- even a periphery one from his school years -- genuinely wishing that on Sirius. His frown deepened as Harry continued, "Remember how angry he was at breakfast?"

"He doesn't like not getting his own way," Hermione said, voice wavering. "He can be vindictive about it."

"And now you're OWL students," Fred said, rubbing his hands together and glowering. "Someone'll have a break down in Potions before Christmas, I'd put money on it."

"It's not fifth year potions till Snape's made someone run out crying," George agreed. "You'll see."

"Professor Snape is exceptionally talented, and a valued member of the Order." From the door
came the lightly chiding voice of Remus Lupin. He seemed to be surveying the scene with tired amusement. "That alone should be worthy of the due respect."

"Even though he's a git," George insisted on adding.

"As is everyone from time to time," Lupin said coolly. "But Molly would like to get a start on the dining room when you're all finished."

As the group of teenagers gradually filed out with a stray remark here and there, Regulus shifted his stance to face Lupin, arms still folded loosely. When at last it was just the two of them, he spoke again, tone laced with curiosity. “That was surprisingly decent of you. Were they being melodramatic, or does he actually deduct points for reading library books outside of the library? It seems excessive, even for Severus, but I’m admittedly a bit out of touch.”

"While Severus can be difficult, I believe when it comes to Harry, excessive is an excellent term." Remus smiled wanly. He kept his voice low. "I'm afraid he has difficulty in differentiating Harry from his father and tends to be stricter than necessary. He's quite tolerable with his own students. He wouldn’t be the first professor to show a bias."

“The visual was quite jarring, I will admit,” Regulus said with a flicker of distaste before he smothered it again, “But that makes a great deal more sense.”

"It was jarring for me as well," Remus admitted. "But Harry is bright and talented, and while there is no denying he has plenty of his parents in him and the trouble that comes with it, he is also selfless and kind." With a ghost of a smile, he added, "Far more so than we ever were at that age, as you're well aware. It would be difficult to see that and hold a grudge, but I think Severus would rather hold the grudge."

“I figured as much. Thinking about James Potter too specifically still makes me feel a little nauseous, but thus far, Harry has not been completely unbearable, which is honestly exceeding my initial expectations…I suppose I’ve found other things to focus my grudge on.” Shaking his head, he looked back to Lupin again. “However, speaking of a misguided youth, I will say it got a bit convincting, for a moment. Their examples reminded me of the year we took so many petty points from each other’s Houses that Hufflepuff won the Cup. Less than a year, I suppose... It really only took a term…” With an awkward, one-shouldered shrug and a pinched expression, Regulus added, “But I decided against drawing that comparison.”

"I don't think it's something any of us are particularly proud of," Lupin agreed, pressing his fingers across his eyes with a tired sigh before opening them. "But we weren't the first teenagers to get carried away with our friends and their hurt feelings. We won't be the last. Lines, it seems, are already being drawn again. Are you worried about your cousin?"

In truth, Regulus was worried about all of his cousins, if in different ways, but Draco was undoubtedly the one in question. Allowing his mouth to pull down into a frown, Regulus glanced over to the tapestry, and though it was too distant to see the names clearly, he found his littlest cousin easily. Malfoy though he was, Draco was the only pureblood child remaining in the entirety of their family, and he was steeped as deep in the world of the Death Eaters as any child could be. Without the presence of the unfamiliar gaggle of Gryffindors, Regulus felt his dread spread and settle.

“I am,” Regulus responded, punctuating the words with a nod. “Increasingly. I hate being unable to contact him and Narcissa when I know he is poised to make terrible, preventable choices that are difficult to reverse.”
"A larger issue would be if he'd listen. Obstinance appears to be something of a family trait. We will have to put our faith in Severus to run interference for now. They do appear to get on well enough," Remus said, grimly. Despite his words earlier, he didn't seem happy about it.

“I suppose we have little choice, as it is,” Regulus granted, trying to fight off the little stab of jealousy pricking in his chest at the reminder that Severus had been able to develop a relationship with Draco while he had not. The separation had been Regulus's own doing, and he knew it well, but logic did little for his frustration when it was his family in question. Snape had been civil enough, but his motivations remained a mystery, and Regulus had never known his friend far beyond the surface, even during their school years.

(How far did Severus Snape’s loyalty extend to the Order? How far did it extend to the Death Eaters, to the Malfoys, to Draco specifically?) Regulus hated not knowing, and he hated the reality that he might never know for certain, when Severus was so find of secrets, himself.

There were far more questions than answers, but as long as he was keeping Draco safe, Regulus supposed that was better than nothing. Perhaps Snape, too, could be motivated to both help Draco and defeat the Dark Lord.

"I know it doesn't make it easier,” Remus continued, “but he is more safe than most at the moment. The Malfoys remain a heavily influential family."

With a heavy sigh, Regulus’s expression pinched again. “I was too, until I was his age.” (A young heir with everything to prove…) “But I appreciate the sentiment. Perhaps he will give the fight a wide berth for long enough to end this war.”

"There's no evidence of active recruitment at Hogwarts yet," Remus reasoned aloud. "The priority appears to be secrecy, and with the activation of the Dark Mark, I think it's more likely he's rounding up those still around, more so than anyone new, for now. Unless he goes looking for it himself, there is every chance Draco will not get involved directly. Hogwarts remains one of the few places Voldemort fears to tread."

“Not to be an alarmist, but as logical as that might sound, a lack of evidence at Hogwarts doesn't mean much, unfortunately,” Regulus said with a punctuating huff. It was during the holidays at home with family and social peers that the recruitment had occurred in his own experience, and his cousin was well set up for the Death Eaters’ courting, if he were to show any interest at all. “Especially for someone like Draco. Perhaps they will decide to focus on prior members, at least initially, but with all of the losses and arrests, I would not expect it to remain that way for long. Predicting their timeline is a bit more difficult at the moment, but I remain skeptical. Hopeful, but skeptical.”

"Sadly, I think that's more realist than alarmist." Remus conceded, raising his hand to cover a stifled yawn. "If you'll excuse me, I must get back to brewing."

Regulus tipped his head in acknowledgement, his mind shifting back to the text in his own hand, crowded though it was with the unexpectedly surreal series of conversations. “I shall release you to your brewing, then.”
Chapter 10

It was still dark outside when Harry awoke. There was a looming murkiness to the whole house as it was, and lying in the semi-darkness wasn't helping. He pulled on his glasses and was surprised to find himself alone. He scrambled to get his jeans and a t-shirt on, only jolting a little when he heard snickering from the painting. No worse than your average Slytherin, Sirius had said, but to his knowledge, Harry'd never had a Slytherin watch him get dressed, so it was a little worse.

On the other side of the door, he could hear the low sounds of talking. With a flash of irritation, Harry wondered what else people weren't telling him. Even Sirius had seemed to decide he didn't need to know anything more than he'd already been told. He opened the door to find Ron, still in his pajamas and eyes half shut, and a fully dressed Hermione.

"You're up!" she said in a low voice.

"Yeah," Harry said, looking between the two of them and trying to keep the accusation out of his voice. "How come you are?"

"Must've left the door open last night," Ron mumbled, running his palm over his eyes in a seemingly vain attempt to wake himself up. "Sirius' mum kicked off again half an hour ago."

"I was already up," Hermione explained.

"Because she's nuts," Ron clarified through a yawn.

"Because it's OWL year, and I want to get in some studying before breakfast," Hermione raised her voice a little. "It wouldn't be the worst idea for you two to join me."

"No thanks," Ron said, sleepily looking at the door. "I'm going back to bed."

Harry didn't want to go back to bed. The nightmares were persisting, so even resting felt uneasy, and there was something unsettling about a tittering Slytherin Headmaster watching him sleep. Ron didn't seem too bothered by it. There weren't a lot of things that could wake Ron up once he'd settled in, barring spiders. Still, Harry knew he wouldn't concentrate even if he did want to study (which he didn't). His hearing was three days away. If they decided he was expelled, what would have been the point of studying? He wouldn't be going back to Hogwarts with them. He crossed his arms against the chill that came over him.

Hermione seemed to sense the downturn in his mood as Ron shuffled back through the door. "Mrs. Weasley is looking downstairs if you want to get something."

Harry didn't really feel hungry, but knew he probably should. "Where are you going?"

"To study, I told you," Hermione said.

"There might not be much point," Harry replied.

"You're not going to get expelled. People don't get expelled for using underage magic in life or death situations." Hermione huffed at him. "I looked it up. There's a precedent."

Harry didn't feel convinced. "Why is Mrs. Weasley making breakfast now?" It was early, well before the usual time.
“Bill came in earlier,” Hermione said, taking on the conspiratorial tone that meant it must have been something to do with the Order. “I think Sirius went to get him. That’s what set the portrait off.”

“How do you know?”

“The insults change,” Hermione shrugged. “Lupin gets the half-breed ones, I get the filth ones, Mrs. Weasley usually gets something about blood-traitor, and this morning, it was familial ones, so it had to be Sirius. She won’t acknowledge Tonks.”

“But there are two of them,” Harry said, thinking back to the brief encounter with Sirius’s younger brother the day before.

“Oh, she doesn’t scream with him,” Hermione shrugged. “It’s quite a well done bit of magic.”

Harry didn’t think anything that portrayed the clawing, elderly woman screaming through the window could be thought of as done well, but he could take a guess as to why she wouldn’t scream. Sirius had taken him aside the night before and quietly explained the circumstances that had led to the Order of the Phoenix setting up its headquarters in the house. That his brother had joined the Death Eaters when he was Harry’s age, but had backed out when he realised what it was really like and that you don’t just leave the Death Eaters: you’re there for life, or they’ll kill you. The thought made him uneasy. He thought it might make the other members of the Order uneasy too, given that he didn’t really see them interacting. Harry himself had been there two days with only a brief discussion with the man.

(The others didn’t know. Sirius had asked in earnest that he not say anything yet because it was technically Order business, but he felt Harry had the right to know. That suited him, Harry had thought bitterly, he wasn’t the only person keeping secrets around here.)

But the problem he had with this information was that he had no idea why a Death Eater would spend the majority of their time around the only muggle-born in the house. He was friends with Snape, which tracked, and the house definitely screamed Death Eater, but Sirius had grown up here too before he’d left to stay with Harry’s own grandparents. He wondered if it was like Crouch, who’d taken a special interest in Neville even though he’d gone to Azkaban for torturing his parents. It was a disturbing thought, and one he wasn’t sure was true. Crouch, as Moody, had acted bizarrely, and though Harry could understand he was just doing a good impression of Moody now that he’d met the real one, there were no signs of that Sirius’ younger brother was similarly unhinged. Maybe he was just better at hiding it. Look at their mum.

Harry was greeted by the hushed tones of Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Bill, and (to his lack of surprise, given Hermione’s suspicions earlier) Sirius. He and Bill seemed to be in deep discussion about something that stopped abruptly when Harry came in.

“Hello, Harry dear,” Molly said fussing over him. “You’re up early.” The statement was punctuated by Mr. Weasley’s sluggish gulp of what looked like burning hot coffee. “Do you want some breakfast? We’ve got some eggs, toast, I can break out the bacon if you’d like some…”

“Toast is fine, thanks,” Harry said, picking it off the plate. The room remained in a state of awkward stasis, since they clearly wanted to talk about something but wouldn’t do it while Harry was in the room.

“Are you getting an early start on your OWL work too?” Molly asked. “I’m surprised we haven’t had the letters yet, it’s almost time.”
Assuming the letter came for him at all. “Er, yeah,” Harry said, distractedly.

He was broken out of it by Sirius snorting, and when he looked, Bill looked ready to laugh as well. Apparently the idea of him getting a headstart on his studies at sunrise was extremely funny. However, it was short-lived as the tension quickly returned.

“I’ll take it up then,” Harry said, wanting to get away from the stuffy air or secrecy.

“To study,” Sirius asked, without asking.

“If Dumbledore goes to all the trouble of making sure I can go back to Hogwarts, it’d probably look bad if I failed everything.” Harry replied snippily, though regretted it almost instantly. He hadn’t been awake an hour, and he was already getting a throbbing headache.

For lack of anything else to do in a quiet, looming house, Harry traipsed up the stairs to the study. That was usually where he’d expect to find Hermione. He found Crookshanks outside the room and helpfully covered Harry’s jeans with ginger cat hair by winding around them until Harry bent down to scratch him behind the ears.

“Your cat is trying to trip me up,” Harry called in, trying to extricate himself and not drop his plate. Except Hermione wasn’t in the study.

Looking up from his book, Regulus saw Harry standing awkwardly in the doorway with the rather large ginger cat still winding affectionately. His morning thus far had been peaceful and solitary (save for the occasional visit by Crookshanks and Kreacher), but surprisingly enough, it seemed that even rising before the sun did not guarantee the morning would stay that way. A new guest had arrived not too long ago, from what he had gathered, though venturing downstairs was not tempting enough to pull him from the book when the noise level below was certain to be louder.

“I suppose you were expecting Hermione,” he said as more of a statement than a question. “She hasn’t been in here yet this morning.”

"Uh, yeah." Harry replied eloquently, before trying to get an armful of Crookshanks to move the cat out of the way. He shifted beyond the boy’s grasp with a low rumble. Harry added awkwardly, "She said she wanted to study. And this is the...study."

“It is,” Regulus responded simply. Noticing that Harry was still struggling to juggle the plate and the cat, Regulus marked his place in his book and crossed the room to where the boy was standing. Without ceremony, he scooped up Crookshanks, shifting the massive cat in his arms as the bottle-brush tail swished freely. “Come along. He’s trying to walk.”

Harry nodded. He watched the cat for a minute, before reaching over to give a few light strokes. "Crookshanks doesn’t usually like people," he said with a frown.

“We bonded,” Regulus said, scratching the cat’s head. Crookshanks hadn’t struck him as particularly unfriendly, even in those initial days, but Regulus had always been quite fond of cats. Perhaps Crookshanks could sense it, or something silly like that.

Harry’s frown lingered before he seemingly made up his mind. "Er....can I ask about the...staring, from yesterday?"

The staring, unlike the cat, was quite another point, and one that was rather more uncomfortable. There was no truly polite way to say ‘you remind me of the person I hated most as a child,’ true
though it might be. He had told Sirius he was going to make every effort at civility, so to any
degree he could, Regulus was going to try to find the closest approximation to politeness.

“You look quite a lot like your father,” Regulus responded carefully. The ghost of childhood fury
flickered at the edge of his mind, and pointedly he fought to calm his mind again, grasping for
words. “So I expected a more... arrogant disposition. I was simply surprised.”

Harry recoiled, letting his hand drop from the cat and responding with a half-hearted glare. "My
father was not arrogant, and neither am I," he said, hotly.

“I never said you were arrogant,” Regulus said pointedly, lifting his brow as he scratched the soft
scruff beneath Crookshanks’ chin. Shifting on his feet, Regulus turned to walk back to the chair
he’d been settled in, reminding himself that there was nothing to gain from arguing with a teenager
about his dead father, even if that father really was a twat. That argument was better served with
Sirius, if he was going to exert the effort of a confrontation, and Regulus was not in the mood for a
confrontation. “In fact, I was specifically implying the opposite.”

Harry blinked a couple of times, perhaps unsure of what to say that. "Sorry, I didn't mean - It was
just -" he started, but forcefully stopped himself mid-sentence. "You weren't what I expected
either."

With a soft snort, Regulus lowered into his chair and loosened his grip on Crookshanks as the cat
perched in his lap, tail swishing. “If Sirius was delivering the description, that does not surprise
me,” he responded wryly, though his tone was light and distinctly lacking in the bitterness that
might have once pricked sharp in such a statement. Exasperating though his brother might be on a
deep and defining level, Sirius had been almost complimentary at times, as of late, and even if a
backhanded remark could round the corner at any moment, those complimentary moments stuck in
his mind as firmly as their insulting counterparts so often did. (‘It requires strength of character to
face something you can ignore. Given the choice, most people are not you’...)

Harry made his way into the room properly, looking back at the door before lowering his voice to
speak. "You don't remind me of a Death Eater at all,” he admitted softly.

Immediately Regulus’s mouth twitched in subtle discomfort, eyes flicking first to the door, then
back to Harry, but again, the words were not jabbed forth with hostility. He’d even possessed the
decency of lowering his voice, which was more than Regulus would have expected from a
Gryffindor Potterspawn. As it turned out, Sirius had taken it upon himself to share that particular
piece of information with Harry -- but it had not been weaponised yet, so that, at least, was a small
and tentative comfort.

“I’m not a Death Eater,” Regulus replied with a quiet finality to his tone. “Seventeen was quite
some time ago, and suffice to say I thought better of it.”

"I just don't get it," Harry said, screwing his face up out of something like frustration. "With Snape,
or Lucius Malfoy, you can tell. They're cruel and angry. You don't seem to have a problem with
Hermione either. Were you that different?"

Regulus crinkled his nose, the fringes of a familiar burn crackling at the back of his mind. “I was
an angry fifteen-year-old,” he admitted, voice tightening a little. (And sixteen-year-old...and
seventeen-year-old...) “I’ve never had a stomach for cruelty, but it was a very...complicated time,
to say the least.”

“But isn't that what a Death Eater is? Someone who tortures and kills people because they think
they’re better than them?” Harry seemed to mull his own question for a moment. “Or because
they're told by Voldemort and they think they have something to gain out of it.”

In that moment, Regulus was grateful for the cat in his lap, providing a distraction for his hands and something reasonable to look at that wasn't another person. Such a view of the Death Eaters was a simplistic one, blunt and staggering in its matter-of-fact nature as it landed its blow. 'Someone who tortures and kills...' -- even now, Regulus could feel Bella’s expectant gaze burning into him: the derisive shame she wielded as a weapon when he hesitated, the freely-given praise upon compliance.

'You are a Black...' The words echoed hollow in his mind.

“It's not always that straightforward,” Regulus responded without lifting his gaze from Crookshanks, who was getting a very dedicated scratch beneath his ears at the moment.

“Why did you?” Harry asked, bluntly.

A simple question -- an expected question, even -- yet Regulus could feel the words connect a dizzying blow. ‘Why’...There were so many reasons why, muddled and crushed together, but it was in that moment that Regulus realised no one had ever asked him before. Everyone who had ever known he was a Death Eater had possessed the context to draw their own conclusions -- Sirius included, it seemed, given his relative avoidance. To untangle and articulate that time in his life brought forth a flood of unsettling memories, and caution would warn any attempt to communicate candidly with these unknown and untested strangers -- yet the urge to express it (even to Potter’s surprisingly bearable son) was a spark flickering to life.

“There is not an easy answer... When Sirius left...” Regulus hesitated, trying to formulate the thoughts into something neutral enough to express to a Potter but true enough to ease that knotting frustration in his chest. “There was a sort of...shift. A blemish everyone could see, even if most knew better than to talk about it. His behavior was incendiary, even before he left, but he was the second in our generation to betray the family and flaunt all expectations. One is a shame - but two starts the suggestion of a pattern...”

Regulus shook his head, his posture tensing. Uncomfortably, he continued: “The balance had been upset, and it was my responsibility to restore the environment, mend the fractured family, meet extremes with extremes, I suppose... And honestly, I was angry at Sirius for abandoning me to frolic with his friends while I had to clean up his mess.” Feeling the prick of the memory's bitter edge, he paused to take a centering breath and shook his head. “But there is no single answer, I'm afraid. Frustrations, expectations, responsibilities, restorations... I could not see past them for a long time. My understanding was naive, or idealistic, or misguided - however one wishes to phrase it, I suppose it comes down to that understanding being incomplete. In the end, I could not condone my situation as it was, much less sustain it. But that, too, is rather more complicated than any one factor can explain.”

There was a moment of silence punctuated only by the crunch of toast and the low purr of the cat. Harry suddenly seemed terribly interested in the contents of his plate. "The weight of fixing everything on you when you don't know what you're doing, I wonder what that would feel like," he mumbled into his chest. He seemed to regain some of his voice after that. "But you did escape, didn't you?"

Sparing a glance to Harry, at last, Regulus offered a subtle tip of the head, though it did not seem the boy was looking anymore. “I did, when I was seventeen. I left the night I came home from my seventh year at Hogwarts, actually. Didn’t say anything, just left while everyone was still at our graduation celebration.” With a slight contortion of his face, Regulus shook his head and pressed his fingers firmly to his temple as a stab of guilt struck in his chest. “Not my most polite moment,
but I am alive enough to feel guilty about it, so I suppose that is better than the alternative.”

"Do you think it'd have been more polite to get murdered?" Harry asked.

"Mm...It probably would have been more polite, yes," Regulus said dryly, dropping his hand with a weighty sigh. Some murders might be messy, but he suspected his would have been relatively straightforward to minimize the burden on his remaining family. (Would it have been Bella? Would he have even known?) The thought hovered darkly in his mind, irreverent though his comment had been, and again he looked uncomfortably at the ginger cat in his lap. "Dissenters who have been eliminated are less argumentative, and by extension more polite," he added in sardonic tones, and a sharper stab of pain cut in his chest. (His family, certainly, would not have wanted him dead, and yet...)

Regulus thought of his mother's wailing shrieks, sick with a nagging feeling: “And a dead son is arguably preferable to a living traitor, I suppose.” In ways, it was better not to know.

"It's not! It's not preferable!" Harry insisted sounding more than a little upset at the idea, dropping the plate to the table harshly enough that it clattered against it. "I don't believe that. Parents, they're supposed to do the best for you, and they love you. They don't want you dead. Why would anyone choose Voldemort over their own son?"

Jolting at the clanging plate, Regulus was uncomfortably quiet for a lingering moment -- until again he spoke in mild, if strained, tones. "Some things are complicated beyond the matter of the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters..." Blood, legacy, appearances, expectations; he did not feel as though he was a true blood traitor, but would his family have been able to make such a subtle distinction between traitor to blood or traitor to the Cause? "I've wondered countless times if she would have forgiven me, but as it turns out, it's a moot point, and I will never know," he said, wrangling to make his voice more light than he felt -- or at least less downtrodden.

"But it seems I have gotten away from myself -- I did not intend to be quite so forward on the matter," Regulus added after a beat, though for every thing he'd said, there were several more he had withheld, for all the complications at play. "I suppose it is not very cheerful breakfast conversation."

"S'okay," Harry shrugged, before pressing at his forehead with a wince. "I don’t blame you. I asked and I was in a lousy mood anyway."

"Headache?" Regulus asked probingly, eying Harry's forehead-soothing, "Or just the threat of expulsion? Though I suppose they don't have to be mutually exclusive."

"Yes," Harry said, then shook his head. before looking as if he really wished he hadn't. "Er, no. I mean, it's nothing new, just the scar, happens all the time now Voldemort's back."

Lifting his brow, Regulus made a soft 'hm' sound, tucking away the thought for later. Everyday pain from an everyday scar wasn't interesting, but anything related to the Dark Lord was. His own 'scar,' the Dark Mark still etched into his arm, had begun to burn every time it was activated for a call to meet or a call to arms. The Dark Mark had been a very intentional piece of magic, serving a very specific function, but he had not welcomed its return, all the same. "Sounds unpleasant."

"Yeah," Harry agreed distractedly, attempting to stifle a yawn and just deciding to give in. "I'm going to lie down again before someone leaves and wakes your mum up again."

"A wise course of action," Regulus granted, and as Harry shuffled out of the study, Regulus once again opened his book hoping -- if only a little -- to drown out his reeling thoughts.
With every fiber of his being, Regulus had despised James Potter, and between the unflattering Triwizard newspaper reporting, the shouting he’d heard floating up upon the boy’s arrival, and his own preconceived notions about a spawn of Potter, Regulus’s expectations had been thoroughly unmet. On more than one occasion during the two brief conversations he had experienced with Harry Potter, Regulus had expected that arrogance to surface -- thought he could see it coming -- but while the boy did seem to be a blustering and tactless Gryffindor, on the whole, it was not as terrible as he would have thought.

Somehow, it seemed a little bit like losing, to tolerate Potter’s son, but with a degree of reframing, Regulus reminded himself that at least Potter wasn’t managing to ruin his life from the grave, and small though the comfort was, it proved something to rest in. (Severus, regretfully, seemed to be having less luck on that front.) Regulus could not resolve his frustrations with the departed James Potter any more than he could his mother, and Harry was a poor substitute when he refused to be intolerable enough to hate.

The Dark Lord’s return had locked in a more pressing grudge -- and that return continued to pique his interest, the more Harry and the others described the events of that had occurred at Hogwarts in the last few years. The Chamber of Secrets and its monster (a basilisk, of all things), Death Eater professors, the philosopher’s stone… Tom Riddle’s diary, manifesting differently from the locket, yet seeming to serve the same function. It had even been destroyed in a manner that was not so unlike his own experiments. Harry’s zigzag scar was yet another curious thing -- and its recent painful spikes earned a notation amongst his other Information of Interest, shortly after their conversation had concluded.

Days had passed since then, and strangely, he thought he might almost be adjusting to the additional teenager running about the house. Regulus was uncertain if Harry had told the other kids about his prior allegiance, but their behavior towards him remained unchanged, so he suspected Harry had not, at least for now. The degree to which Harry could keep a secret was yet untested, but he had not failed miserably in the first week, so that was another tentative point in his favor.

Preliminary investigations into Albania had failed to spark any connection, but if there was in fact anything of significance, it may only surface from interactions with relevant parties. Perhaps a visit would be enlightening, but without even a city to target, it was more likely to waste time than serve much benefit, if the Dark Lord had already returned to Britain. Locating the text on genealogies was the next step, locking in the connection between Slytherin and the Riddles. That particular book had been absent from the study recently -- strange, when the subject did not seem to appeal as much to this crowd of individuals, but it was possible Kreacher had taken it for some reason or another… or perhaps it had been gone, some time before.

A great deal could happen in sixteen years, as he was learning quite thoroughly.

When at last Regulus did locate the missing book, he could not decide if the reader in question was the last person or the first person he ought to have suspected to be browsing a book about wizarding lineages. Curled up in the study was Hermione, her attention fixed intently on the page.

“Interested in genealogy, are you?” he asked.

Hermione looked up, startled. She looked a mix of embarrassed and proud and didn't seem to know which direction she ought to lean in. "It's really interesting," she admitted. "I've heard about some of it in passing, of course. Ron explained most magical families aren't pure-blood and of course, last week, when Sirius was explaining some of your family tapestry to Harry, he mentioned that most of the names had died out. According to this, they didn't really. Names simply changed because the last descendant was a girl who changed her name, so they're still around, just with a
different name. It looks as if the Hufflepuffs became the Smiths, for example. We've one of those in our year."

"The bloodlines themselves have not necessarily died out, but the names have," Regulus corrected. The House of Black was dwindling dangerously, itself, with only himself and Sirius still possessing the name, throughout the entirety of their bloodline. Just thinking about it made him anxious, but he had aggressively avoided thinking about it for over a decade, and now was hardly the time to change that. While the war still raged, there was no feasible solution in sight, however upsetting the thought might be.

Her mention of Hufflepuff seemed a perfect opening to ask about Slytherin, or even about the Founders in general, but questions begot questions, and he was not certain he wanted to answer them just yet when the information was so accessible in his own library. Instead, he nodded with a genuine look of interest. "I don't like to see name after name dying out, but the bloodlines, at least, can live on. Lineage is a fascinating thing."

"Definitely, from an outsider's perspective." Hermione nodded in agreement. "There does seem to be some inconsistencies, but it's still interesting to consider all of these people who were students hundreds of years before us. I wonder if Hogwarts keeps a detailed student record."

"I don't know if Hogwarts is so committed to its record-keeping, but I would not be surprised if such a thing existed. There is a lot to learn from history -- patterns, successes, mistakes, the people who made them. I had our entire family tapestry committed to memory by the time I started at Hogwarts," Regulus said thoughtfully as he folded his arms loosely.

"That probably depends on whether or not the information is accurate," Hermione mused, before picking up one of the other books to one side of her and showing it with a rueful smile. "This one seems to think I'm responsible for a squib. Of course, personally, I think it's far more likely that magic can be genetically recessive, only occurring when two people have the right set of inherited characteristics, so it's just far more commonly passed on if one or both parents are magical themselves. But arguing with books has gotten me into trouble before, and I just don't have the medical background. Did you want the book?"

Automatically, Regulus's nose crinkled, and he could feel an argument dancing on the tip of his tongue. Every well-rehearsed retort rose in his mind like air to his lungs, but debating the finer points of purist ideology would gain him nothing but suspicion in such company, and he had quite enough of that already. Instead, Regulus swallowed the words, trying to brush the subject of blood back to the dustier corners of his mind.

"I did, actually, if you are finished with it," he said instead.

"It's not important, I can read it another time." Hermione said, closing the book over and reaching it over to him. "There's always next summer."

Regulus took it in hand with a brief word of thanks, forcibly turning his mind back to the task at hand. There was a time when he could have rattled on for hours -- or rather, when he would have, for her certainly still could -- but it was strange, how uncomfortable it all felt, now. The only real security, now, was his research and their related goals, and it was that process that he knew he needed to focus on. With this book, he could trace the Dark Lord's -- Riddle's -- lineage. Perhaps it would be useless, extraneous knowledge; or perhaps it wouldn't be.

Some days later, Sirius was on his way down from feeding Buckbeak when something distinctly Hermione-shaped blurred up the stairs and bolted full speed into the study. If something was
wrong, it was unlikely to be the study she would run into, so it must be something else.

Actually, knowing Hermione, a book would be exactly where she would run to in a time of crisis.

He poked his head into the room to find its usual resident in his usual position, except he had also clearly not expected Hermione to come bursting in there with Hedwig.

"Everything all right?" Sirius asked, given the frenzy.

"Oh, yes!" Hermione cried, smiling brightly and holding up a piece of paper that looked like a Hogwarts letter with a small red and gold badge. "The letters came, and I'm a prefect!"

Sirius wondered privately if there'd been any doubt she would be, but he didn't know who else she was in a dorm with, so maybe it wasn't a lock-in. "Congratulations," he said.

"Thank you!" Hermione beamed, before bending down over the paper on the table without sitting down. "I'm just writing to Mum and Dad to tell them. At least getting prefect is something they'll understand. Mrs. Weasley is so excited, Ron got one too!"

That had been a little surprising; he didn't know why he'd expected Harry to get it. Sirius himself hadn't been a prefect, and neither had James, and Harry was a lot like his father. Getting up to too much mischief to really worry about enforcing rules.

(Of course, Lily had been, so perhaps that's where he'd thought of it.)

“I’m sure she’s thrilled.” He had tried to bury the sour feeling he’d had towards her since her unwelcome commentary, but there was something about this house that made anger fester and linger beyond its due.

"They're going to make butterbeer, and a cake! You must come down," Hermione said. Nothing was going to dampen her enthusiasm in the slightest. She was practically vibrating from it. "We’re celebrating! Harry's not expelled, we're prefects, and it looks like the Headmaster finally found a new Defense teacher!"

While all of that was good news, it also brought home the grim reality of the house emptying, save for the crossover of the Order. Molly and Arthur would return home, Remus was constantly on guard duty because he had some idiot idea that because he didn't have a job, then he should take more shifts, and for the first time in a very long time, both he and Regulus would be left in the house alone. He didn't know how well he would handle that. Left to their own devices, they had gotten on, but there were twenty years and too many things left unsaid, so there was a continuing awkwardness to their interactions that he didn’t know what to do about. It made it easier, having everyone else around.

"Let's hope this one isn't a Death Eater too," Sirius said, finally.

“Along the current pattern, there is a fifty-percent chance,” Regulus said wryly, looking up from his book.

Sirius bit back a comment about suggesting he try out for the role when this one ended up having to leave for one reason or another over the next year, but given that he was pretty sure Hermione didn't know about his illustrious past, he let it go. Besides, the only thing worse than being stuck here together was being stuck there alone.

"It'd be more surprising if they lasted past the year," Sirius shrugged.
"That would be a first. It was like that even when we were in school, a new professor every year," Regulus remarked with a shake off the head. "Terribly inconsistent from an educational perspective."

"We did clean up on the betting pool though," Sirius commented, losing himself to brief nostalgia. "I'm going to see if Harry's started packing."

Offering a nod to Sirius as he wandered out the door again, Regulus turned his glance to Hermione, who was folding up her letter over by the desk. He seemed to hesitate for a moment before settling to speak. "I did not wish to interrupt earlier, but congratulations, once again, on becoming a prefect. You seem to be the type who will wield it well."

"It's a lot of responsibility," Hermione agreed, nodding as she scribbled furiously. "And in OWL year too! With S.P.E.W. and studying, it's going to be a real challenge!" She looked absolutely thrilled at the prospect. "I'm glad I'm not much of a flyer. I enjoy watching Quidditch, of course, but I don't think I'd want anything else on my plate. I'd need another time turner!"

"I can speak as a former quidditch-playing prefect that it was quite a lot to juggle, particularly during exam years," Regulus remarked, though the remainder of her comment had been notably more curious.

"I suppose that does let Harry off the hook for that," Hermione commented distractedly, still writing at a fast pace.

Lifting his brow, Regulus continued in a leading tone, "When you said 'another' time turner…?"

"Oh, I would have thought Sirius would have said something considering. I was entrusted with a Ministry time-turner, so I could take all of the electives. It was quite helpful, but too much responsibility."

"The topics of our brotherly discussions vary quite considerably," he said wryly, "But to another point, I am admittedly also unfamiliar with 'spew' -- is that a new club?"

"It's S.P.E.W, not spew. Society for the Protection Elvish Welfare, I started it last year after I saw Mr. Crouch's atrocious treatment of Winky. I was going to put Stop the Outrageous Abuse of Our Fellow Magical Creatures and Campaign for a Change in Their Legal Status, but it wouldn't fit on the badge." Her quill came to an abrupt stop, and she looked up finally.

A look of recognition dawned on Regulus's face as she spoke, and his mouth turned slightly downward at the mention of Winky, but he waited until she had quieted to remark: "The house-elf society -- you mentioned that in a note awhile back, yes? How is she? Winky, that is."

Hermione looked pleased and nodded, before coaxing Hedwig over and giving him her letter. "She seems to be doing better," she said. "Dumbledore gave her job at Hogwarts."

Regulus lifted his brow and nodded thoughtfully -- 'jobs' for house-elves were typically used in the looser sense of serving a family, but if he recalled Hermione's impassioned letter correctly, then she meant a literal job, wages and all. "I'm glad to hear she is doing well," he responded genuinely. "Mr. Crouch was an atrocious person, so I am not surprised he was atrocious to Winky, as well."

"It's a start," Hermione said, with a tone that indicated she felt this was only the beginning of things that should happen in regards to Winky, or perhaps house elves in general. With that, she took a step back towards the door. "I really ought to let Hedwig go and make sure my own trunk is packed. Do join the celebration if you want to, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley really are lovely and the
cakes are always wonderful.”

Regulus did not expect himself to accept the celebration invitation -- after all, civil though they all were, these people were not exactly his friends -- but he found himself wandering downstairs in the general direction of the kitchen, nonetheless.

Over-earnest though Hermione seemed to be, and uncomfortably complicated though it was to have a non-antagonistic interaction with a muggle-born might be, her respect for house-elves was admittedly refreshing. He had only met Winky once on his single visit to the Crouch abode, but she had been a sweet elf, and though Barty had doubted the sincerity of Winky's devotion, Regulus liked to think it was true. The desire was rooted in some level of self-interest, perhaps, for it came down a deep need to believe Kreacher's devotion was as real as he thought it was, in turn. (Some would assert that it was not love freely given, but few had lived through the sort of shared experience he and his elf had endured.) With a creeping shiver, he waved the thought away.

Regulus was passing the drawing room when he heard a bone-chilling scream. There was a certain frantic devastation to it, jarringly different from the normal shouts hurtled about the house by living and dead alike, and though he thought he could hear what he assumed was the pattering of footsteps coming from the lower staircase, he opened the door to a barrage of wracking sobs and a floor of dead bodies with ginger hair and lifeless eyes.

For a horrible moment, panic thundered swift in his chest (had something happened? was there something that dangerous in the house? could they have-), but as he took a few hesitant steps forward, the bodies stirred with slow, almost convulsing movements, and all at once, their fair skin slackened and swelled like an over-soaked sponge -- blazing red hair thinned and paled to sopping, stringy bunches -- lifeless eyes sunk eerily into their skulls.

Molly Weasley's wails intensified, clanging relentlessly in his ears, but the dripping bodies had fixed their attention on Regulus, moving forward with a jagged, almost pulsing crawl.

(Inferi- they were inferi-)

Cold terror clenched in his chest, and Regulus's breath caught tight in his throat as he stumbled a step backwards again, head shaking with a slow steadiness that seemed almost independent of his control. He could feel the ghost of clawing fingernails at his throat and arms, but there was nothing touching him- only crawling-

"They will not come near Master Regulus!" Kreacher shrieked, his raspy voice thick with feeling as he bolted from the cabinet he had been rummaging through, "They will not lay a hand!"

The shake of Regulus's head was more purposeful as the elf swerved in near-reach of a flailing arm, and with his own arm sweeping out like a barrier, Regulus fell to his knees -- as if by instinct - - to re-route Kreacher's path. Without pause, the house-elf grasped at Regulus's arm, face contorted with despair as a loud crack pierced through Molly Weasley's sobs.

“R-r-riddikulus!"

The sound of Molly Weasley's shaking voice snapped Sirius out of his frozen stance. There was a crack and the creatures that had been pulling themselves along the floor changed again and the breath went out of him at the sight of James, no, Harry spread lifelessly on the ground. But he wasn't. Harry was two steps away from him, staring at his own corpse.
To his left, he heard Remus. "Riddikulus!" Again, there was a crack and the body lifted into a silvery orb before vanishing.

It was a boggart, Sirius realised with his heart in his throat. They'd found it a couple of days ago, and he'd forgotten about it. Molly must have come to deal with it herself and gotten overwhelmed. That was the first rule of handling a boggart: You don't do it alone. He dragged his eyes from the spot on the floor where the body had lain to see Mrs. Weasley sobbingly asking them not to tell her husband, that she was being silly, and she was just having nightmares about what might happen to the children.

He could understand. He'd been having the same nightmare about Harry for a while now, but he hadn't encountered a boggart full on. There'd been one in the potting shed where he and Remus had been staying before this, but Remus had insisted he had it handled. Given his deft handling of this one, Sirius had no doubt that was true. He didn't want to know what his own was. Mrs. Weasley's had been hard enough to look at. Remus, to his side, was attempting to reassure her that they would be alright (which he didn't know), and even if they weren't, they took care of each other. Even if something awful happened. He felt a sudden upsurge of affection for his old friend.

"But what were those things?" Harry asked.

That, Sirius did not have an answer for. They'd piled into the room upon hearing the commotion to see some bloated, bony creatures clawing on the carpet for only a moment. By the time he'd registered his own surprise, Kreacher had blown out, grabbed his brother, and apparated. The more he thought about it, the more uncomfortable he was. Regulus had always been tightly wound but also forcibly controlled every emotion, and to see blind fear even for a few moments was jarring. But what the hell were they? Kreacher clearly knew; he knew enough to get him out of the room.

"If I were to hazard a guess, I'd say inferi." Remus answered for him, giving him a look of curiosity. "Childhood fear?"

Sirius shook his head in response. He had no memory of it ever coming up when they were little. It had been at least twenty years since he'd seen what his brother’s boggart was, and it had not been inferi then. If he were to hazard a guess, he'd suggest this was more likely to be first hand experience. Perhaps he'd seen some during his Death Eater summer holidays, and they'd left an impression on him, but something itched at him that it looked more intense than a simple observation. While Regulus had always been a bit soft, he didn't think he was sensitive enough to have that intense a reaction to something without a good reason.

Sirius slipped out of the drawing room while Moody gave it the once over. He wanted to find where that damn house-elf had moved Regulus to, but he had a pretty good idea it was only as far as his own bedroom. It was just another piece of the puzzle, frustratingly incomplete and getting more worrying with every piece.

As he hit the top landing, he decided he needed to get to the bottom of this one way or another.
Shakily, Regulus slumped back against the door of his bedroom, Kreacher still clinging to his arm until he pulled the limb loose, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes, as if to blacken out his thoughts just as simply as he could his sight.

“They weren’t real,” he muttered, though it was unclear if he was reassuring himself or Kreacher.

Nothing dangerous remained, safe in his room, yet Regulus’s thoughts now thundered with the silence of the cave; the way the water had stirred around his boat as it cut across the surface; the lake of the dead staring eerily upward from the black water. That poisonous potion-- those gutting terrors-- the clammy grapples of countless inferi as they dragged him into the water--

Curling in on himself, Regulus tucked his head between his knees, fingers tangling securely into his hair as he reminded himself to breathe. “They weren’t real,” he repeated, “Pull it together.”

-Breathing in-

(Over a decade- it had been over a decade, and yet-)

-Breathing out-

“Old Kreacher could not bear it if something happened to Master Regulus…” the house-elf was saying, his raspy tones now more mournful than frantic.

Kreacher’s voice pulled his reeling thoughts back from the lake, if only for a moment -- back to the quiet stillness of his bedroom, where the ghosts seemed to reside primarily in his mind. Lifting his head again, Regulus looked to the house-elf, whose face had dropped its impassioned determination in favor of a certain gloom.

“I’m sorry I left you- after all of that-” Regulus started, trying to form the clamoring thoughts. (It was his fault Kreacher ever experienced that awful cave, why Kreacher was left alone, why his mother was left alone-)

Already, Regulus could hear floorboard creaking on the other side of his door, and Regulus pressed his fingers firmly to his temple and shook his head, as if the silent protest would somehow banish the oncoming visitor.

A voice came from outside his door, tentative but firm. “Regulus?”

(Sirius- of course it was Sirius-)

Lurching horror mixed with humiliation as Regulus realised his brother must have been among the footsteps he’d vaguely noticed behind himself. To deal with the lingering haunt of the inferi was terrible enough when it was isolated to the confines of his own head, but outside of his head where others could witness...

"I don't want to talk about it," Regulus responded quietly, forcibly steadying his voice.
There was a beat of silence before an audible sigh. "You don't have to say anything, but I still want to see you."

For an uncomfortable moment, Regulus said nothing, letting his head fall back against the door with a soft thump. He did not want to see his brother's expression any more than he wanted to talk about the horrid, dripping monsters that had appeared in their drawing room. Steeling himself, he responded, "I'm fine. I was just startled."

"A fact I'd like to verify for myself," Sirius continued, stubbornly.

In his brother's tone, Regulus sensed the implication that this would not be left alone until at least some measure of compliance was satisfied, and going back and forth through the door was not so much better. If anything, resistance would probably only cause Sirius to dig his heels in further, if history was to be acknowledged. Releasing a huff, Regulus pressed his lips to a line, pausing just a moment longer before forcing himself to stand, shifting slightly to allow Kreacher to move out of the way. Though his mind still burned with the unsettling sight of the inferi, Regulus maneuvered his expression into one of relative neutrality -- save for the subtle flickers of a strained, shaken tension behind his eyes -- and without further word, he opened the door.

Sirius scanned over him, as if looking at his brother would give him some kind of answers to the burning questions that were no doubt forming. Whatever he saw, he must have deemed it satisfactory, because he nodded. "The boggart's gone," he said, finally. "Remus dealt with it."

Regulus nodded, though he did not meet his brother's eyes as he crossed his arms loosely across his chest. "That's good. Boggarts are dreadful creatures."

"You used to be a better liar, you know. You look awful," Sirius said flatly without much accusation to it. "You don't always have to face everything by yourself. There is nothing wrong with being frightened, and despite a decade and a half of being told otherwise, no one will think less of you for it." With that, he huffed through his nose. "Holler if you find any more of them."

Crinkling his nose, Regulus stood stone-still. On the contrary, his experiences had been, for the most part, best dealt with alone -- but ironically, in light of his brother's implication, it was in facing the inferi that Regulus had never been alone. Sparing the slightest, tipping glance at Kreacher, he felt a small rush of warmth, and some of the edge softened in his eyes, even as he flicked his gaze back toward the floor between himself and Sirius.

"I wasn't by myself," Regulus responded, his voice taking a certain weight to it, "but I will be certain to alert you, should I stumble across any more boggarts."

"I thought asking why Kreacher chose to apparate you out would fall under talking about it," Sirius pointed out. "I know never want to talk about things, but I was attempting to give you a break. For now, at least."

Regulus shifted, lifting his eyes to meet his brother's. In truth he had not actually expected Sirius to accommodate his request, but with the pointed confirmation, some amount of tension loosened from his shoulders, and he nodded. "I appreciate that."

"You have time," Sirius shook his head, looking away from him with a snort. "I'm not going to make you talk when you're upset. I'm not that big of a twat. I just wanted to-" He stopped suddenly, then shrugged. "Doesn't matter. Do you want to know when we're going tomorrow?"

There was a certain discomfort in the air, and it was with increasing skill that they stepped delicately through the issue and landed safely on neutral ground once more. Seizing the
opportunity for a subject-change, Regulus nodded, though he knew it was not so much an invitation to see off their swarm of Gryffindor students so much as it was an indication of when the house was likely to become very loud and then very quiet, once again.

"Alright," Sirius said, giving him one last look over and seeming to decide this would be all he got out of him tonight, since he took a step backwards and chugged down the stairs.

The house descended into a state of frenzied chaos, the likes of which Sirius had never seen before. After a tense night, it didn't seem like anyone had gotten a decent amount of sleep, so everyone was running around trying to get ready. He'd fallen asleep in the study, unusually empty with Hermione taking an early night and Regulus still locked away upstairs looking like death warmed up after whatever the hell happened last night. It’s possible he shouldn’t have left it alone, but Regulus had a long-standing habit of leaning against doors when he was genuinely upset, possibly looking for or waiting for permission to get the hell out and he could see the shadow underneath it on the other side. He didn’t want to push. He would do better to get some rest. However, it seemed Molly Weasley was giving his old Mum a run her money this morning so it didn’t look like anyone was going to rest much longer.

Sirius almost walked right into Hermione, who was running around with Hedwig. "What happened?" he asked, wincing at the sounds.

"Fred and George charmed the trunks to go down the stairs while Ginny was going down, so she fell down them," Hermione said as she dashed off (he assumed) to pick up yet another book to add to her own luggage.

"...SHE COULD HAVE BEEN SERIOUSLY INJURED, YOU IDIOTS..."

"...CHILDREN OF FILTH, DESECRATING THE HOUSE OF MY FATHERS..."

That probably meant Ginny was fine, and if Molly hadn't set her off, it was possible Tonks was here as well. Sirius tried to stop the flutter of anxiety about taking them to the platform, because they would be fine. Harry had the guard, and Dumbledore be damned, if this was the last he’d see him for several months, he was going to see him off himself. It was already getting late, that much was true, but Sirius had said he'd say when everyone was going and he was likely up already, so Sirius bolted back up the stairs with stiff limbs.

Forgoing the usual niceties or creative avoidance thereof, he just turned the handle and opened the door a crack. "Are you up?"

From his desk, Regulus looked as if he was going to say something, then sighed instead. With a slight twist of the torso, he turned his attention to the cracked door and settled temporarily. "I am. I take it the chaos downstairs is a sign that you are all about to leave for the train?"

"In a minute, we're running late." Even in Sirius' youth, they always seemed to be running a little late, so perhaps it was just the general state of being for leaving for Hogwarts. "We shouldn't be long. Everyone's heading home after this, so it should just be me and Tonks on the way back."

"Duly noted," Regulus said, though a bit of a strange expression flickered on his face before he smothered it again. "Don't get arrested, while you're out."

"WILL YOU LOT GET DOWN HERE NOW, PLEASE!" Mrs. Weasley bellowed from downstairs.
Sirius huffed in amusement, before shaking his head. It was strange, the things you could get nostalgic about. "The more things change, the more they stay the same. Stay out of trouble." With a wink, there was a loud pop and instead of Sirius, there was a large, black dog who immediately (and literally) turned tail to flee out of the doorway.

With widening eyes, Regulus watched the dog -- *Sirius* -- scamper away unceremoniously. Shaking his head, he gave his wand a silent swish, and the door shut again with a quiet thud.

Stillness settled throughout the house like dust. Silently, Regulus walked the halls looking for possible stragglers, but each room was empty (save for the hippogriff still nestled bizarrely in his mum's bedroom), and for the most part, it looked as if every sign of their fellow occupants had been swept away and packed off. For over a month now, chaos had rattled the walls with a pack of roaming teenagers (Gryffindor teenagers, at that), but a familiar calm had settled in their wake, and for the first time since he'd awoken that first morning home, Regulus was the only human in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place.

(The only human, but not the only being.)

He found Kreacher in the first floor bedroom that had been occupied by Ginny and Hermione for some time now, removing the sheets off the beds. "Mudbloods and blood traitors, speaking to Master Regulus like equals, defiling this great house....oh how my Mistress would weep..." the elf was muttering under his breath, looking at the piling linens as if he might simply set them on fire to cleanse the contamination. "Poor Master Regulus...but the vermin have crawled away...old Kreacher will scrub away the filth..."

From the doorway, Regulus smothered a wince. The elf's consistent and altogether unflattering commentary was a point of contention in the house, he knew, and had done little to endear Kreacher to the other residents, but Regulus had not yet determined the best way to break his own complicated emotions to the elf, fierce though his loyalty was. Explanations had been scarce, the night they went to the cave, and that had been as much a protection of Kreacher as anything -- traitorous behavior was as dangerous to Kreacher and the family as it was to Regulus, was it not? As the family elf, Kreacher was still attached to his mother, too, even as a portrait, and he wasn't quite ready to instigate that debate when there was no telling what avalanche might topple down. The slower he approached the conversation, the less likely he was to spook Kreacher...

(But what time was the right time? Kreacher spoke like Regulus was a hostage in his own home, sometimes, but could he understand with the right explanation? What was the right explanation?)

Shaking his head, Regulus stepped into the room, leaning a little and catching the house-elf's attention. "Good morning."

"Does Master Regulus require breakfast?" Kreacher asked, allowing a levitating pillow to plop down on the pile.

"Breakfast can wait a few minutes. I wanted to talk," Regulus said, starting to sit down on one of the stripped beds.

"Master should not sit on that!" Kreacher objected, holding out an arm in protest. “Covered in muck...”

Regulus froze, hesitating a moment -- then shifted his weight to crouch on the floor instead. Seemingly satisfied, Kreacher resumed cleaning. A lump of guilt settled in Regulus’s stomach, but he waved it away. There was no one present to be insulted, at least for awhile. The only insult
fodder would be Sirius, for the next few months, and that was practically nostalgic.

"I just...wanted to thank you for protecting me," Regulus said, unsure if it was better or worse to tell Kreacher it had been a boggart. He did not want Kreacher think they had inferi roaming about the house, but he didn't want to insult the attempt either... Was Kreacher familiar with boggarts?

The elf paused in his task, slumping at the memory. "Master Regulus is the one who protected old Kreacher... Kind Master Regulus, dying for Kreacher...Kreacher is unworthy..."

"You aren't unworthy," Regulus interjected gently. "You've been strong, carrying on and protecting this house while I was gone. Taking care of Mum, even when she's gone..."

"Kreacher has protected the young master's secret, even when his Mistress wailed." Kreacher looked pained at the thought, and Regulus's face mirrored his expression in turn.

"You did a wonderful job," he emphasized again, an echo of the day Regulus had returned home, and he felt it every bit as much as he had for over a decade and a half. Just as it had that day, the devotion in Kreacher's eyes made his heart swell. "Sometimes secrets can protect people. Did anyone question you, over the years?" he asked, curiosity creeping into his tone.

Kreacher nodded, looking slightly more miserable. "Mistress asked if Kreacher had seen the young master... Kreacher told her he did not know. Kreacher had to punish himself later for lying to the Mistress..." At that, Regulus winced, but the elf continued, "Miss Bella and Miss Cissy asked old Kreacher too, but Kreacher said nothing about the cave, said the young master had disappeared without a word..."

"Thank you," Regulus said with a frown, "Did they ever ask you do anything else? Did they ever mention needing to hide anything else? To put anything somewhere safe?"

Shaking his head, the house-elf turned his attention back to cleaning the beds. "Old Kreacher stays in the house, just as Master Regulus instructed..."

Nodding, Regulus pressed his lips to a line. Convenient though it might have been to gain insight on another hiding place, he was just as pleased to know Kreacher had remained out of the fray from that point on, at least... safe and sound, with no sign of suspicion from those who would finished the bungled attempt on Kreacher’s life that had started all of this. "Well done."

"Master Regulus honours old Kreacher..." Kreacher said with a bow, and when he rose again, he asked, "Is Master Regulus ready for his breakfast?"

Standing again, Regulus nodded. "Breakfast sounds lovely."

As Tonks shut the door behind them, Sirius popped back into his usual form and did hit best not to deflate. The feeling had been invigorating. He'd managed to make Harry burst out laughing several times, and despite the misgivings, nothing had happened. However, there was something a little damning to watching the door shut again. The familiar feeling of summer holidays long past lingered in his mind, knowing it would be a couple of months before he could get back to where he considered home again.

But even Tonks could not linger. She had to be back at work to avoid the suspicions of her head of department, and then she had duty afterwards, but she promised to poke her head in at the weekend. Remus would be back by then too, at least for a little while before he shot off. He seemed to think it was his duty to take every watch lately. Despite it being only a couple of hours, Sirius already missed the chaos of the kids running around. He knew they had to go. Given the choice of whether...
to go or not, he would always choose to go back to Hogwarts, and Harry should have that. They all should. He shook himself, insistent upon keeping his mood up, and reminded himself that this wouldn't be forever. He'd gotten through it before. He could do it again.

However, with the house now emptied and quiet, his mind cast back to the night before. He had said he'd give his brother a little time to collect himself, but he suspected at least part of the reason for him hiding away was a sense of humiliation. Showing any level of discontent or fear had certainly not been encouraged for them growing up, and to have people he didn't know witness that must have been difficult for him. Sirius figured it might be an easier discussion to have in private. Miracle of miracles, there had been no portrait shrieking at all, so he figured Regulus may not even know he was back. It was worth a try.

Sirius was not at all surprised to find Regulus holed up in the study. 'When in doubt, find a book' seemed to be his coping mechanism. "You look better," he said in greeting.

Looking up from the text, Regulus caught his brother's eyes and nodded. "It has been a relaxing morning."

Sirius almost hesitated to ruin that. He didn't want to see him upset or frightened, but he also knew it was something he couldn't just let go either, and there were enough burning questions going unanswered between them. "You scared the hell out of me last night," he admitted.

"I did? It wasn't my fault there was a boggart," Regulus said in measured tones, though the way his eyes flicked back down to the book suggested he was being deliberately obtuse.

For an incendiary moment, Sirius considered arguing that. Given his decision to skip out of the merry band of morons that made up Voldemort's followers, Regulus hadn't been there when their mother died, and the house had fallen apart without its residents. But that probably wasn't going to get him talking. It was going to make him shut tight. Slowly, he was remembering how to navigate around him like a muscle gone atrophied.

"No," he agreed instead. "But it came from your head. What was it?"

Regulus's expression tightened subtly around his eyes and mouth, but he answered simply without lifting his gaze: "They were inferi."

So Remus had been right. However, there had been no childhood fear of them that he was aware of, and those did not look like any of the general pictures of inferi he'd seen. The most logical explanation to that was that somewhere in his Death Eater days, Regulus had encountered inferi. It was a deeply unsettling thought.

"Why inferi?" Sirius asked, trying to keep his tone neutral.

For an uncomfortably long moment, Regulus stared silently down at the page with his brow knitted, though his eyes did not move at all. Just when Sirius was preparing to ask again, Regulus found a response, vague and flimsy though it was: "I had a bit of a…negative experience with a swarm of them, there at the end," he said in guarded tones.

At the end of what? His short-lived Death Eater career? School? Where had there been a swarm of inferi? That would have made the papers, generally useless though they were. Sirius was sure he was deliberately making this like pulling out teeth to see if he would drop it. He had no intention of dropping it again. It was tough enough once.

"Is it possible to have a positive experience when it's a swarm of inferi?" Sirius asked, rhetorically.
"What the hell happened?"

"There was something I had to...take care of before leaving." Hesitation halted Regulus’s words for a beat, though he did not lift his eyes. “Something I was not supposed to know about, strictly speaking, so I would appreciate if you could keep the inferi to yourself, should you find yourself chatting with any Death Eaters, Severus included."

"I know I lie awake at night with bated breath awaiting my conversations with Severus, but I'll try to contain myself," Sirius said, flatly. There had been the ghost of an idea forming in his mind that somewhere out there, back when he’d disappeared, there’d been a group of inferi like that, perhaps as some kind of experimental force. But it would have had to be a failed experiment, given that he’d never seen them or heard of a large scale inferi attack in those two years. They hadn't looked like failures. There was also the possibility this was Crouch mucking about with dead bodies, given Regulus and his willingness to see his friend through a nostalgic lens, or even something Bellatrix would do for fun. Actually, it sounded quite a lot like something bloody Bellatrix would do. “The something wasn't the inferi?"

“I had never seen inferi before then, but no, they were not ‘the something.’ They were… more of a deterrent,” Regulus said, holding his face still. Again he paused, looking for a moment as if that would be the extent of the explanation, but with a carefully measured tone and a tensing of his shoulders, he added, “There was a small island in the middle of a lake full of them, poised to pull intruders to the bottom the moment they touched the water, and the Dark Lord had enchanted the place to block apparation… The fail-safes were quite thorough.”

Sirius had to wonder: What sort of thing requires a lake of inferi as a deterrent? Something valuable enough to either kill a bunch of people or to dig up their remains so they can act as disgusting protectors, obviously. With a start, Sirius realised what was wrong with the inferi - they were water-bloated. It was like the setting of a riddle. How do you get off an island where you can't apparate and you can't touch the water? There was something almost funny about that, given Voldemort's real name. Perhaps he has a dark sense of humour. He'd have to put up with that lot.

He was about to ask for the solution to such a riddle when another thought screeched into his brain. "You touched the water," he said, more statement than question. He had to have. If that was where Regulus had seen them, and they were underneath the water until it was disturbed, then he touched the water - but why the hell would he have done that? "Did you know what would happen before you touched it?"

Regulus crinkled his nose, nodding uncomfortably. “I did. It was originally Kreacher’s task, but the Dark Lord failed to mention he intended to drown my house-elf.” With a bitter tug at the corner of his mouth, he continued, “I had instructed Kreacher to come home safely, so he did, and his survival allowed him to explain the mystery task quite thoroughly. I presume that was not the Dark Lord’s intention.”

Sirius snapped his his fingers. "That's how you bypass it, you don't use human magic! I'll give the bastard this, he's not stupid." It was always exceptionally satisfying to figure out the way to get past this sort of thing. Of course, that just brought up a whole load of other really uncomfortable questions. "Hang on. You rented the house elf out to Voldemort, he almost kills him, and you decided to follow the same steps, despite the fact you knew your own magic wouldn't work? Were you out of your mind? Do you have any idea how reckless that is? You could have died!"

“You don’t say,” Regulus muttered dryly.

“I’m serious!” Then something matched up in Sirius’s mind. Regulus had said 'at the end', likely meaning this was the very last thing he'd done before leaving. He needed to walk around, or do
something with his hands, or something. "How are you not dead? Unless..." Unless they had literally just walked in on a reenactment, he'd just apparated him out when the inferi started to encroach. But why would they have? It brought him back to the original question. "But why did you touch the water if you knew what would happen?"

"Because the Dark Lord designed it so that touching the water was the only option available," Regulus responded, subtly smothering the creep of a shudder, neutral though his expression remained. "His intention is to kill visitors who attempt to accomplish anything of substance, so he would not leave it up to the visitor to think it a good idea to touch the creepy water."

"Sadists," Sirius said angrily, before bringing himself to a stand still. "Well, did you?"

"Touch the water? Considering it was the only way to accomplish anything of substance, yes, I did," Regulus said stiffly, storm-grey eyes still locked on the page of a book he was no longer seeing, and as his fingers found the hem of his sleeve, he rubbed his thumb to the fabric in a distant fidget. "I probably would have been killed soon enough anyway, so I thought it better that it was on my terms, doing something meaningful... I did not anticipate surviving, but I'm grateful to Kreacher for his intervention, because it started feeling like less of a good idea, once it was happening."

Sirius's mind stopped dead in its tracks. That wasn't what he'd been thinking. He'd thought perhaps Regulus just had give it a shot, screwed up, and gotten out before anything had happened or he'd done something since he plans absolutely everything down to the last letter, but no, apparently taking suicide runs ran in the family. For a moment, it seemed like his breakfast might come back for an encore, but after a few breaths, the feeling subsided, and he tried to parse what Regulus had said with some glimmer of logic.

"There are few things that are worth the cost of your life," he said slowly, more to himself than Regulus. He moved over and squatted at a crouch. "Very, very few. You didn't give Voldemort the power he had, and you were just a kid when you screwed up. I'm not saying there's not something to be paid for there, 'cause I think you know there is, but it's not your job to fix all of it when you played only a small part. You don't have to pay with your whole life for a mistake you made for a small part of it. It doesn't all fall at your door and it's unfair for it to. So don't do that again, okay?"

"It was worth it," Regulus countered with quiet conviction, and when a small flicker of uncertainty flashed in his eyes, he quashed it quite thoroughly. He paused, then, seeming to absorb his brother's words for a moment longer before at last lifting his eyes from the book to look at Sirius. "Even so, I am quite devoted to the idea of living, should it be possible to maintain."

"You might even get around to doing it for real one of these days, instead of holing up and researching yourself into a stupor." Sirius put his hand on the table and pulled himself up, with a heavy sigh. He didn't like to think there was anything worth it, truth be told, but he knew he felt some things, some people, were worth his own, so it stood to reason his brother experienced the same. Even it sounded utterly ridiculous to get that worked up over Kreacher of all things, Regulus had always been a little peculiar that way.

He wanted to ask. He wanted to know what could possibly be worth all of this. But there was also a part of him that kept to what he'd told the kids: the more you know, the more it's likely to get out; and miserably, he found that he trusted himself no more now than when he was twenty-one. Not the least was the issue that, should the Ministry admit Harry and Dumbledore are right, if he actually managed to get some semblance of his own life back, then there was the distinct problem that Regulus (while he had been young and idiotic) had done the things he'd be arrested for. Generally, it wasn't easy to get out of that - unless you had something worth it, as many had back in
the day. While the thought of it made him angry, the idea of lives gone unavenged, he wouldn't wish Azkaban on his brother now anymore than he had all those years before. Even less so now. He wanted an exception to the rule and knew he shouldn't, but damn it, if he had a way of not confronting that line of thought for awhile, he wanted to take it.

He put his hand in his brother’s hair without warning, messing with it for a moment. "You're infuriating, has anyone ever told you that?" It should have been an insult, perhaps, but instead, it felt almost affectionate.

Swatting at Sirius's hand, the tension in Regulus’s shoulders seemed to melt away. With a soft snort and a shake of his head, he responded with the smallest flicker at the corner of his mouth, “Not in awhile.”

"That's because you're actually a bit of a tosser under all of those manners and swottery," Sirius pointed out, letting some of his own tension go. They had nothing but time, at the minute, but even if Regulus was so unobtrusive you could be forgiven for thinking he wasn't there at all, it helped to know the house wasn't as big and empty and isolated as it felt. "It's one of my favourite things about you, even if it takes a while for most people to figure it out. You ought to give them the chance to. They may surprise you."

Smoothing his hair, Regulus leaned back into the armchair and responded with a certain weight to his words, simple though they were: “Perhaps so.”

Chapter End Notes

For a more detailed account of Reg researching, stealing, and surviving the horcrux, you can read no answers for no questions asked.
Chapter 12

Waking hours had quieted and stilled in the days to follow, but at night, clammy hands grappled at Regulus’s limbs, water flooding his lungs with a cold burn as the fringes of blackness glowed a sickly green. He was always breathless when he snapped to consciousness, but it was the rippling wrinkles of his emerald-shade blanket that bunched around him, not the splash of lurching bodies, however furiously his chest might thunder. Nightmares had not consistently plagued him in some time, locked away tightly in the darker corners of his mind, but that door had been yanked open without warning, and as the barriers lowered to expose the vulnerability of sleep, those hauntings had secured their foothold.

Regulus had fended them off once; he could accomplish as much again. (A clear mind, a calm mind…)

A crescent moon hung high in the sky on the fifth night, a subtle glow from beyond his window as it ducked in and out of a cloudy haze that obscured most of the London stars. Regulus did not know how long he had stared at the moon peeking out, only to dart back again in a startle. He thought of the cave, though he knew he oughtn’t -- thought of how quiet and dark it had been, shrouded in green, rather than the pale whites and yellows beyond his window.

He thought of the locket that had started it all.

Within Regulus’s wardrobe, a worn brown bag hung inconspicuously amidst the robes, cloaks, and other accessories of choice. Some of the contents had been distributed around his room upon settling back in his childhood home -- books he’d accumulated over the years, as well as the majority of his transportable potions set up -- but with those prioritized items at hand, he’d given the bag little thought since arriving. With a flick of his wand (left on the bedside table, for just such an occasion), Regulus silently called the bag to himself on the bed and cast a Lumos, brightening the contents.

The first thing he noticed was the glint of a sheathed dagger. Regulus found blades to be quite base, as far as defenses went, but its enchanted edge had been among his first (unsuccessful) attempts on the locket...a locket that rested in that same bag, and with a bit of digging, he found it, tangled up in the heavy golden chain. It had been pried open, the insides damaged and charred, not unlike the cracked (but still gleaming) surface. How desperately he had tried -- how fearful he’d been that he would never succeed --

-- and had he succeeded, really? If the Dark Lord could still return, what good had it all been?

The destruction of the locket horcrux meant one less shard of a soul for the Dark Lord to rise from, but the eerie truth of it remained: There were likely more, still, if the Dark Lord had bothered with two.

So many years had passed since Regulus had faced the demons inside that locket, heard it scream and writhe until only a husk remained. He’d been an adult, by then, holed away in France for some time, yet nineteen felt so young, looking back. He had not known what he wanted from his life, back then, standing in the wake of his accomplishment.

He did not know what he wanted now.

Dropping the locket into the bag once again, his eyes fell on a small white box, settled at the bottom of the remaining collection of bits and bobs. Photographs that other person’s life, as he’d
come think quite regularly, whenever those years rose in his mind. Rian’s friends. (Rian was not a Death Eater and had significantly fewer problems in life, after all.) Tugging the box out and cracking open its top, he could see the small handful, collected over time -- of Julien, of Emilie and Gerard and their two children -- and Regulus realised he had not thought of them since stepping foot in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, save for the owl Julien had sent in July for his birthday.

Like little charmed dolls, they were trapped within their frames, stuck in the loop of their photographs. The state of his life in France was an unknown, now -- whether Emile had found another partner for the shop, whether Gerard and Emilie's daughter would like Beauxbatons as much as she hoped, whether Julien was still irritated with the abrupt departure despite the casual birthday letter.

Closing the box again, Regulus fit it back into the bag.

They were a lifetime away, but his family, the Dark Lord, his Death Eater friends -- they were on his doorstep now.

After a week in Number Twelve, Sirius was starting to feel itchy feet again. While it had felt good at the time, running around outside made the walls of Grimmauld Place seem thicker and more overbearing than even he could remember. Remus had come back for only a night before having to run off again, this time investigating claims of an increase of dark creature attacks in Yorkshire, and aside from that, there was an eerie quiet about the place. Never had he thought he'd actually miss that bloody portrait going off every five minutes, but silence was thick and suffocating. Saturday couldn't come quickly enough; Tonks was bright, cheeky and cheerful and while he was still having a little trouble matching up the child with the adult, he liked having her around.

Then when Saturday did come, after a week without word, he received three owls. What happened to not sending too many? There was something about being a wanted fugitive that just didn't lend itself to correspondence, so he was a little surprised before he recognised Hedwig. He'd need to have a word with Harry about that; owls can be intercepted and Hedwig is very noticable. He read the short letter quickly. He knew that name from somewhere, Umbridge. She had to be foul if his mum was the only comparison Harry could make and now Harry was stuck in detention with her. He felt a pang for his godson, but detentions were at least a normal part of Hogwarts. 'That thing happening again' was undoubtedly his recent issues with his scar. He wasn't sure what to make of that one, nor how to phrase it to ask him in a way that wouldn't be caught by someone reading it.

It was no good; he would have to have a word with him personally. Or as close as they could get. The second was from Remus, written in large clear letters that he needed to stay put. "Why thank you for reminding me," he muttered, wondering what had gotten into him. The third was from Tonks herself, wrapped around a Daily Prophet and making apologies she couldn't come tonight since she was cleaning up 'the mess' with Kingsley. She said not to worry but they needed their department head not to ask any funny questions. Sirius was starting to wonder what he was missing. He opened the paper, scanning past the entertainment news and did a double-take when he saw his own name. Someone had tipped off the Ministry that he was back in London. All of a sudden, the letters made sense; Kingsley would have to explain why he was focusing internationally if there was a tip off in London.

Sirius swore loudly. Someone must have seen him, someone who knew. That was the problem with half the bloody Death Eaters now having children going to Hogwarts, and bloody Wormtail (who would be extremely bloody by the time he was through with him) had told them everything.

Then something else caught his eye and his stomach lurched. That explained why Sturgis hadn't
shown up as part of Harry's guard: he'd gotten caught! Sturgis always did have the nervous energy of a jarvey on espresso. Six months in Azkaban, *damn it*, this was getting too hard too quickly again, and the Ministry was uncomfortably close.

He swore again, uselessly.

Just like everything else he seemed to do lately.

Sirius spent the next couple of nights in a sullen mood. When one of his Great Uncles had commented about having thought the sulking teenagers had left, Sirius'd nailed the portrait with a paperweight and cracked it. That just made the old bastard complain more loudly, so he'd decided to go stay with Buckbeak for a while.

To think he'd been wanting to talk to Harry all week.

This house had never brought out the best of him, but needless to say, he felt angry with himself for comparing Harry unfavourably to his father. What if that same spirit got him killed? For a moment, he thought of the boggart only a week before, the image of Harry's lifeless body before it turned into a bloated, crawling inferi, and a chill went down his spine. He'd gone in trying to reassure Harry -- it really didn't matter that they thought he was in London, they'd known he was going to Hogwarts too, and he'd gotten in and out plenty without being seen -- and instead, he was sure he'd upset him.

*Excellent job on the godfatherly duties,* he thought to himself sarcastically. None of this was Harry's fault. He had to stop himself trying to take it out on him. He wasn't his father, or his mother, and both of them would probably thump him for treating him like that.

He needed to pull himself together.

There was one thing he could at least corroborate with someone who might know. Even if he'd barely laid eyes on his brother all week, they were still (as far as he knew) on good enough terms he may even answer.

Nestled in one of the study’s armchairs, Regulus had been flipping through their *Nature’s Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy* text for some time, dutifully scribbling notes on his piece of parchment:

**Known**

\[ H- \text{ Obj. (Spec. or Ord.)} \]
\[ C: M \]
\[ D: BV \& ? \]
\[ E: Pos. \]

1. SL (X) - BV, no pos.
2. Unk. (used?) - spell (GMFTI CPOF CMPPE)
3. TRD? TR → DL (TR: UPN SJEEMF) (X - HP) - BV, pos. (G)
   \[ M (16) \rightarrow TRD \]
   \[ LM \rightarrow G \]

**Investigate**

-D: Other?
-HC? RD? GS?
Going back far enough, there had been a number of branching descendants tracing back to Salazar Slytherin, including the Sayre line that had immigrated to America some time ago, but besides Slytherin himself, there were no surnames of particular import or prestige that would likely draw the Dark Lord’s attention for anything but arbitrary reasons. The exception might be the Gaunts, dangling at the end of Slytherin’s notated genealogy. If that was Tom Riddle’s – the Dark Lord’s – immediate family, there might be other family heirlooms like the locket, or perhaps a glimpse at some other clue relating to objects of sentiment. Difficult though it was to imagine the Dark Lord having a mother and a childhood, he supposed he must have, just as they all did.

Regulus had been at it for a half-hour when Sirius strode in without warning, and Regulus was folding his parchment into a pocket of his robes just as his brother reached the chair. “Good afternoon, Sirius.”

Sirius flopped himself onto one of the large chairs, which gave a wheezy complaint about it, but no dust. It was quite the improvement. "You met him, right? " He said, launching into the conversation as per usual. "Voldemort. This wasn’t a third party sort of membership where you’ve never stood in the same room.”

Regulus lifted an eyebrow. Everyone around this place seemed to throw around the Dark Lord’s name like it was nothing, which he had at least started to adjust to, but somehow, it always seemed particularly irreverent, when Sirius spoke of him. Perhaps it was the way his brother seemed to hold some consistent air of mockery, but whatever the reason, today was no exception.

“I did,” Regulus answered, his tone slightly guarded but no less curious about where Sirius was going with such an unfiltered opener. “Why do you ask?”

"Something Harry said that's been bugging me," Sirius said, leaning his arm back and forth in a fidgeting motion. "It's one thing for an old curse scar to twinge, but I'm starting to think that's not what it is. Harry seems to be picking up on what he's feeling here and there, and I'd think it had something to do with the resurrection spell, but he's been experiencing some muted form from before that, so can't be just that." He shook his head. "Even if Dumbledore’s not worried, I'm not sure what I make of it other than I don't like the idea of him in someone else's head.."

Eyes widening subtly with curiosity, Regulus tipped his head slightly. Harry Potter’s scar had been a point of interest for just that reason, and though Regulus had assumed there would be no revelations of interest on the subject until the next time the teenagers piled back into the house (assuming they did), it seemed information -- or at least speculations -- were being laid out before him on a platter.

“Like Legilimency?” Regulus ventured, his mind turning over the thoughts rapidly. Harry had implied the scar’s pain had coincided with the Dark Lord’s return, but if his scar had bothered him prior to the resurrection -- if Harry had experienced thoughts and feelings that presumably belonged to the Dark Lord -- then perhaps the resurrection had only strengthened when the Dark
Lord went from a disembodied soul to a full-strength being once more…

Sirius nodded. "Don't happen to know if he is one, do you?"

"I do, in fact," Regulus responded, shutting his genealogy book with a soft thud and setting it on the side table tucked up to his chair.

Regulus had studied basic Occlumency under his cousin Bella’s tutelage, as much for his own curiosity as for the protection of his mind, should he be captured, but however naturally he might have taken to magic designed entirely for the purposes of increased privacy, he had not assumed it possible to invade anyone’s mind from such a presumed distance. (Was it a new power the Dark Lord had cultivated in his resurrection? Was it specific to Harry, somehow related to that strange, cursed scar…?)

"The Dark Lord is quite a skilled Legilimens, as far as I know," Regulus continued thoughtfully, "though if he is capable of transferring even just emotional states over presumably great distances, that is rather more concerning than I would have originally thought."

"Could he be doing it without knowing he's doing it?" Sirius asked, shifting uncomfortably under the weight of that knowledge. "Like an echo. The scar was an accident, it was supposed to kill him so it's feasible it's an accidental side-effect or something he didn't mean to do. It was going nuts all last year, but I didn't think too much of it at the time."

"Hmm…" Regulus started, nodding slowly. Doing so accidentally was certainly possible, as well, though it offered no comfort. If the Dark Lord could do it accidentally, there was no guarantee he could not do it on purpose… "Interesting."

Sirius frowned and looked down at himself. "No, I've just remembered. He was already having flashes of conversation last year, I think I've left the letter at Remus'. Either way, it can't be because of his blood, it's been going on too long, and Dumbledore's too preoccupied with it." He huffed a sorry excuse of a laugh. "It’s not my area of expertise, but I’m guessing it means something. There's too much of this to be considered a coincidence, not now."

"Agreed. I don’t think it’s a coincidence," Regulus responded, mind reeling steadily. "Perhaps it is not much of an immediate problem now, but it has the definite potential to be a problem… Did he mention what sort of conversation flashes they were?"

"Not to me," Sirius admitted, miserably. (At that, Regulus smothered a look of disappointment.) "I think he was worried either I'd think he was as histrionic as the Prophet thinks he is or I'd take it so seriously I'd just up and get him, consequences be damned. But as far as I know, they were just fleeting dreams. A few lines of conversation." He sat up suddenly, as if a thought had just occurred."I think he was pissed off then too, and it wouldn't be the first bit of magic to require an emotional component and not be entirely voluntary. It'd support the idea he doesn't know he's doing it, unless Snape's spilled it."

Not a completely useless train of thought, Regulus concluded, and he granted his brother a nod. "I see. That sounds quite reasonable, actually. Hopefully the spilling is being kept to a minimum,” he said, crinkling his nose -- a concern that was relevant to Regulus on more than one respect, as it was.

"I never know what to think with him," Sirius said darkly, indicating exactly what he thought of Snape and his supposed change of heart. “Hope the Headmaster knows what he's doing."

Pressing his lips to a line, Regulus nodded, mind once again drifting momentarily to Severus and
his apparent alliance with the Order. Sirius did not trust him, but Sirius never had and probably never would trust him, so that was not much to base a judgement on. Ever curious, and ever anxiety-inducing.

Dropping his eyes to the genealogy text and tracing the spindly-gold branches of its decorative tree, Regulus concluded that he’d gotten all he could out this book’s particular line of research, short though it’d been. Rising to his feet, Regulus grabbed the text and walked it back over to the shelf, slipping it into place again. “I hope the same,” he said after a moment.

“Genealogy?” Sirius asked, mildly. He was looking ever so slightly smug. “You have the tree memorised. What were you looking up?”

Dropping his hand from the shelf, Regulus twisted back around to look at Sirius. “Other people’s family trees,” he responded with a vague sort of truthfulness, as he so often preferred. “More specifically, refreshing my memory on family names that are extinct in the male line.”

Turning back to the bookshelf again without further word, Regulus began running his eyes over the titles again, looking for what may prove to be an interesting direction to explore next. Tracing the Slytherin line to the Gaunts had been quick work with the book (presuming there were no generations between, though the years seemed to match with what he might expect…)

“Is this really the time to be thinking about next generations? We have to survive this one first.” Sirius quipped, but then quirked his head curiously. “Is that really something you used to know, or is refreshing your memory a turn of phrase?”

“Some, but not the whole book of them. In this case, it was more a turn of phrase,” Regulus admitted, still running his gaze along the bookcase. (Dark creatures...advanced transfiguration...locational warding spells…)

"The war probably took out a few," Sirius said, reaching over to flick through a random book far too quickly to be reading it. "Death Eating appears to be a full time job with no time for babies. Unless there's something you're not telling me, I think only a couple of your old mates have had any."

A frown tugged down at the corners of Regulus’s mouth, eyes fixed intently on the bookshelf. “I was worried that would happen. Some ‘protection of pure blood’ this ordeal turned out to be,” he noted with a subtle edge of bitterness creeping into his tone. Curious though Regulus was about which friends had survived to parenthood, he hesitated to ask. Somehow even naming them as friends seemed like admitting they had been Death Eaters, and he did not know who had been caught or named -- perhaps it shouldn't matter when they might be enemies now, and yet…

Only one of his friends was a certainty, and the thought still made his chest tighten. “Barty was the last male in their line, so I suppose Crouch is among them.”

"Rosier too," Sirius said, counting him off on one of his fingers. "You missed Evan by about a year."

A fresh wave of distress rolled over him, and Regulus lifted a hand to rub firm at his temples. (Evan, of all people… Evan had been family, too, through their Aunt Druella-) “Were there any others?” he asked, fishing for word on the Averys and Mulcibers, who had not been mentioned either way. Sebastian Avery had a little brother, too, but there was no telling what could happen in a year or two, much less a decade and a half…

"Let's see," Sirius trailed off, before holding up his fingers to tick each of them off in turn. "It was
him and Wilkes, they got into a bloody duel with the aurors not long after Harry was born. Out of the people we went to school with? Avery's still knocking around, he blagged it with the imperius, same as Malfoy. It was a popular defense. Mulciber was arrested just before I was. He took Azkaban, though, but since he was always mental, that's not a surprise."

Regulus frowned. Evan and Wilkes dead (the latter a half-blood, but no less a friend), Barty as good as, Mulciber in Azkaban… It was no small relief to know Sebastian Avery, at least, had dodged the worst of it. Surprising, perhaps, that the imperius argument had worked, but his father had been a barrister... perhaps strings were pulled, or perhaps he'd been lucky. Whatever the reason, Regulus was glad of it. Severus and Sebastian, at least, remained from their dwindled group…

“Hopefully they will see reason, this time around, or there will barely be any pure-blood names left,” Regulus said, shaking his head.

"Or names survive, but the recognition doesn't. Harry wouldn't be counted because of his mum, the Weasleys won't because they don't like their politics, and no doubt the Longbottoms will be thought of the same way, given what happened," Sirius said, distractedly. "That reminds me, I think you were already gone by the end of July, so then you can strike the Prewetts off, as well."

Sliding his hands over to run his face, Regulus released a measured sigh. Generally speaking, the Prewetts had been a neutral family that fell to either side of the debate, depending on the pocket of Prewetts in question. His own Uncle Ignatius had been a Prewett, and Regulus had always been very fond of him. Even if the Prewett brothers in question had been fighting on the side opposite of his teenage self, Regulus thought it a terrible shame, and a terrible waste.

What would become of his own name - of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black? Even if he did have children, could he still salvage it, with all of the traitorous associations? (An anxiety-inducing thought, if he was frank.)

“So counterproductive,” Regulus said after a weighty moment of silence.

"That was a terrible pun. You should be ashamed of yourself.” Sirius managed to both smile and wince at it, and Regulus snorted softly in return. "You'd think they'd cotton onto it being a sham with Voldemort, when faced with a pure-blood or half-blood, chose the latter as the more dangerous potential enemy. If you're going to be bigoted, at least be consistent about it."

“One would think,” Regulus remarked dryly. “I don’t know if if is blindness, denial, the shroud of devotion to the task at hand… but logically, people should be more upset than they are. The war accomplished nothing for purism, save for a pile of dead bodies, including our own.”

“People believe what they want to believe,” Sirius shrugged. “Or the whole stupid idea that ‘it's your blood -- rather than your mind, your heart, or abilities -- that makes you strong’ would have died out by now."

The words settled uncomfortably on Regulus’s ears. Merit on mind, heart, ability… There was a certain draw to such criteria, and a certain gamble. Strictly speaking, it had not been his blood, really, that propelled him forth through his life since discovering the locket, but those who would lessen its importance trod so carelessly on what it was meant to represent. Magical strength and magical purity -- legacy and tradition…

_Toujours Pur._

There was little ambiguity in such a motto.
With a heavy sigh, Regulus pulled out a book on magical artifacts, in case new insights triggered more interest in its contents than the time before; and without a word, he returned to his chair.

Sirius scrutinised him for a long moment, before sitting back with a heavy sigh of his own. "I thought so," he said. "I don't understand why you're clinging to it. You know it's not your blood that makes you special, and it's a disservice to the things that do to attribute it all to genetic inheritance."

“It's not that, or more than that- it's…” (history, belonging, identity-) “…complicated.” Regulus pressed his lips to a line, cracking open the book to its table of contents without lifting his eyes.

“Because you're equating blood with family?” Sirius asked. “And all the shit that comes with that.”

“Blood is family,” Regulus said pointedly, his voice a little firmer as he flipped to a section on historical east European artifacts.

“Blood is permanent,” Sirius said, with a brittle smile. “Since when has family ever been that for us?”

Regulus’s frame tensed slightly as a sort of bristly defensiveness rose unbidden: ‘Whose fault is that?’ he thought, a question that had always been as leading as it was accusatory, though he found that he wasn't entirely certain of the answer. Instead, silence pooled thickly as Regulus sat in silence, starting at the page he had yet to start reading.

“You can't hide behind a book forever, not on this.” Sirius said, with a huff of annoyance. He stood up and strode out without another word.

You wouldn't think Sirius would be surprised to find Mundungus Fletcher in his hallway, but he'd gotten used to people setting off the portrait when they came in and had to do a double-take when Dung was looking at the weird trinkets on the side board. Trust the old crook to remind him not to get complacent.

"You want to go downstairs so we don't wake the old bird?" Dung croaked, from underneath a very fetching black veil. He must've been round one of the pubs or other nefarious establishments that he wasn't technically allowed in anymore. "I got a bit of news of your lad."

Grateful for the company, for the news and of the dirt cheap whisky that reminded him of his school days, Sirius listened as Dung described the scene from the Hog’s Head: Harry was forming their very own group to learn practical defense in full defiance of the Ministry. Sirius felt a swell of pride over their actions. Even Harry, Ron, and Hermione had found a way to fight back. Despite the antagonism of their last talk a month ago, Sirius wanted to talk to them very much. He'd send Hedwig when she came through and try again.

As luck would have it, the following morning effectively broke the silence. Remus and Molly arrived within minutes of each other, just after lunch, the former falling asleep into his tea and the latter telling him he was too thin and needed to eat before he went to bed. Despite his own desire to talk to his oldest friend, Sirius had to agree. The full moon, only a day a way, was definitely wearing on him.

"An ille-illega-illegal defence group?" Remus fought a yawn as Molly tried to get him to eat more of his eggs.

"That's what Dung said," Sirius replied. "I've got to have a word with him."
"Be careful," Remus said, while Molly harrumphed in the background showing exactly what she thought of that.

"It was fine last time," Sirius said.

Molly made the noise again, so he looked at her and tried his best to sound polite. "Anything you want passing on, Molly?"

"You can tell Ron on no account is he to join an illegal defense group!" Molly squawked, looking very formidable with the kitchen knife. "There's plenty of time for that later, and he'll end up expelled if he's caught! It could ruin his entire life."

"Duly noted," Sirius replied.

"And you can tell Harry and Hermione they shouldn't do it either, I know they want to help, but they're only children." Molly said, bringing the knife down forcefully on the toast. "I know I don't have the authority with them, but I have their best interests at heart. I want them to be safe."

"We all do," Remus promised.

Sirius nodded as well, though he privately thought it was better to be able to defend yourself than to run and hide. Molly must have a touch of the mind-reading herself, given the look she gave him.

Sirius Black, infamous for disappointing mothers since nineteen fifty-nine.

A month and a half had passed since the boggart had menaced the inhabitants of the house, and it had been a month and a half since Regulus had ventured into the offending room. (Even with the limited wandering, he and his brother had managed to consistently miss each other in passing, despite being the only two people in the house day in and day out, but that was another issue entirely. Perhaps Sirius was still sour, or perhaps he had mastered the art of respecting privacy. It was hard to say.)

The drawing room looked as it always did, no sign of sopping undead monsters. Logically, he'd known as much and would not -- on threat of death -- admit to any such overwrought avoidances, but the nightmares were starting to slink to the shadowed, hazy recesses of his mind where they belonged, and some measure of tension had slipped away with them.

His eyes first fell to the chair by the window where he had spent a great of his childhood and no small amount of his recent adulthood curled up with a book, but it was not a book that drew him to the room today. He'd been experimenting on his rings all morning and reading further into advanced experimental charm theory for the entire duration of the afternoon, and though it felt like some betrayal of expectation to say as much, for a short while, he was not in the mood to continue digging in, even after the break for supper.

Dusty and most likely untouched for over a decade now, it was the baby grand piano that his eyes fell to. There were probably doxies living inside it at this point (a thought that he could not decide if it was more horrifying or amusing), but it was in the privacy of silence that he realised how long it had been since he last played it. There had been no way he would reacquaint when there were invisible strangers around, and the visible strangers were not so much better, but when he (cast a quick cleaning charm and) sat on the bench, his fingers settled on the keys with a memory all their own. Tentatively he prodded a bar from a song he remembered more subconsciously than consciously, and the clanging notes were as out of tune as he had expected, but a little smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.
Shutting the door with a swish of his wand and casting a half-hearted muffling charm, he’d spent only a short time shuffling through old music sheets before deciding to continuing feeling through notes and the vaguest memories of many, many hours of practice -- and making something of a game out of trying to determine which notes were wrong and which were just out of tune, at present.

He could not say how long he had been sitting there when the splitting pain rippled up his forearm, startling him mid-phrase as his skin burned with a silent scream for him to return to the Dark Lord, just as it always did when the call for a meeting went out. His long sleeves were pulled down to the wrist, just as they always were and had remained throughout the duration of the summer, despite the boiling heat. (The hottest since 1976, they’d said. Cooling charms were a veritable blessing, Regulus could not help but think.) Though the sleeve covered his Mark, he knew the vivid red outline was now a writhing, smoky black, about as conspicuous as one could imagine when left bare.

Uncomfortably, Regulus permitted himself to rub at the burning Mark in the privacy of the empty room, letting out a sigh. Somewhere out there, (what remained of his living and non-imprisoned) friends and family were probably gathering to discuss chaos that could only end terribly for the rest of the wizarding world.

‘So close, yet so far,’ the saying went, but though he was back on the British Isles again, he felt as far away from them as ever.
Chapter 13

Regulus had endured quite enough of the shrieking for one morning.

For hours, Sirius had continued to set off -- and subsequently engage -- their deceased mother's portrait, and the racket had not truly subsided for more than short periods at a time all morning. Sound-cancelling spells could offer some reprieve, but it had been so long since his brother had been in this foul of a mood that he felt some measure of baffled curiosity at just how many times they could get into it before Sirius would learn to stop drawing attention to himself in that hallway.

Twenty-three times, as it turned out. It was nearly lunchtime by the time the house had experienced any significant length of quiet. Perhaps his brother was experiencing some sort of haunting, but whatever it was seemed to have settled. With a cease in the crossfire, Regulus thought it the best time to switch out a book in the drawing room before Sirius and their mother started up again.

Wasting no time, he braved the trek downstairs.

Today had been a mistake. By the time lunch rolled around, Sirius was on the next screaming match with a portrait - in this case, an ever bored Phineas who decided to inform him he was being dramatic which always helped. He should have known better. He should have spent it curled up on four legs with Buckbeak, or drunk himself into not remembering it. But no, as always, he picked the stupid option of trying to get on with his day like it was any other, and the pounding hangover wasn't improving his mood at all.

He'd wanted to at least try for some measure of normalcy, but who the hell was he kidding? Remus had said he'd try to be back by today, but who knew? People said they'd be here and there, but there was a war on and it was unpredictable. It could be another week, even two.

It wasn't that he didn't know he was in a bad mood, but screaming back had helped a little as a teenager. It just felt empty now, leaving him with a build up of emotions (griefshameangerregret) and unable to focus on anything. He'd tried sorting out the dining room, but he'd gotten increasingly frustrated with setting his mother’s portrait off about twenty times and that strong desire to set the bitch on fire was coming back.

The windows in the drawing room still needed a little work, so he hoped even the illusion of outside space would help a little. It was mindless work, which left his own mind to misbehaving and wandering back over the same events over and over in obsession. He noticed one of the music boxes on the table, undoubtedly something deeply unpleasant given he was quite sure it belonged to his great aunt and he didn't have any decent ones. He slammed it into one of the bags they'd been dragging up to the attic. If Regulus so chose, he could sort through the murderous shit when he was done trying to ignore the world outside three inches from his face. He wasn't leaving it here where someone could get hurt.

When he was done, he turned to find Kreacher reaching inside the bag.

"Drop it!" Sirius growled at the house elf.

"As he wishes." Begrudgingly and slowly, the box fell back into the bag. However, he lingered. Probably trying to find more things to stash away, then he'd noticed some of Bellatrix's pictures
had gone missing, and not because he'd smashed them. He didn't want to look at her, but hoarding the callous, sorry excuse of a person that destroyed families was not acceptable either.

"...the little traitor brats must not come back, to stain this house..."

In a flash of anger, Sirius picked up one of the ornaments and threw it. It smashed inches from the house-elf’s head, and Sirius tried to take a deep breath as he went scurrying off through the door. It was possible. Harry had stayed at Hogwarts before. They might not come back at all. There was a voice deep inside him saying that perhaps that was how it should be. James and Lily had died for his screw up; he hadn't taken care of Harry like he'd promised to; and the rat responsible was still out there breathing, so why should he get to see to see him? The thought was enough to make breathing a little more difficult, shallow and painful in his chest as he tried to pull himself together.

"Damn it," he snarled angrily to himself. He just stood in the room, wondering what the hell to do now.

Not even a minute had passed before Regulus peered around the drawing room door frame with a mildly agitated look on his face. "Did you just throw something at Kreacher?"

That was exactly what this afternoon needed: a lecture in elf care from their number one (maybe two, Hermione had gone bonkers about it) fan. "It didn't hit him," Sirius said, yanking one of the other frames down.

"That's not an excuse," Regulus said stiffly. His eyes followed the path of another portrait as it was stuffed unceremoniously into the large bag, and his mouth flattened a little more. With a leading tone, he asked, "What are you doing with those?"

"Getting them out of the way." Sirius replied shortly without turning around. He supposed he could say he can sort them out later, but the fact he would even want to see Bellatrix after she helped destroy his young life said a lot about him... but Sirius didn't want to engage him. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew he was just not going to be good company today, and the quicker he left, the quicker he didn't get something thrown at him.

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"They were fine where they were," Regulus responded firmly, moving fully into the doorway. "Just because you apparently woke up in a foul mood doesn't mean you get to go around smashing things and yanking frames off the walls. This is my house too. You could at least ask me first."

"What, you want to look at the bitch that pressured a kid into learning Unforgivables?" Sirius snapped back at him, pulling one of what he thought was a wedding photograph down and slinging it hard enough into the sack that the crack echoed around the room.

Regulus winced, holding an expression of increasing agitation as his eyes flicked down to the sack, then up to Sirius again. Though he paused for a staggered moment, when Regulus spoke again, there was a chill in his tone. "You're acting like a child, throwing things around like that. Leave them. Go clean a drapery or something, if you must."

"If that bloody elf wasn't obsessing over non-existent muggle germs, or hell, hadn't let the place end up like a tomb just 'cause it was Mum's, then they wouldn't need it, would they?" Sirius shrugged and carried on regardless. If Regulus was going to act like a priss, he was going to get treated like one.

"I said leave them on the wall, Sirius," Regulus said again, his tone a little firmer. His weight shifted slightly, as if he was thinking about walking over, but after a hesitant moment, he remained in line with the door frame. "If you don't want to see them, go to another room. We have plenty."
"Tried that this morning, but since I was ready to burn the place down to get half the portraits in
this place to shut the hell up, I thought I would try to be a bit more," Sirius let another drop
unceremoniously in, "- constructive. Did you want something, or are you just being a snot for no
reason?.

"More like destructive. You have broken two things in the past two minutes," Regulus corrected
with a crinkle of the nose, looking first to the smashed ornament then the sack with a growing
frown. "I thought you were past this, but apparently I am going to have to babysit you to keep you
from smashing things, so here I am."

"If only you were a wizard and capable of repairing things with a flick of a wand," Sirius stopped
to take a look at a photograph that he was sure once contained himself. He then threw it down with
an obscene amount of force.

At the clanging smash, Regulus winced again, then tensed his entire frame. "It's the principle of the
matter," he countered in a strained tone, eying the sack again for a moment before seeming to take
his brother's sarcastic remark to heart, if only to an extent. Pulling out his wand, he flicked the top
of the sack to a twisted close then yanked it over with a summoning spell, and with a calming
breath, he gently sat the sack on the floor by his own feet.

However, Sirius didn't seem to have noticed and proceeded to repeat the process. It was only when
it hit the floor and shattered glass over it that he jolted and noticed Regulus had taken the bag.
"WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO THAT FOR?"

Recoiling from the spray of glass, Regulus clamped his eyes closed and pressed his mouth to a
tight line for an unsettlingly quiet moment. Taking a measured breath through his nose, then
another, Regulus opened his eyes again and said with a strained sort of calm, "You've done enough.
We're finished with the drawing room for today."

Sirius took a step back, raking a hand through his hair and tried to get his mood under control. He
already knew it wasn't going to work. He couldn't leave the fucking house to bleed off the anger;
he couldn't talk about it with anyone who would understand it; and he was already feeling
completely wrung out. He was too damned old, and too damned tired for all of this. "Just...piss off,
alright?" he said through a clenched jaw. "Just go away, go back to your books."

"So you can keep wrecking the house? I know you're used to just doing whatever you please
while I clean up your messes, but I have quite frankly tired of the routine," Regulus said with a harsh
edge to the tone.

Sirius laughed, sharp and jagged. "My mess?" He indicated around the room. "Have you seen this
place? Have you seen that monster downstairs that your mother turned into? You fucked off for
twenty years and let all of it rot, and you've a problem with a few broken frames?"

'...your mother...'

"I wasn't just talking about the house," Regulus said coldly as memories best left forgotten
spiralled relentlessly. In his mind, there were different shards still flying through the air, blood and
shrieks as their father banished them to the hallway, and he couldn't make the sound stop ringing in
his ears. It had been a mess to behold, but the mess to follow had been far worse -- one of a very
different kind, the night Sirius left... Agitation was pooling thicker and thicker, even as he tried to
be rid of it, but the feeling just slipped through his fingers like scalding water. It had been a delicate
truce, a tentative bridge between them, but all at once it seemed to crack in a burst of flames.
"I'm talking about your complete disregard for how your careless actions might affect other people," Regulus added tightly.

"Must be genetic," Sirius glowered at him. "Between signing up for a murderous cult and trying to kill yourself, I don't expect you thought about whether you were effectively ending the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, what it would do to the people who cared about you. And look what happened!" He gestured outward with both hands. "What's left of your family are running lackeys for a homicidal, sadistic freak or they're screwed. Your friends are either dead, in Azkaban, or wasting away without a soul. Great regard for your actions there, wonderful job."

Fury flashed fast and hot, and before Regulus could reign in his tongue, the anger clawed its way out with gnarled fingers. "You don't know the first thing about what I was thinking, and you don't care how they felt when I left, so stop pretending like you do," Regulus snapped, his tone smoldering at the edges as wounds old and new ripped open all at once. So carefully, the subject had been avoided, had been danced around for months, but Regulus could only see Kreacher, see Barty and his parents and Evan- Could only feel the phantom of the permanent Mark on his arm, a brand he could not escape- "You never bothered to know, never even tried. All the people who expressed even a passing care in my life thought it was a great idea, me joining, and do you know why that is?" Regulus did not pause for an answer, the words burning on his tongue in some unbidden eruption before he could stop them. "Because of you. Because everything YOU did was something I had to make up for. Because you decided to unload your responsibilities onto me and frolic off into the sunset. People don't just forget, no matter how much they might act like they do, and I had to compensate for your absence every SECOND from the time you left."

Sirius froze in place for a moment, seemingly unsure of what to do before exploding back. "Becoming a Death Eater was never one of those responsibilities! And you should have known better! YOU DID KNOW BETTER! You knew it was wrong, you knew it felt wrong and you did it anyway just to please everyone else! Don't you fucking dare act like it was anything but a damned relief when I left because they had their son, their perfect heir now, and all you had to do was show enough BACKBONE not to fall for the same bullshit rhetoric that Bella did, and you could do anything you wanted!"

"No, I couldn't!" Regulus objected with a subtle twinge of desperation, feeling his grip slipping as two decades of anger tumbled out. "I could not just do anything I wanted. You humiliated us, cast doubt-" Adrenaline thundered in his veins, and with a cold wash of dread he felt fourteen again -- saw his parents wrapped in fury and icy silence, Bella with an outstretched hand and steel in her eyes. "You said you were going to FIX IT and then LEFT me there ALONE!

"I thought they at least cared enough about you not to throw you to the fucking Death Eaters! I'm sorry I assumed the precious family-" Sirius spit the word with utter venom, "- might give even a little bit of a shit about, if not you, then at least the precious name! I thought you'd be safe here and would at least give me the time of day long enough to explain what happened, but no! As fucking usual, IT'S ALL MY FAULT!"

Guilt sunk thick and heavy in Regulus's chest -- a mental sort of suffocation, if not physical -- and in the buzzing silence to follow, Regulus ran firm-pressing hands over his face from his temples down to cover his nose and mouth in a steepling barrier. ('YOU DID KNOW BETTER!') He did know better, he knew then and he knew now, but even as he let his eyes clamp shut for a moment, he saw their faces reel in flashes, his mother's and father's and grandfather's and Cissa's and Bella's -- 'You are a Black.' It should have meant safe, it should have meant successful, it should have meant carrying on the line and upholding an ancient pure-blood legacy, and he wished one of them,
any of them, had tried to deter him even for a moment-

(A breath in, a breath out- Steadysteady-)

"I just wanted to fix it," Regulus finally said, his voice quieting again, for all its emphatic strain, "just wanted to make them happy, or at least less angry, but nothing I do is ever enough, not for anyone." With another steadying breath, he let his hands fall again. (Be a Death Eater, be the best Death Eater, be the perfect heir, excel at school and quidditch and responsibilities - discover the darkest secret, steal it, sacrifice, destroy-) It wasn't even the only horcrux... "Even you have only gone back to passing a fleeting care about me because I'm doing what you want, but apparently that isn't enough either. All I wanted was for you to at least pretend to care at all about what I think about the things in this house, for you to not throw things at someone who saved my life," he said with a sort of breathless disquiet still thudding in his chest.

"You think you could make them love you?" Sirius laughed sharply. "They weren't capable of it. The only reason we were even born was because Druella couldn't push out something with a dick! And yeah, sure," he sneered, throwing his shoulders back and crossing his arms, voice dripping with sarcasm and anger. "That's why I spent eight bloody months sitting on an active Death Eater name while trying to destroy them! Because I don't give a shit about you. That's definitely why I spent those eight months wondering if I could have ended up killing you and not known it, or why every bloody time I walked into the bloody mess a Death Eater made of people, I had to deal with the fact it could have been you, and if I had the fucking balls to let it go, maybe they'd still be alive! That's why I spent years waiting to see if some unidentified body part was yours! BECAUSE I DON'T CARE! YOU BROKE MY HEART, YOU STUPID IDIOT AND YOU DON'T EVEN CARE!" He took a deep and ragged breath. "Loving someone is not something you can turn off and on with the flick of a wand or make it happen by being extra good. It's been almost twenty years, and you are still the fourteen-year-old trying desperately to make two dead people happy!"

The words were like a dizzying punch to the throat, tightening all of Regulus’s words at a choke point, then pushing them back down again. It was hard to think, hard to process his brother’s insistent argument when that gaping hole in his chest still felt so unbearably lonely. Regulus could not say how much time passed before he regained control of his voice -- maybe a minute or two, maybe only a few unbearable seconds -- but even as he did, his eyes remained fixed on the floor where a blanket of shattered glass still remained, and his brother’s words clanged relentlessly in his mind (the only reason we were born- maybe they'd still be alive- you broke my heart- trying desperately to make two dead people happy-)

"Don’t tell me how I feel," Regulus objected quietly, his frame stiffening.

"Are you telling me right now that if Narcissa offered you the chance to go play happy families, you wouldn't want to take it?" Sirius flared his nostrils. "Even knowing what you'd have to do to get it?"

Regulus’s expression pinched with a little ripple of misery. His brother wasn’t completely wrong, for if Narcissa gave the slightest hint things could return to normal, he knew he would want, desperately, and yet- “I left for a reason,” he settled firmly, forcing himself to look up from the floor.

"And I didn't?" Sirius looked away. "That's why it's okay you left, but I'm a terrible person for it?"

“You had a reason. Leaving to prance around with your friends and eschew all responsibility is technically a reason,” Regulus countered, though the bite had finally faded, leaving his tone more worn than truly combative.
"You are so full of shit," Sirius hissed back at him. "I take responsibility for plenty, I just wouldn't do it on their terms, and you're always theirs. Their side, their explanations, and their son." He placed a hand by one of the portraits, looking at it. His tone was quiet and bitter. "No wonder you want to look at them all. You don't see what I do. You see your cousin. I see the bodies and the people she left alive when it would have been kinder to kill them."

Wincing, Regulus’s eyes dropped to the floor again. He saw bodies too, and blood and rot with ringing screams, chilly words with no room for hesitation or failure -- but to toss, smash, sack the remnants of them in this house felt like ripping out his insides, and he could not settle on why, much less even start to explain it to Sirius in a way that could approach any sort of understanding.

"Not always," Regulus said vaguely, though it was unclear -- even to himself -- which statement he was responding to as he shook his head.

"What the hell was wrong with them?" Sirius asked. He sounded more baffled than angry. "Crystals of blood, pin needles that rip your skin off, sedating curses, knives everywhere...who in their right mind would raise children around that? There were other places, there was the town house, there was the Isle of Wight, there was even fucking France, but no, it has to be the place that'd kill them." He snorted. "Maybe that's the point, if you couldn't survive it, you weren't worth it and deserved it. Making you prove you were worth your own blood sounds exactly like the kind of thing they'd do. As if ANYONE can live up to that, no matter what the hell they do!"

Uncomfortably, Regulus crossed his arms across his chest, and though the thundering in his ribs and his head had finally calmed to a hollow sort of misery, that line of conversation felt no better. He did not want to insult his family - did not want to defend them - did not want to forget them - did not want to think about them - and that confusing tangle was knotted up in itself. 'Prove you were worth your own blood' -- the words struck a little too close, but Regulus gave no response, save for a subtle shake of the head.

There was a long moment of silence, heavy with tension and recoil as they stood. Sirius took a few shuddering breaths, before raising his hand to his temple. "Can you please just go upstairs and leave me alone?" he asked. "I'll add you to the list of people whose lives I've ruined if it helps, you'll make top three. I know how you like to be at the top."

The words stung, but Regulus could not find the words to argue with them, and before he truly realised it, he had backed out of the doorway. Regulus could not recall the last time Sirius had said to ‘leave him alone’ -- typically, it was quite the reverse -- but however uncomfortable it felt to leave such a bitter remark hanging in the air, he wanted to get as far away from the fight as possible before the roiling guilt rose higher.

One of the portraits in the hallway was muttering about all of the shouting, but Regulus did not stop to see which one it was as he strode swiftly towards the stairs, climbing one step after another until he was slipping into his room. Letting his head thump back against the door, he pressed the heels of his hands firm against his temples, trying to fend off the waves of guilt.

'I'll add you to the list of people whose lives I've ruined if it helps, you'll make top three. I know how you like to be at the top.' At one point, Regulus might have found a miserable sort of satisfaction in it, like winning some childish blame game, but all he felt was miserable when he thought back on the argument. The thudding fury echoed dully, the shadow of an unnerving explosion that he had not felt coming on until the wall had broken down, and he did not like it. Sirius had been spoiling for a fight -- it was obvious all morning, obvious in his brother’s surly mood, but in Regulus’s mind, some invisible tension had been pulled too taut: ornaments smashing next to Kreacher’s head, his childhood environment being torn down around him…
...and accusations that felt a little too true, however vehemently he might deflect them. Joining the Death Eaters had been stupid, it had been terrible and destructive, and no excuses would bring back the people who had lost their lives because of him, whether indirectly or directly. No amount of redirected blame would douse a house on fire or cleanse poisoned water, it wouldn’t uncurse a bird or a rat or a beetle -- nothing could, and however trapped he had felt, deep in his chest he knew that no one had truly forced him. No one had placed him under the imperius curse to make him do anything, however popular the defense apparently was, at the war’s conclusion. A hot, sick feeling turned in his stomach as he strode over to his bed and curled up near the pillows, feeling far closer to fourteen than thirty-four, humiliating as it was.

‘You were just a kid when you screwed up,’ his brother had said some month ago, before this surly mood began piling up in the space between them. ‘You should have known better! YOU DID KNOW BETTER,’ his brother had said today with venom. Regulus had no idea how to read what his brother thought of him, what was sincere and what was a fleeting sentiment born of compliance, what was a snarly remark born of a Mood - what was true.

Miserably, Regulus thought that perhaps they were both true.

**Finally by himself again, Sirius fell into the chair and let his hands hold his head up. It was pounding, heartbeat still screaming in his ears, and he could feel a familiar heat on his eyelids he was struggling to keep under control. He wanted to be by himself, but the idea of going up to his old room, of seeing those house colours, those photographs, things from another life, made him feel light headed and sick. He didn't know if he wanted to break something else, scream, or sob, but nothing was going to change any of it, was it?**

**Are you happy with yourself?** Even his own internal monologue wanted to have a pop at him today. He probably deserved it. He hadn't lost control that badly in over a year, and even if he was ready to scratch and pull apart the walls, it had been jarring. But not nearly as jarring as seeing Regulus lose his own extensive grip on his emotional control and yell back. It was something he'd tried to get his brother to do a lot when they were kids; he'd laughed at him for it, how terrible he had to be to repress everything.

They'd been doing better, so of course he had to ruin it. Walburga and Orion Black might have been unfit excuses for parents, but they were right about one thing. He tended to destroy everything he touched. Shit, no wonder Dumbledore didn't want him having Harry around. That poor kid had been through enough. It was already his fault he didn't have parents. (everything YOU did was something I had to make up for) Again, other people having to pay the consequences to his actions. He hadn't meant to hurt anyone, not really. He just seemed to have a natural talent for it.

He should have known better. He should have known that their parents being more tolerant of their youngest son didn't mean they'd lift a finger to protect him, even from his own reckless teenage behaviour. (I just wanted to fix it.) No, of course they were going to dump near a millenia's worth of history and tradition on a fourteen-year-old and expect him to surpass even the highest expectations. He had never been safe, no matter what Sirius had told himself, so why did he think he was? To assuage some of the guilt of leaving him there? He could have asked, Regulus would never have said yes, and it would have been done with a clear conscience.

But Regulus was his little brother. He'd been his closest friend his entire childhood, starry-eyed and willing to go along for the ride on any adventure. The shared looks of ridicule over the dinner table, the fellow quidditch enthusiast, the first protective instinct he had -- and he'd just left him there. Sirius had known he was young and wanted to please them, and he'd still left him to fend for himself among the vipers. Can he really hold it against him that he ended up bitten by their poison?
Given the choice, when it would have been easy not to, he had still chosen to come back and face the consequences. Pride mingled with guilt and shame; no matter how much he tried to tell himself they were just kids, it didn't ring true. He'd seen the mess his brother had been in at their father’s funeral, and he'd still just left him to deal with it. To clean up the mess.

He'd been a fool to think he could do anything to mend this. He’d messed it all up again. He'd been stupid to think he could handle this house and its ghosts. Four months in these walls, and the old feeling had returned. He was struggling to breathe, and in a moment of blind misery, he wondered if he should just get up right now and leave. He wasn't going to get caught. And truthfully, would it really matter if he did get caught? Fuck, he wanted to talk to James so damned badly, but every time he tried to picture him, he just kept seeing the body lying in the doorway, and he flinched with his whole body. Within seconds, there was a pop, and a large black dog let out a soft whine before curling up on the chair.

Remus had barely made it to the memorial on time. He had slid into the crowd looking for a familiar face and calmed upon finding Emmeline sitting with McGonagall - Minerva, he kept trying to correct himself. They'd mocked him gently all year for his inability to call them by their first names when he'd been a professor, but he was making an effort. It proceeded more or less as it always did, a small group of people who had known James' parents, people who wanted to pay their respects, and a scattered group of survivors who had known them personally. The respects group was smaller than it had been, no doubt due to some of ridicule Harry was unfortunately facing, but he'd never been comfortable with them as it was. They were thankful a couple of twenty-one-year-olds died in front of their toddler so the Wizarding World could be free again. And now, it wasn't even true anymore. Voldemort was back, and it felt exceptionally empty.

He lingered longer than he wanted to; people always had condolences, they'd known how close they all were. Except it almost always came with well meaning condolences for Peter as well, which didn't help. He'd been surprised to see Kingsley, even more so when he'd pressed a small gift bag that looked as it contained Ogden's into his hand. "Have a toast to them," he said, voice barely above a whisper. "No one should have to deal with this sober." The newest incarnation of the Order wasn't the same as the old one - he missed Edgar's grousing; Marlene's laugh; Dorcas despairing over the sheer amount of Gryffindors; Fabian and Gideon huddled up in the corner with Benjy and Emmeline, undoubtedly planning a Ravenclaw rebellion; Alice trying to wrangle the hooligans and Frank laughing at her binders; James throwing himself into the middle of everything, and Lily making sure she kept the blackmail material for later. But they were good people. He tried not to think that they may end up gone, as well.

The cold was bracing in London by the time he'd reached 12 Grimmauld Place. It was well into the morning, and he'd said he'd be back yesterday, but it'd taken longer in Yorkshire than he wanted it to. He managed to slip past the portraits without setting them off and felt surprised again by the oppressive silence of the place. It had been brimming with people two months ago, all noise and chaos. He didn't imagine it was doing Sirius's mood any favours. He was and always had been a social animal.

He wasn't terribly surprised to find the large black dog curled up in the drawing room. He'd had a feeling Sirius wouldn't really want to deal with the complexity of human emotions, but it was still disheartening. He suddenly felt a crunch underneath his feet, looking down to see what looked like a couple of photographs and shattered frames. He tried not to wince.

"Hello Padfoot," he said, trying to keep his voice even. "I'm sorry I'm late. It looks like I missed quite the event."
Padfoot proceeded to go off a truly pitiful whine and stare back at him.

Carefully and creaking more than he'd like, Remus knelt down by the chair. "I don't suppose you feel like talking to me about it?"

In response, Padfoot put both paws over his eyes and lowered his ears. That was definitely a no.

Remus gave the back of his fur a quick stroke and stood up with a heavily sigh. "Whenever you're ready," he said. He felt drained enough from the morning that he was even grateful for a light reprieve. Perhaps a little quiet would do them both good. It certainly looked as if his mood had gotten the better of him at some point, and in full temper, Sirius was rarely easily to calm down. He didn't know if he had the energy yet. It had been a long trip.

He made his way down to the kitchen once he'd dropped things off in his room and made a pot of what he hoped would be fortifying tea. On a whim, he made a second. There was a very good chance Sirius' younger brother had heard some of the dramatics and decided to stay out of the way. He could at least offer and reassure him that the worst of it seemed to be over.

Morning had done little to ease the tension strung taunt in the air, and Regulus felt it was no small blessing that he had not seen his brother all morning (nor for the remainder of the previous day, holed as he had been in his room). Guilt was still pooling thick in his stomach, and a certain uncertainty about whether he had somehow done something in the past month to spark Sirius’s ire again. (Had it been the discussion of purism? Or something else?) His brother had always taken on a grumpy disposition when confined to their house for even a few short weeks, when they were younger, but the explosions had not been directed at Regulus, back then.

Perhaps Regulus had stepped into the crossfire, but the accusations had been far too specific for it to be that alone.

Regulus had tucked himself away in the study before the sun ever rose, knowing that Sirius would not venture in here today when the discomfort was still so unbearably palpable, so when a quiet rap on the door broke the silence, Regulus gave a small start, rustling the open book in his lap.

There was absolutely no way it was Sirius -- Regulus could probably count on one hand the number of times Sirius had ever knocked before entering a room, throughout the course of their lives, even if several were recent -- and despite the lingering, miserable desire to sulk in solitude, anyone polite enough to knock was unlikely to be too unbearable. It was probably Lupin in search of a book or something of the sort, given the infrequent visitors, as of late…

“Come in,” Regulus said without raising his voice, eyes still fixed on the bookshelf across from him that he’d be staring at for at least a half-hour now as thoughts rolled around in his mind.

The door opened, and as predicted, Lupin came in. He was carrying two cups, balancing somewhat precariously on his arm. "I don't want to intrude," he said lightly, looking Regulus over. "I just wanted to see if everything was alright."

Regulus turned his gaze towards the voice, looking first at his face, then the two steaming cups of tea, then back to his face again before shifting back into the cushion of his chair. To send him away would be easy enough, but not even Lupin carried around two cups of tea at a time to drink by himself, and no one who knew Sirius at all would come looking for him in here. Perhaps Sirius had said something to him, or perhaps he had caught on to Sirius’s surly mood as well. Whatever the reason, his understated extension was strangely comforting.
“I don’t know that ‘alright’ is the word I would use, but it is quiet, today,” Regulus said as his lips thinned to a line.

Seemingly taking the response as an invitation to sit down, Lupin did so and set both of the cups down on the table. "Ah," he said, wincing. "I'm sorry. I wanted to be back yesterday, but...it got a little complicated, and I only got back this morning."

“Sirius was in a very foul mood, so honestly, you probably didn’t want to be back yesterday,” Regulus said, his tone even despite the slight wrinkling of his nose.

Remus took his cup and took a long drink of it. "I hadn't realised you'd actually interacted yesterday," he admitted. "I don't like to apologise for my friends, but...you know him well enough to know it was just a difficult day and he'll be back to normal once Halloween is behind us. Truthfully, I'm not in the best of moods either, but since he's refusing to have arms, I don't think tea is the answer for him right now."

“Is it already Halloween?” Regulus asked with a sigh, shaking his head as he leaned forward to pick up the other cup of tea. “Time flies.” The Dark Lord had fallen around Halloween, fourteen years ago. Regulus could still remember reading about it in the newspaper, sitting in a park in the small French village he’d settled himself in -- the sudden rush, the sense of accomplishment -- which turned out for naught, in the end, with the Dark Lord returned again, but on that day, the war ended in the most unexpected way--

-and a look of dawning realisation focused Regulus’s eyes, pausing his tea halfway to his lips.

Remus paused as well, before apparently sussing out the issue immediately. "It can be easy to lose track of time here," he offered, quietly. "But yes, it's November 1st. Would I be correct in guessing you got caught in the crossfire?"

This time, Regulus released a heavier sigh, taking a slow sip of his tea. The Potters had been killed the same night the Dark Lord fell, with Sirius sent to Azkaban as the ‘Death Eater who betrayed them’ not long after. A fair reason for a foul mood, even if the argument had blown open quite a different fracture…

“That is a way of putting it.” Regulus frowned, breathing in the warm steam rising from his tea . “He was sacking things in the drawing room, threw something at Kreacher. I told him him not to, and it sort of...escalated from there,” he added uncomfortably from behind another sip.

"That sounds about right," Remus commiserated, with a hefty sigh. "When he was at Hogwarts, before I knew of the truth, he absolutely tore the Fat Lady's portrait to shreds. The entrance to the Gryffindor common room," He elaborated with a small smile, "As I'm quite certain you're likely to know by now. Try not to take it to heart. People grieve in different ways and rarely are they pleasant."

Regulus nodded, tracing a finger along the rim of the cup. That particularly story hadn’t reached him, presumably from the year following his escape from Azkaban, but it felt somehow appropriate when the disarray of the drawing room flickered in his mind. “He’s a menace to portraits everywhere,” Regulus remarked wryly, shaking his head as he tried to smother that lingering roil in his stomach.

"I imagine your mother would agree," Remus said, lightly. "He was probably trying to blow off steam. I'm not sure if he's said anything, but Dumbledore doesn't want him to step outside the house for any reason. There's not really an easy way to let it run its course in the house. I imagine he'll fix things, given a few days, to regain his balance."
“Didn’t he go to the train station to see the kids off to school?” Regulus asked with a subtle furrow of the brow, thinking back to the massive black dog bounding from his room and down the stairs with little care for decorum. As appropriate for a dog as it was for his brother, he supposed. “Turned into a dog and scampered off, right?”

"Something he was not supposed to do,” Remus replied, shortly. "Peter has obviously told Voldemort's followers all about their animagus abilities. He was recognised. If he gets recognised again, especially if it's somewhere quieter...no, he's not to do it again and he knows it."

“Hm...yes, I can imagine he does not like that very much,” Regulus granted thoughtfully. Sirius had not ever liked being stuck inside anywhere, stir-crazy as he became, and he disliked this house most of all... If there was tattling involved, as well- but a measure of curiosity rose in his expression. “While we are on the subject, who is this 'Peter'? Sirius mentioned something about a Peter when we were talking about the diary that the kids came across, but I didn't know any Peters among the Dark Lord’s followers, certainly not any that would have known my brother could turn into a dog while I didn’t.”

Remus gave him a blank look. "I thought you'd been informed of the circumstances surrounding his arrest."

“Everyone stupidly thought he would join the Death Eaters and murder a bunch of muggles; then he went to Azkaban for a little over a decade; escaped about two years ago...” Regulus listed off with his eyes narrowing, just slightly. The expression on Remus’s face suggested that he fully expected Regulus to be aware of this already -- like the Fat Lady remark, so casually mentioned -- but no mattered how he dug around in his memory, he could not recall anything connecting the ‘Peter’ with Sirius's arrest. “Honestly, the only Peter I can even think of is -- or I suppose ‘was’ -- Pettigrew.”

With a roll of his eyes, Remus huffed. “That's not inaccurate, but it doesn't explain anything. I'm not sure how much you're aware of, but both James and Lily became highly desired targets. After Harry was born, it got worse. By the time he was a year old, they were having to move around every month, usually in the middle of a fight. There was only one explanation: someone was feeding information. The decision was eventually made that the Fidelius was the only way they would remain safe. James asked Sirius - we were on bad terms at the time - and of course, he said yes. Less than a week later, they were dead. Does it still seem like a completely out of the question idea, when faced with that? ”

Regulus lifted a single eyebrow, absorbing the (far more detailed version of the) story, but as he had experienced before, he could not help but be caught on a particular detail: “It’s Sirius, though. I don’t question his ability to spill a hugely important secret, but a Death Eater? He would tear into us for unflattering word choices. There’s no way he would have murdered a whole crowd of muggles,” Regulus said matter-of-factly. He doubted his brother would have betrayed Potter, either -- an eternal point of contention between them -- but he wasn’t sure he could say it without being insulting, and he knew Remus had been friends with Potter too. If ever there was a time to try to be sensitive on that front, he supposed it was today.

Remus took a breath in and smiled sadly. “I think that was the problem. Sirius didn't question his inability to keep it quiet either, so they switched at the last minute without telling anyone. I think he believed that then even if he was targeted, it wouldn't matter.” Remus hid behind his own cooling cup for a moment. “Except he switched with Peter - yes, that one. Him being a Death Eater had not occurred to either of us. And of course when Sirius got to the house and saw they were already dead, he didn't explain any of it. He just went after him. Then Peter cast the curse that killed all of those people, which provided ample opportunity to fake his own death. I believe you
know the rest.”

Regulus shook his head with a measuring look. “Really? Pettigrew always seemed a bit useless, honestly... Death-faking murder mastermind is not exactly a descriptor I would have granted him, but I suppose this is not the first surprise along the way.” Pettigrew had been their friend, too, the four of them, moving like a pack, throwing their weight around -- even if it seemed like that weight was mostly borrowed from Sirius and Potter... “So there was no falling out with Pettigrew beforehand? There couldn’t have been, I suppose, if Sirius switched with him…”

“No,” Remus said. “No one has any idea and no one is going to take the word of a werewolf and three children over law enforcement. As such, Peter remains at Voldemort’s side.”

At least there would be one Death Eater Regulus wouldn’t feel guilty about destroying, should everything go according to plan. With a soft snort, he shook his head. It didn’t feel funny, not really, but the discomfort was suffocating, a dread still hanging over him from the day before. He didn’t know what to say, what to do, to make it go away-

Again, Regulus sipped his tea, though the heat had been gradually seeping away for some time now. “From the sound of it, the Ministry and its law enforcement, by extension, cannot be counted on to accomplish anything useful at all, so even if those testimonies were considered reliable on a good day, I suppose these days are not good days, regardless. Hopefully Pettigrew will get his comeuppance in some other form.”

“There are good people in the Ministry,” Remus replied. “But on the whole, it's more concerned with political control. Usually today is a much bigger event,. The celebration and the memorial both get out of control, and it often makes the Prophet, for better or worse. This year, I think he didn't want to see that kind of support. One thing he and Voldemort have in common seems to be that they're both afraid of a fifteen-year-old boy.”

“So it seems,” Regulus said with a shake of the head. Sipping the last of his tea, he paused for just a moment, then set it back on the table between them. This time of year felt charged to Regulus himself, thinking of the Dark Lord’s first fall, but for those who saw the war all the way to its end, tragedies and all, he supposed it was charged in quite a different way. His own losses still felt so fuzzy -- Evan and Wilkes, his mother, his grandparents and aunts and great-aunts...even Barty was vague, despite the relative proximity in time -- most likely around the time his Mark first burned again, but the specifics seemed a haze…

“I know it was probably difficult for you, relaying information on this particular subject on this particular day,” Regulus started, his voice quiet and uncomfortable but not insincere. “All the same, I appreciate your thoroughness and your willingness to share.” (To explain, to distract…)

“Though I, too, am remaining within the walls of these house, the information is no less valuable.”

“I hadn't realised it wasn't known already. Though some secrets remain necessary, others just lead to misconceptions.” Remus smiled, this time much more warmly. "If not for the house and Sirius's manner, I wouldn't have put together who you were. Not immediately. While I don't encourage it, as long as you don't go somewhere with people who would automatically know you, you are capable of going out and taking a break.”

Some measure of tension loosened at that, and the start of a smile began to form at the corner of Regulus's mouth. “Ah, hiding in plain sight...” For months now, they had been holed up in the house. Confinement had always affected Sirius more than himself, and Regulus actually quite liked to seclude himself away within these walls, but there was a certain comfort in thinking that perhaps it would not be such a blatant danger to venture outside briefly -- not only for the fresh air, but for resources beyond the texts and materials his family already owned… “I will exercise discretion and
"Trust is not something that comes easily anymore, not after Peter." Remus admitted. "If you don't test it, it won't grow. And honestly, as much as I care deeply for my friends, the desire to smack them tends to come if we stay in close quarters for too long," he added with a smile. "Particularly ones who don't knock."

Regulus’s own smile grew, and for all the lingering despair he’d woken up with, he found that his insides were not twisting so aggressively. His brother’s ill manners were almost starting to seem amusing again, if only for the moment, even if the thought of actually being in the same room as Sirius still made the guilt and humiliation turn in his stomach. Talking to Lupin had been surprisingly calming -- more so than he had expected -- and some of the knotted tension in his shoulders loosened, just slightly.

“I have experienced living in close quarters to just such a person,” Regulus said with a soft huff of a laugh, pressing his lips back into a wry smile as he shook his head.

"How funny, so have I." Remus shook his head, in a way more fond than exasperated. "I swear books used to migrate seemingly of their own accord from my bookshelf to his bedroom floor with no explanation for how they got there. Very peculiar."

“Upon retrieving such wadersome books, one might even find mysterious creases folded at the corners of the pages, as if all of the world’s bookmarks had vanished at once,” Regulus added pointedly, a subtle lilt to his tone as he smothered the smile. “Curious business.”

Remus huffed a laugh, not bothering to hide it this time. "There was, back then, a contingent that used to sit and pour over these rare books and parchment to gain some insight. The amount of times I'd seen one of them scream bloody murder at him for using them as coasters..." he said, shaking his head. "The terrible things that we end up putting up with from the people we care about."

Another uncomfortable twinge tugged in Regulus’s chest. “Terrible indeed,” he said, though such a sentiment went far beyond Sirius. “Such is our burden.”

"I think I'll go and see if he feels like being human again." Remus decided, collecting both of the cups up. "Thank you for the company."

Regulus nodded. “Best of luck,” he said with gratitude evident in his expression and tone, more than the words themselves, and he watched until Remus disappeared into the hallway again, closing the door politely behind himself. Letting out a heavy sigh, Regulus twisted back around in his chair and propped up his book, still open in his lap -- and with a clearer focus and a calmer mind, Regulus finally settled in to read.

Chapter End Notes

For a more detailed account of Sirius running away from home, you can read our one-shot putting out the fire (with gasoline). Likewise, for a fleshed out version of the "my little brother is a Death Eater” reveal, we wrote that out in my past has tasted bitter for years now (so i wield an iron fist), should anyone wish to reference it in more detail, as well.
It was dark outside by the time Sirius found Remus downstairs. The unmistakable stench of wolfsbane lingered in the kitchen - a reminder of what Remus was was having to deal with today on top of a transformation week. Guilt slithered into Sirius' gut, joining the amount that was already there and festering since the argument yesterday. He found himself lacking in the energy to do anything but curl up, but he also wanted to see his friend before he had to leave again.

"Good morning," Remus said, without looking up from the potion.

"It's late," Sirius replied, annoyed by the hoarseness of his own voice.

"You were asleep when I went to see you earlier," Remus replied. Ergo, morning. "There's tea in the kettle."

Sirius absently picked up the lukewarm mug from the table and took a drink out of that before recoiling slightly. "Is there whisky in this?"

"What?" Remus looked up, then rolled his eyes. "Yes, because it's mine! Kingsley sent the bottle. Make your own tea next time."

The familiarity that rushed inside him at the playful annoyance was a welcome change from the mix of guilt, angst, and numbness that had been dominating his mind for two days. He mustered a smile and did, in fact, make himself a cup. "I'm sorry about earlier," he offered as he loaded the cup up with sugar.

"I miss them too, you know," Remus reminded him.

"I know," Sirius nodded and warmed his hands on the cup.

"It seems I got off easily," Remus replied.

Sirius' stomach dropped. "What makes you say that?"

"The state of the drawing room?"

Sirius winced. "Rough day," he said, weakly.

"I heard," Remus said.

Sirius paused, the cup just below his lips. "In Yorkshire? Shit. I'm louder than I thought."

Remus snorted, then shook his head. "No, I had tea with Regulus earlier, and he seemed quite perturbed to realise the date. I think maybe it explained something?"

A leading question if ever there was one. Sirius didn't want to talk about it. He was still raw, tired and utterly wrung out from the argument. "I got annoyed with Bellatrix's pictures. He got annoyed back. It's fine."

"Is that a real fine or an 'I'm just blagging it because I don't want to talk about it' fine?" Remus asked, shrewdly.
"He yelled at me," Sirius said, still a little surprised that he had.

"If you were throwing things, I'm not surprised he yelled," Remus said,

"How did you-" Sirius put his cup down on the table sharply. "Our parents have been dead for a decade! How is he still tattling on me?"

"I'm not your father," Remus reminded him, though he was smiling when he spoke. "I've tried multiple times to grow facial hair, but alas, it appears I can only do fur."

"Yeah, that's what makes you different from my Dad," Sirius deadpanned. "The hair."

"It wasn't tattling," Remus said firmly. "We just had tea and chatted. Speaking of, I thought you'd told him about happened that night."

"I did," Sirius said. He'd covered the basics of it - Wormtail, the animagus, the betrayal. He could feel his stomach turning at the very thought of it.

"Not effectively. It appears Peter's current living state, as well as the majority of his involvement, got lost in translation." Remus sighed. "I explained some of it, but it's a conversation you should really have, given his former associations."

Truthfully, Sirius didn't want to have any conversation with his brother at the moment. The accusations of leaving him, when he'd been a child, to deal with all this shit was a hard thing to swallow down. He felt a renewed anger towards what had remained of his blood kin; Regulus had done everything right. He was obedient, obliging, polite and purist. He was everything they could have wanted, and yet no one had even tried to shield him from what was undoubtedly an emotional decision born out of anger. Moreover, Regulus seemed to understand that they should have, and it bothered him. He'd never thought to imagine it would bother him. He didn't think a lot of things bothered him, but apparently they seemed to.

Damn it, he needed to talk to him, but he was sure if he tried it now then there would probably only be another argument.

"He's never yelled before," Sirius said, in lieu of an answer.

"Then perhaps he was simply due to," Remus shrugged. "Whatever happens, he is your brother."

It had been that unconditional thought which he had prided himself on, but one he had clearly not communicated effectively at all. Instead of dwelling on it, "How's your Dad doing?"

Remus, to his credit, didn't blink at the change of subject. "He's doing alright. He doesn't get out too much, with the weather on the turn. I'm hoping I'll get up there before Christmas."

"You should," Sirius said, taking a drink of tea. "And stop hanging around with my little brother. You two teaming up would be the biggest pain in my backside."

"It's not a team up," Remus said, "It's a support group."

Sirius threw a biscuit at him. Apparently, he wasn’t done throwing things yet.

Day eight into the grand avoidance -- halfway through day eight, at that -- and Regulus still had not seen his brother for more than fleeting moments at a time. Unresolved though it all felt, he was quite glad of it: Losing his cool in some explosive display of emotion was about as horrifying a
thing as he could imagine, even with the staggering guilt and undying distress aside. The argument still felt raw, rubbed with the salt of memories he tried so hard not to think about; and mixed within those bitter memories was the jabbing implication that Sirius, of all people, had been all torn up about his disappearance. During their last conversation -- daringly exchanged at their father’s funeral, very much much against the protocol when dealing with traitors -- he settled quite firmly on the conclusion that one or both of them would die. Horrifying as it felt, death had sounded like such a foregone conclusion.

Privately, Regulus knew he would have been devastated, had something happened to Sirius, yet the thought of his brother -- the one who had walked out on him for a ‘brother’ he liked better -- getting so passionately upset about it all had been jarring, if not in a completely negative way. He did not quite know how to feel about it -- how to even start figuring out how to feel about it.

Perhaps Sirius was experiencing the same thing, with how expertly they had missed each other all week. More often than not, it was empty room after empty room as Regulus walked through the house, but when he passed the parlour and saw Remus settling on of the chairs with a dark-bound book of some sort, he took pause.

Arguably it was not his business what anyone else was doing, any more than he wanted it to be their business what he was doing, but he had found he quite liked Remus's company amidst the sullen silence and endless days of often-tense solitude. Curiosity prickled. In truth, Regulus did not know much about him, save for his lycanthropy, his occasional visits to various book locations, and the persistent air of calm politeness he always presented. Regulus had paid little attention to any of Sirius’s friends (except for perhaps Potter, in self-defense) whilst in school, but if any of them were to survive and remain a non-Death Eater, he had to admit he was glad it was Lupin.

Approaching the small gathering of chairs, Regulus craned his head just slightly to try and make out the title, but Remus’s eyes soon flicked up to him. Instead of trying to pretend he was examining the worn tear in the chair (though he had just noticed it), Regulus asked: “What are you reading?” Casually he sat down and summoned a random book from the short bookshelf along the wall, as if that had been his intention from the start.

“A book,” Remus replied, lifting the novel in question to reveal the title. Regulus rolled his eyes but read it nonetheless as Remus continued, “I enjoy the fictional whodunnits considerably more than their real life counterparts. They're completely unrealistic.” He paused for a moment. “I would guess it's how seemingly impossible deaths are explained by the non-magical world. The reality of it simply being a spell or potion is almost mundane in comparison to the complex tales of secrets and lies woven in something like this.”

“So it’s like a muggle mystery?” Regulus asked with a subtle lift of his brow.

Remus nodded. "You're presented with the clues, possible motives, and multiple suspects, and you don't find out 'til the end if you're correct. This one has a wizard who is trying to out the secrets of the others through a seance."

Regulus tipped his head, brow furrowing slightly. “A seance? That seems a strange choice, though I suppose it is fiction. If it's about a wizard, is it a wizarding mystery, then?”

“No, it’s a muggle mystery that happens to have a wizard. You’d be surprised how often it intersects.” Remus placed a finger between the pages and closed the book over on it. “Merlin remains a popular choice in both literatures, for example.”

“Really,” Regulus responded, more of a statement than a question, puzzling though it was. Perhaps muggle-borns were taking extra liberties with the cultural crossover, or perhaps some stories really
could linger over time… “I know the statute was not always in place, but it has been quite a long
time since the two mingled freely. Is the depiction accurate at all? I have to wonder, if they are
solving crimes with seances.”

"Let's not confuse my relaxation literature with actual literature,” Remus said, huffing a laugh at
himself. "The magical world is a lot more stagnant. Many of the stereotypes - the brooms,
cauldrons, magical creatures, certain spells - all predate the statute, so it's woven into their cultural
perceptions. There are also people who are exempt from the statute, those married to a witch or
wizard or in positions of power. However it comes about, muggles know a great deal more than
they're given credit for. My parents rarely ran into too much of an issue, and I was quite the special
case.”

“Hmm.” Regulus nodded, pressing his lips to a line for a moment. He paused for a brief moment,
but when he spoke again, the tone was thoughtful. “I admittedly have not contacted much muggle
literature, of any sort. Only once, in fact... the summer of ‘74, I think it was? Sirius had talked me
into investigating the muggle shops just down the street from here… I’m not sure if they are still
there.” A reminiscent sort of look had settled on Regulus’s face as he tried to wave off the
uncomfortable twinge his brother was still triggering in his chest. It had been such a long time
ago...They had been so young, unaware of the disasters to strike their family, one after another...
“The idea had seemed akin to some scheme to get me caught looking at a muggle thing, so I had
possessed no intention to go inside. Unfortunately, there was an old bookshop, and I suppose he
knew the curiosity would be too much. I caved and spent quite a bit more time than was strictly
wise...but our parents remained none the wiser, so I suppose it all turned out okay.”

"Does that mean you found something you liked?” Remus asked.

“I was mostly reading the synopses of as many books as I could to maximize the breadth of
information, even if it was information I intended to pretend I did not have.” Regulus shrugged a
shoulder. “For the most part, I concluded that they were duller versions of wizarding literature.
However, I do actually recall one mentioning dwarves, though they mentioned other nonsensical
creatures that I’ve never heard of and probably don’t exist, so I assumed they just made up the
word by coincidence. It sounded quite interesting, but I didn’t want Sirius to realise I thought as
much, or he might not let up on it.” Wryly, he finished, “So I put it back and proceeded to look
exceptionally bored.”

“Many creatures just have different names,” Remus noted, tapping one side of the book cover.
“But I understand. Of course, there's nothing stopping you now if you're still curious.”

With a soft huff, Regulus tipped his head. “I suppose not,” he granted. Even now, he felt a little bit
like he might get in trouble, like even thinking about it was enough to shatter some sacred rule, and
the walls of this house would cave in...yet there was a whole world of untapped literature out there.
Perhaps some of it had been dull, but perhaps even muggles were capable of imagining the
wonders of magic, despite their separation from it, and that was a curiosity in itself. Slightly
uncomfortable, but curious. “If only I can find time in my incredibly busy schedule.”

"It might fit in well with your research project." Remus gave him a knowing grin. "You've been
looking into Voldemort?"

Regulus quirked his mouth a little with an acknowledging tip of his head. They had been paying
attention - Sirius had implied as much already - but it was just as well. The details were best under
wraps, yet it was not so terrible, having information and suggestions offered up freely. Their
similar goals and dedication to toppling the Dark Lord were advantageous, even if not much else
about the situation was, these days.
“I have been,” Regulus said, “Are there muggle documents related to such a task?”

“It’s quite likely,” Remus mused. “I seem to remember Harry noting that he was raised in muggle London, so at the least, a birth certificate if not records before the age of eighteen. The graveyard he was reborn to, I believe that was muggle too. It could be nothing, but you do seem to prefer being thorough.”

Regulus nodded with a little quirk of the mouth. “I do prefer to be thorough, yes. You never know when a small piece of information might be useful. I will take that into consideration.”

“You’re welcome to look at the books, though.” Remus held up the one he was reading. “I should be gone for a while, and I’m an aspiring collector of them, so I never seem to be be able to start one without eyeing another…”

“I can relate to that sentiment,” Regulus said with a quaking slant to his mouth, feeling the twinge of a lingering guilt for the fact that he sort did want to investigate the sorts of stories told beyond the muggles’ synopses. His mother would have railed at him for the consideration, Sirius would probably rail at him for the hesitation, but perhaps a little peek wouldn’t hurt, once Remus was on his way…

"It's a hodge podge, but you might be able to find something you like," Remus said, as he placed one of the marks inside his book. "It'll pass the time while the two of you attempt to ignore the other."

“‘Attempt’? I don't know, we are pretty good at it,” Regulus said wryly, shaking his head. Years-of-practice good at it, depressing as that train of thought might be. “Consider the offer noted and appreciated.”

"You know, sometimes, it's very easy to see the resemblance.” Remus snorted.

"Your senses must be playing tricks on you,” Regulus said primly, a tinge of amusement coloring the matter-of-fact tone as he finally opened the book he had summoned upon his arrival. An in-depth history of wizarding villages in Europe was perhaps not what he would have specifically pulled off the shelf, but it would suit.

"When?"

The look on Remus' face when he came into the kitchen said it all. He had to go again. The Order was keeping him busy for weeks at a time, investigating one minute, trying to broach things with magical creatures the next but all of it couldn't be done from London. The house had been quiet, even with him there, but he had a reassuring presence and he looked solid in a way Regulus still didn't. As if sometimes he could believe his brain was playing tricks on him and he'd imagined the whole thing.

But Sirius knew he hadn't.

The fight had been too real, and too shocking. When he thought about it, Regulus had always been a sullen, sulking presence when he was angry. He was cold in it, where Sirius had always been hot. To see him lose control like that was jarring, frightening and oddly humanising. He'd has his part to play too, as he usually did when things got screwed up, but the more he thought about it and rolled it around in his head, the more he realised they never had spoken about it. Remus was right; they didn't communicate effectively at all.

It was an almost childlike admission. The desire for everyone to be happy together. Sirius had been
a child when he'd experienced something similar, in his second year, as the resentment set in about
the close relationships many of his housemates seemed to have with their families and the way
James' own parents treated him. Comparing it with his own home always felt as if it had never
measured up. But he'd known then that it wasn't necessarily him that didn't measure up (even if he
could rarely remember that even now) and that they were just a bunch of dysfunctional people
locked together by their blood. Despite the tone in which it was screamed, Sirius believed what
he'd said was true: they had been born as a last ditch attempt at keeping a line going, not because
they were wanted or loved, and between the growing distance of their father and their mother’s
growing mania, they managed to keep themselves mostly happy until that last summer. War
destroyed everything it touches, and this family had just been waiting for a catalyst.

He'd had to leave. Sirius knew that in his bones. He'd have lost his mind in this house as a teenager,
was losing it slowly as an adult. He had been right when he said they didn't care about them.
Maybe they had, once, but it was a care that extended only as far as obedience and success. It
wasn't real. He knew what real care looked like, even then, and as much as he'd desired it, he didn't
want his heart to get broken by loving people who were never going to reciprocate in a meaningful
way. It would have (did) make it harder to listen to the constant criticisms and bile. No one wanted
to be the one left standing there hurt afterwards. He missed the idea of what their family could have
been, in other circumstances, but he needed to get out.

But as much as he thought he'd managed to tell Regulus that, he didn't think he ever really had. It
was just one of the many things they did not talk about.

He'd already bared his own heart too openly. As much as he had criticised Regulus for thinking
showing his emotions was a weakness, he still felt the same way. He just hadn't realised the same
problems had laid a mark on his brother, as sure as the one he likely had and didn't want anyone to
see. The isolation, the desire for cohesion, the pressure. Regulus had bowed under it and ran, as
much as Sirius had, and he hadn't come to him because...he didn't know why. He thought he would
have, and it stung.

Every time he passed him fleetingly in the couple of weeks since the fight, it was all he thought
think of: how much there was to say and how little equipped he felt to say it.

"Tomorrow," Remus said, bringing him back to the present.

As it stood, that left the brothers alone in the house again. Dread filled him, a fear that they were as
beyond repair as he felt after being given a second chance.

"I'll try to be quick," Remus said, perhaps sensing the melancholia.

"It's important," Sirius said, giving a forceful shrug. He'd miss him, not just because he was a
calming presence with tea and chocolate and nostalgia, but him. On a whim, he put down his glass
and hugged him - apparently much to Remus' surprise, given that it took him a minute to respond.
James had always been the most tactile person in the group, but Sirius had picked some of it up and
lost it along the way. He found himself wanting to just remind himself he was there.

"I can ask someone else," Remus said, and when he let go, he found that his friend looked worried.

"You have a job to do, and I'm not a child, I don't need a babysitter," Sirius said, even cracking a
smile. "Besides, him upstairs has been doing that job for years. He's used to it."

Remus didn't look convinced.

"You'll be back before Christmas?" It was a month away.
Remus nodded, "No matter what."

"Good," Sirius said, nodding more to himself than Remus. "I need someone to go do my Christmas shopping for me. Being a fugitive really puts a crimp in your social life."

December had crept in, and in the week since Lupin had departed, Regulus had ventured to pocket one of the other man’s forbidden muggle novels - not yet read, but sitting before him on the bed as he tried to work up the nerve to start it. (A novel detailing the investigatory work of a muggle named Sherlock, according to its synopsis.) He had been sitting on his bed for some 10 minutes already when the screeching began, and it carried on for some ten minutes before Regulus determined that their mother’s shouting was not going to quiet anytime soon. Normally the triggering culprit managed to smooth the racket by this point, but Walburga Black’s continual berating had outlasted his patience, and when at last he walked down the stairs to investigate the situation, it was not his brother, but a very different smudge on the family tree that was fruitlessly trying to battle his mother's whipping curtains.

He had seen Andromeda's daughter briefly on the day they'd all heard about the Dementors, and caught glimpses in passing since then, but an unspoken tension still pulled at his chest, a lingering difficulty in connecting this pink-haired woman with his cousin, and even more so with the noble house of Black. A look of recognition opened up on her face when he approached, and her mouth started moving, though it was difficult to distinguish what exactly she was saying.

Quieting his mother was quick work, once he set to it, and as the curtains at last fell still, he held a single finger to his mouth in a silencing gesture. In preparation, Regulus specifically moved himself to stand between her and the troll leg umbrella stand -- just to make certain an immediate revisitation did not strike them.

"Thanks, mate." The girl - Tonks - said in a loud whisper. She smacked the side of her head a couple of times, as if she was trying to let water out after swimming. "My brain's not actually dribbling out, right? It just feels like it is?"

Regulus eyed Tonks for a moment, flicking his gaze to her ears and back. Part of him thought he should perhaps downplay the irritating quality of his mother's derisive commentary on some play at defense, but he couldn't quite muster it, even with the portrait likeness right on the other side of those curtains.

What exactly was one supposed to say to the unrecognised daughter of an estranged cousin? In this house, there were plenty of answers to that conundrum that he could rattle off from the tip of his tongue, yet his own precarious situation confused those emotions rather effectively. He could not count himself a true traitor to his blood, whatever how family might someday think, yet the years had rendered it all so unimportant in his interim years away, and he could not find the motivation to devote quite so much internal aggression towards the mostly harmless.

(Strange though the hair choice truly was…)

"No sign of dribbling," he said at last, his own voice low and slightly awkward.

The girl smiled wide and bright. "I thought you had a wicked sense of humour, or so I was told. Did you leave it somewhere?" She pointed to the door. "Or are you just getting freaked out too?"

She was looking far too cheerful for coming out of a wrestling match with the curtains, and seemingly too cheerful for the statement itself. Suddenly, when he thought of it, receiving word of the Dementors was perhaps the only time he had seen her without a smile plastered on her face.
"My sense of humour is in fine order," Regulus said a little bit defensively, shifting on his feet as they shuffled towards the stairs leading up to the landing above. "It's just selective." (And quite off its footing, if he was honest, though he wasn't interested in being quite that honest.)

"Is there anything in this side of the family that's not selective?" she asked, bluntly.

Regulus paused for a moment, allowing a thoughtful expression to settle on his face. "Hmm." That pause had begun to stretch as they reached the top of the stairs, but after sparing another fleeting glance, he continued in a rather understated (if airier) tone, "Yes. It is in our dedication to selectiveness in all things that we, in fact, come full circle and become, in a sense, quite unselective."

"Guess I got some of that in me then," Tonks snorted. "Since you weren't the one I was looking for. He hasn't gone out, has he? Much as I like Dumbledore, I wouldn't want him screaming at me or telling my mum on me so she can do the I'm Very Disappointed In You talk."

Regulus expected the I'm Very Disappointed In You talk would sound quite different, coming from their respective mothers, but it went without saying, so the thought went unsaid. "No, I don't think he's gone out... He's been in a bit of a mood, but Lupin seemed to think Sirius recognised the danger of being identified, when last they spoke about it. I can't say I have seen much of that self-control in the past, but I've caught enough glimpses of him in passing that I trust he's staying within the walls." Regulus shook his head, staving off a shudder. "I imagine he finds it quite unpleasant, being cooped up in this house, but it had to be worse to be cooped up in Azkaban." (Or dare he even think it, left to the fate of a soulless husk...)

Tonks made a face of distaste. "Too right. I haven't done an Azkaban run yet, I'm still in my first year, but I'm not looking forward to it." She stopped for a moment, frowning and looking down. "Actually, I might not get assigned to do it since it'd be kind of a family reunion, if you know what I mean. No offense, like, but I prefer not to socialise with the Death Eater contingent. I dunno about the former ones yet mind, I only know Professor Snape, and I think he's still holding my, erm, impression of him over me. And you, of course! But all I know about you is 'reads a lot' and must have big balls to say piss off to the Death Eaters when it looked like they were winning."

As her words started tumbling out at an increasingly rapid pace, Regulus lifted his brow, waiting for a distinguishable pause before responding. "That is one way of phrasing it." Vulgar word choice, perhaps, but seemingly sincere, at the very least. In everything, she seemed to be jarringly sincere (and jarringly vulgar), strange though it felt when their family had refused her very existence for decades, himself included. He and Sirius had a previous relationship to restore, but this girl, he'd never known her, and what he did know he hadn't liked on principle. Everything she said implied she knew it, yet the tone was always off...

With a huff, Regulus shook his head, as if to bat of the lingering conflict. "I can't say I fancy a visit either, permanent or temporary... but what you were saying about a Snape impression..." Perhaps any impression would be sufficient to trigger a grudge, but he was curious nonetheless. She seemed old to be learning from 'Professor Snape,' but with how quickly he had apparently set to teaching, perhaps she wasn't.

"I promise not to break out my incarcerous on you then," Tonks said with a wink, stalling for a moment before slipping into a sheepish expression. "He was my potions professor. And I'm decent at it, so I did it right through NEWTs, but he can be a bit grumpy with people. I get why now, even if I didn't really then, but I was a cheeky bugger at school and...well, I do a mean impression, and he walked in on it."

"I can't say I would be particularly thrilled about an irreverent impression of myself, either,"
Regulus said wryly, shaking his head.

"I don't think I've seen you enough to get your features down." Tonks gave him a scrutinising look, perhaps trying to do just that. "Plus, you're posh. I can't do posh. With Snape, you just gotta-" Her tone changed to illustrate. "-talk with your back teeth."

“My features?” Regulus said, deciding to ignore the remark on Severus talking with his back teeth, accurate though the tone might be. Somehow he was not surprised she would struggle more with representing herself as 'posh.’ “Do you mean in respect to facial expressions?”

"No, I mean-" A smile spread across Tonks' face, as she seemed to realise something. A sudden shift happened, and standing there was no longer a girl with short pink hair in jeans and a neon jacket but Severus Snape in jeans and a neon jacket. "I never get the forehead quite right, but aside from that, not bad, right?"

The change was jarring, a startle that jolted Regulus's mind quite thoroughly into focus on what was quite possibly the most ridiculous image he had set eyes on in some time, or perhaps ever, if he were to think about it. “You're a metamorphmagus,” he remarked, more a dry comment than an inquiry as he shook his head, and his stare lingered. They were incredibly rare, and even if he and Sirius had exchanged little more than a passing mention of Andromeda's daughter, it was baffling to think that his brother wouldn't think to mention it. (Or perhaps not so baffling, in light of recent revelations.) “While we are on the subject of important things that no one has mentioned, are there any veelas or vampires or additional animagi running around that I should be aware of?”

Tonks shook herself, taking on her usual appearance with a wink of confirmation. "Nah, I think it's just McGonagall and Sirius. I'm just an anomaly. Bit handy, though, with this vigilante lark, being able to have people in two places at once."

Shaking his head again, Regulus thought that ‘handy’ was a massive understatement of how useful it would be to completely change your appearance at will, especially in times of war when a person's identity and allegiance was so monumentally important. It was a matter of life and death, in many cases - but instead he said, “I can imagine…”

"I'm not sure if it makes up for being dead clumsy though. I'm sorry about your mum, didn't mean to keep setting that portrait off. I guess any of that whole grace and poise thing skipped a generation.” Tonks looked back down at the hallway. "Is it weird? Coming back?"

In truth, Regulus knew that Tonks was far from the only one setting off his mum, but discussing it with her felt a little too unsettling. Tonks did not sound bitter about Walburga Black's colorful commentary at all - a surprise, considering the disownment, which made Regulus uncomfortable even without the shouting to accompany - but her casual manner almost made it more uncomfortable.

Opting to instead address the follow up remark, Regulus let out a measured breath. “It has been quite surreal, to say the least… I did not think I would find myself here again, and a lot has changed.”

"You don't have to be here if you don't want to be," Tonks said, perhaps the most serious she'd been all night. "That was the first thing Dumbledore said to us. As long as you don't go blabbing it about, no one is going to judge you for walking away. The stakes are pretty high."

Regulus huffed softly, shaking his head. "I'm well aware of the stakes and the options available to me. Even before I was brought in on the charm, I suspected the nature of Sirius's invisible friends, and I assure you I would not be here if I did not think it the best course of action."
"That was a very polite 'butt out, I know what I'm doing.'" Tonks smirked, but she shrugged it off nonetheless. "I'll go find Sirius, then."

Regulus smothered a snort. (This one was awfully blunt, but he supposed she wasn’t wrong.) “Good luck.”

It was three weeks into December that Arthur was attacked.

*Gravely injured.*

What the hell did that mean? What had happened? Had Arthur been on guard duty, or was this some sort of deliberate attack? It had to be terrible for Dumbledore to want the children out of the school early. It would raise many eyebrows, and undoubtedly he'd want to do it quickly before that cow of a 'professor' decided to poke her nose in. Nothing was prepared. Christmas was still a week away, and in truth, Sirius had been consumed by his own melancholia for long enough that even that was a startle. But it had to have something to do with Harry, or he wouldn't be sent with them. No mention of Hermione, so something was definitely up. He'd expect Molly any minute too.

For a moment, he stood frozen on the second floor landing. He had absolutely no idea what he was supposed to do. He checked the time - it was later than he’d thought - there was a very good chance Regulus would be in bed. He had no specifically sought him out since the fight a month and half ago, things still heavy between them, but if all hell was going to break loose in his house, he supposed he'd better tell him. Sirius raced up the stairs to the bedroom, where he imagined he would find him this close to midnight, and stood outside it for a moment before saying a mental a 'fuck it' and pounding it.

After a stretching moment, the door cracked open.

“What’s the matter?” Regulus asked, not even bothering to mock his brother about the knocking, which continued to creep closer and closer to appropriate usage.

"Something's happened," Sirius said before looking down as if he could suddenly develop the ability to see through floors and tell if anyone had arrived yet. "Dumbledore wants the kids out of the school now. They're portkeying in any minute."

"That’s vague. What kind of something?” Regulus asked, brow immediately furrowing. “There hasn’t been an attack on the school, has there?"

"Only in the form of a dick new professor," Sirius grumbled, before trying to shake it off. There was no point losing his temper now. He could just say Order business, of course, but to his shock and surprise, his brother had seemingly gotten on decently well with the Weasley children, despite being the most Gryffindor creatures since Godric himself, and even if he hadn't, he'd been around the twins’ age when they - he - had lost his father. If nothing else drew compassion, that would. "It's..." He suddenly realised he had no idea if he'd know them by name. "Ron, and Ginny and the twins, their father's been attacked. They're getting him to St. Mungo's, but it doesn't...their mother will probably go straight to the hospital, they need to be in close by." He let the *just in case* hang in the air.

Regulus’s expression drew tighter. “Do they know who attacked him?” he asked, though the stiffness in his manner suggested he recognised the lack of a comforting answer, in their position.

"No,” Sirius said, then shook his head to try and ward off his own anxiety about that. He was supposed to be the rational one here. There would be a bunch of angry, confused and upset
teenagers descending any moment, and he was supposed to help keep them calm. "I don't, but they may know. Phineas was not forthcoming other than the need for this to happen quickly before someone saw. But we’re about to have some frightened kids showing up who can’t just show up to the hospital yet because they have no way of explaining how they know."

Tension pulled tighter around his eyes as Regulus nodded and folded his arms tightly across his chest, looking for a moment as if he might get lost in thought -- but instead, he spoke: “I see. But Dumbledore was the one who told them, wasn’t he? Why would they need to explain themselves?”

"Because how do they explain that Dumbledore knew, when he only knows because of the Order? The Ministry wants him arrested, they’ll jump on it." Sirius sighed, more out of tiredness than anything else. This was not the circumstances in which he wanted to see any of them again. "They have to wait for their mother to be notified, so don't be too surprised if you hear ours."

“So it’s an Order thing,” Regulus said, nodding with his lips pressing to a line. “As for our mother’s portrait, I wouldn’t say that it is ever a surprise at this point, per se, but consider that expectation noted, all the same.”

"I’d say so, but who knows? I just didn't want you to suddenly come downstairs and be confronted by hell breaking loose. Molly - their mother - is not subtle," Sirius said, as if he could talk at all. There was a noise downstairs. They must have come into the basement by the sounds of the clanging. "And neither are her children. I gotta go."

Sirius did not seem intent on waiting around for his brother’s response, bolting quite readily down the stairs, and for a moment, Regulus stood uncomfortably in the doorway. He twisted around to look back at his bed for a moment, as if considering the merits of merely rendering himself unconscious for the night, but when he looked again to the stairs leading down to the impending chaos, he seemed to make a decision.

It took only a minute to dress himself in daytime robes once again, and without further delay, he pattered down the stairs to investigate further.

Regulus did not like the way his insides twisted as he strode down the stairs one step after another. He did not like the thought of a father splayed on the ground with fatal wounds because in his mind’s eye, it was Orion Black that he pictured - it was his own distressed confusion that crept up in his chest like bile - but however much he wanted to throw his head into a book or make some (probably fruitless) effort to sleep it off, it was that sick feeling that made him feel as though he could not ignore the storm of pain knotting up in his house.

He understood that shock and empty fear better than he ever would have wanted to.

A voice was floating from the kitchen as he descended the final set of stairs - Harry’s, he confirmed as he drew closer - and as Regulus stepped through the doorway, he realised that Harry was sharing the tale.

"It was...I had a kind of vision. I saw him, on the floor and there was a giant snake, and it bit him, and there was just blood everywhere..." Harry sped the story out with increasing upset. "I saw...I saw it attack him, so I went to Professor McGonagall."

A still silence came over the room, before one of the twins turned to Sirius. "Where's Mum?"

"Dumbledore's talking to her now. The important thing was getting you lot out of Umbridge's grasp," Sirius responded, eyes flicking to the doorway.
"We need clothes," Ginny said suddenly, as if realising they were a bunch of children standing around in the kitchen in their pyjamas. "We can't show up to St. Mungo's like this."

"You can't go to St. Mungo's yet," Sirius argued.

Promptly, a screaming match broke out with the twins about the fact it was their father, they had to go, it didn't matter about the Order when their father could be dying. It was a fight that only ended when Ginny walked right up to the doorway and addressed Regulus directly. "Is there somewhere quiet we can sit?"

Regulus nodded. The solemn silence of the study came first to his mind, and he fought the lurch in his stomach. (His father’s study). Swiftly, he decided against it. “I expect the drawing room would be best. Spacious and hopefully lacking in unwanted commentary.” Taking a step back, he glanced around at his brother and the smattering of upset teenagers, then tipped his head toward the stairs in a gesture to follow before turning to scale the stairs once again.

The walk to the drawing room was short, just two floors above, and fortunately for them all, it seemed each of them had the presence of mind to cease their shouting while passing his mum’s portrait. Upon reaching their destination, Regulus held open the door to let each of the children pass, followed by Sirius, and Regulus at the rear as he shut the door behind them again.

Upon entering the room, Ginny immediately sat down and was flanked by her two older brothers. They were silent, but glaring. Softly, both Ron and Harry, still white as sheets, sat down as well. Though none of them looked happy about it, they were willing to settle in. Though none of them looked happy about it, they were willing to settle in. Suddenly, the fireplace burned red, and a phoenix burst out of it to land on the table. One of the twins immediately snatched up the note just as Sirius exclaimed unnecessarily that it was Fawkes, Dumbledore’s phoenix.

"Dad is still alive. I am setting out for St. Mungo’s now. Stay where you are. I will send news as soon as I can. Mum.... Still alive...” he said slowly. “But that makes it sound..."

No one seemed to have an end to that sentence, or wanted to utter it.

Regulus felt uncomfortable, perhaps out of place in their personal grief, but in those teenager’s faces he could recall his own, and however concrete the loss of his father had been, the suffocating uncertainty could not feel any better. He could not put a finger on why he felt drawn to stay in the room - on principle, the Weasleys had never been their concern, and his interactions with the children had been tentative, if generally positive - but he was, and he did. Beyond his own expectations, he hoped their father survived this. (Enough people had died already, had they not?)

Once again, Regulus’s arms folded across his chest, his mouth pursing slightly as his eyes met Sirius’s. Silently he wondered if Sirius was thinking about their father too. Probably not, considering his brother had always been more concerned with the families outside their own, but at the back of his mind rose the fuzzy image of his brother plopping down beside him at their father’s funeral, and that image grew gradually more vivid. He thought of their argument a month ago, of how explosively upset Sirius had become at the suggestion that he didn’t care. As tightly as Regulus’s mind clung to the angry memories of abandonment, as uncomfortable as it was to let himself believe that Sirius had been sincere, another part of him wanted to feel a little less alone in it all.

With a heavy sigh, he turned his eyes to the fireplace again, hearing the low murmur of conversation but not really listening. Uncertainty always made it worse.

Sirius made a half-hearted suggestion that they try to get some sleep, but it was utterly ignored, as
he seemed to know it would be. After a beat, he stood up anyway and spoke to Regulus in a low voice. "I'm going to get them some butterbeer. Help me."

Regulus looked up his brother, granted a small nod, then stood to follow him out of the room.

The grief and worry in the drawing room had been palpable. Sirius had remained until the children were beginning to droop - Ginny had curled up with her legs on the chair, Ron with his head in his hands, the twins half over their arms and Harry hugging himself against the fabric. There was a terrible, slow burn anger that they had to go through this at all. While there would always be things worth dying for, and he believed that deeply, it was harder to accept the consequences of that line of thought when watching a group of children desperately waiting to hear if their father would live or die. It felt intrusive to remain too long.

Despite his expectations, Regulus had remained down with them. With a stab, he remembered suddenly that it was the last time he'd seen his brother before he had supposedly died - at their father's funeral. It made for an uncomfortable parallel of white faces and fear. Perhaps it was something he could relate to, the grief over their injured father and the possibility of losing him. As much as anyone was, Regulus had been much more his father's son than Sirius had been. He had always thought, when he thought he'd simply disappeared as another nameless, faceless corpse in the war, that it had been that loss which had hit him too hard to recover from.

In a rush of emotional connect, Sirius realised that for the first time in a long time, he desperately wanted to speak to his brother. He would not intrude on the privacy of the children, though. These had been their issues, this had been their fight, and the kids didn't need a front row seat. He tapped Regulus out, asking him to help him with getting them some drinks from the kitchen, but mostly, he just wanted the privacy.

"Are you alright?" he asked, as soon as they made it down to the kitchen.

Regulus shrugged uncomfortably. "Just thinking."

"About Dad?" Sirius prompted.

Pausing a moment, Regulus met his brother's eyes for a silent beat before granting a nod.

It hadn't been exactly what Sirius had meant to talk to him about, but like many things for them, it was a conversation they should have had a long time ago. "Did you ever figure out what happened?"

At that, something sharp tightened the expression on Regulus's face, his frame stiffening to stone again. "Beyond being in the wrong place at the wrong place during the bombing, no. For some reason, no one wanted to talk about the responsible party."

"I didn't either," Sirius replied. He could remember Frank telling him with great gravity, but warning him away from letting people know that he knew since Frank had broken a lot of rules telling him. Of course, Sirius had shown up at the funeral.

With a heavy sigh, Sirius sat on the chair and made no move to get the drinks. There was nothing they could do for the Weasley children, or Harry, as things stood. No matter how much he wished it wasn't true, it wouldn't change it. But he did know what it felt like to lose his brother and knew he didn't want to do it again. That was at least something he had a hand in changing. "I'm sorry," he said, trying to convey the sincerity. "For screaming at you. You didn't deserve it, and I had no idea you felt that way at all."
Regulus, too, dropped in an adjacent chair as if weighted with stones. “I’m sorry, too...” Regulus said uncomfortably, rubbing at his temple. “I should not have lost my temper.”

"You're entitled to do it once in awhile." Sirius gave him a wan smile. He couldn't deny the feeling of relief that perhaps things weren't totally ruined. A glimmer of hope there was still some foundation there below all of that anger. He added awkwardly, "You never let on about any of that bothering you. There I thought it was just me that spent their childhood feeling a strange mix of superior and utterly worthless. It's probably shitty to say - I wouldn't really wish it on anyone - but it helps to know I'm not."

“If I did not want to think that I was thinking it, I certainly did not want you to think that I was thinking it,” Regulus said with a soft snort, shaking his head. “But I suppose…” For a beat, he paused, and when he spoke again, his voice was strained with a subtle defensiveness, his eyes fixed on the table before them. “In truth, I suppose I had difficulty putting a finger on the feeling. Which probably sounds stupid to you, but I just- really wanted to make it work.”

Sirius didn't really want to ask, but at the same time, desperately wanted to ask about it. But there was a sharing limit between that, and if things got too emotional, they ended to slam into a brick wall. "If you didn't know what the hell you were feeling, it makes a lot more sense as to why you seem to think I don't feel anything about it. Or..." In for a knut, in for a galleon, he supposed. "Or that you think whether or not I care is contingent upon something you do or don't do. It's not true. That hasn't ever changed."

With a deep sigh, Regulus leaned back into his chair. “I don’t know what to think about it. It’s not that I think you are lying, I just...” Again, he rubbed at his temples and shook his head. “I don’t know how to reconcile it all.”

"What part's giving you the trouble?" Sirius asked, trying to keep his voice steady rather than accusatory.

“The part where my family tells me they care, and perhaps they do, or perhaps they don’t, or perhaps they think they do but not enough. The part where I always want to believe it, but I’m tired of being disappointed.” Closing his eyes, Regulus let his hands drop to his lap again. “I know you hate them, so I suppose it was an easy enough distinction for you to make, but I don’t even know how to describe it. I realise they ought to have cared more, but at the time, it felt like they did. It felt like they cared.” Cracking open his eyes, he fixed them again on the table, still avoiding his brother’s face.

"You say that like caring about someone and hating them are two different things," Sirius said, grimly. To anyone with a lick of sense, they probably would be, but if he was really honest with himself (and he was trying to be, if only for the sake for his guilt at leaving a fourteen-year-old kid to deal with this shitstorm), then he knew how frequently those emotions intersected. "If they were, I'm sure it would be easy. But it's not. I got tired of being disappointed twenty-five years ago, which was probably the last time I felt anything close to feeling like they cared. But then learning to cook with Mrs. Potter and not getting screamed at for every damn mistake or the fact Mr. Lupin was always so interested in what we were doing at school and not acting like he was so horrified that we were interrupting his day to talk to him, it was just this fucking horrible realisation that I would never, ever have brought any of them round here, not even at my most antagonistic, because it would have been humiliating for anyone to watch how they were with us in comparison. It's humiliating enough now with that damned portrait."

Sirius ran his hand over his face, feeling dangerously close to talking about things he desperately did not want to and plowing ahead anyway because he hoped the effort meant something. "I don't
know if they cared, I don't know if they understood the difference between being pleaded with compliance and loving someone, but if it helps you to believe it, that's what matters. I'd rather hate them. Not you, even when I've wanted to hate you, I've come up short. I think it's cause you care, even when you don't want to, and it's hard to hate someone for that."

Discomfort lined Regulus’s’s face, but it was as those words were left hanging in the silence that he forced himself to catch his brother’s eyes for a second before, then ducked them down again, an awkward stiffness in his shifting. “I was angry with you, but I was never particularly successful in hating you either, inconvenient though it might have been,” he said wryly, punctuated with a worn-down huff. “Yet I don't know if I can hate them either. Maybe I should, but…” He shook his head. “It’s been sixteen years, and I still feel like I’m the one that failed them. You said it yourself, that they were relying on me, and I went and abandoned them, too.” Seeing his brother's mouth start to open, Regulus immediately continued with a profoundly uncomfortable look on his face, “I don’t regret it, really. I just don’t know how to stop feeling guilty, I suppose.”

Sirius had to laugh at that. "If you're looking for advice on how to stop feeling guilty, you came to the wrong person. But for what it's worth, I don't think you abandoned them - you would not have lived, if you'd stayed. You did exactly what you were meant to do: survive. Isn't that the point of ancient family trees? To survive?"

Shifting a measuring look to his brother, Regulus paused for a thoughtful moment -- then nodded, with a little more certainty. “It is.”

“Then you did what you were meant to. They may have been careless, but I don't think they would knowingly have sent you to your death. They're not bloody Crouch.” As much as Sirius hated to think anything even a little complimentary about them, he could say they weren't the type to use an unforgivable on their children, let alone kill them. “Bellatrix lost sight of her family loyalties. She's let her obsession get the better of her. It's not betrayal if the person screws you first, then it's just common sense to protect what's important. Lo and behold, unlike many others, the name has survived and I’m sure somewhere in the afterlife, they’re thrilled about that. Even if it doesn't mean shit to me, I do know that means something to you...so I'll try to contain myself when it comes to destroying things every time I'm angry.”

Relaxing slightly in his chair, Regulus nodded again. “Thank you,” he said with quiet sincerity, meeting his brother’s eyes. “For all of that, really. I know I was a bit… difficult about it all, but however spectacularly well-versed I might be at fighting with you, I would really rather not.”

"I don't want to fight," Sirius said, as he slumped down into his chair further. He was so tired of fighting everything, and damn it, trying to sort through his own emotions was exhausting. It really was just easier to hex each other and move on; and instead, he was starting to want something a little stronger than butterbeer. Not that he would, with a bunch of worried, upset kids in the house. "I'm not..." He swallowed thickly, pushing himself. "I won't promise I'll be less difficult, but I'm trying, alright? I just hate feeling like there's nothing I can do."

“Truthfully, trying is all I can promise too, messy as this situation is...but trying is something, at least,” Regulus granted uncomfortably. For a moment, he looked as if he might expand on the comment, but instead he stood, hand resting on the top of the chair with an absent tap. “Shall we get the butterbeer, then?”

"Yeah, I think if we leave them alone too long, they'll make a break for it." Sirius got up, feeling wrung out but steadier than he had in weeks. There was a lot he still wanted to ask - about his leaving, about the Death Eaters, about why he wouldn't come to him after the inferi - but a truce and an attempt to do better, it was more than he could ask for. "Thanks for staying with them."
"It's a terrible feeling. Hopefully, in this case, it will only be temporary," Regulus said, pressing his lips to a line.

"They can handle this. There's seven of them," Sirius said, as the bottles began to fly unceremoniously out of the cabinets. "Or six, till one of them gets his head out of the Minister's arsehole. They'll look after each other."

Regulus's eyes flicked over to Sirius, then away again, and he nodded with a thoughtful expression. "It helps."

"Yes," Sirius said. "It does."

Chapter End Notes

Orion's funeral (which Sirius and Regulus have been referencing) is explored in one of our one-shots, winter lives in my bones (it's all i've ever known), for those interested in reading more about that!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

This is the first of our two Christmas-themed chapters! The other one is still being wrapped up but will be coming soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Molly arrived at about five in the morning, all good news and tired smiles. Arthur would be alright; they'd gotten him to the healers in time and there was a cover story in place. As Sirius decided everyone needed a good meal after a night like that, Molly enveloped an exceptionally awkward looking Harry and thanked him for everything. Then, much to his surprise, Molly had also turned to Sirius and sincerely thanked both he and Regulus with an equal sincerity for taking the children for the night. Judging by his own awkwardness, Sirius didn't imagine his brother had been expecting it either.

When he offered for them to stay as long as they needed to, as long as Arthur was in the hospital, Molly had had practically glowed and decided to take over breakfast. No one was going to argue with that.

"Sirius, can I have a quick word? Er, now?"

Something had been eating Harry all night, and while Sirius had wondered if it was just the awkwardness of having had to deal with trying to explain what Sirius was now assuming was some sort of Legilimency to his distraught friends, it hadn't eased any.

"What's the matter?" Sirius asked, once they'd shut the pantry door.

"You can't be an animagus without knowing about it, can you?" Harry asked.

Of all of the things he'd expected him to say, that hadn't been one of them. "No. Even with an animal's brain, you know you're you and that the form is temporary. Why?"

"I--" Harry stopped for a moment, still upset. "In the dream, I didn't just see the snake. I was the snake. I could feel myself slithering, and the fangs going in..."

That was disturbing to say the least. It was possible Voldemort himself was one, which was a troubling idea in itself. He'd have to ask Regulus, though since Regulus hadn't noticed his own brother, the odds of him knowing were slim. That probably meant Snape. This was going to be terrible.

"Did you tell Dumbledore this?" Sirius asked, eventually.

"Yes," said Harry impatiently, "but he didn’t tell me what it meant. Well, he doesn’t tell me anything anymore..."

It was more likely that Dumbledore didn't want to scare him, if he truly could see inside Voldemort's mind and was picking up on his thoughts and feelings. Personally, Sirius thought that Dumbledore underestimated how much Harry could get scared by not knowing, but it was possible he had a good reason not to tell him. He needed to talk to him before he spilled it to Harry.
“I’m sure he would have told you if it was anything to worry about,” Sirius said steadily.

“But that’s not all,” Harry whispered. “Sirius, I . . . I think I’m going mad. . . . Back in Dumbledore’s office, just before we took the Portkey . . . for a couple of seconds there I thought I was a snake, I felt like one — my scar really hurt when I was looking at Dumbledore — Sirius, I wanted to attack him —”

Sirius swallowed thickly. He hoped Dumbledore had a good reason for this. Harry was getting more freaked out by the moment. The kid needed a meal, rest, and hopefully before long, some answers.

“It must have been the aftermath of the vision, that’s all,” said Sirius. “You were still thinking of the dream or whatever it was, and —”

“It wasn’t that,” said Harry, shaking his head. “It was like something rose up inside me, like there’s a snake inside me —”

“You need to sleep,” said Sirius, interrupting the flow. This was getting more peculiar by the moment, and it’s not as if Dumbledore liked to give answers for any of it. “You’re going to have breakfast, and then go upstairs to bed. You can go and see Arthur after lunch with the others. You’re in shock, Harry; you’re blaming yourself for something you only witnessed, and it’s lucky you did witness it, or Arthur might have died. Just stop worrying. . . .”

Lucky, sure. What's one more trauma for the kid?

But Harry did not seem to be much better after food or sleep. Sirius hoped seeing Arthur would ease some of the problem. If the sight of Tonks and Moody wasn't enough to make him crack a smile, nothing would be. Instead, upon his return, Harry looked even worse and practically legged it up to the bedroom.

All was most definitely not well with him.

Christmas had thrown up all over Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, Regulus concluded as he ventured down the stairs just a few days later. There was a certain nostalgia to garlands and baubles strung about - an echo of his childhood, when their home had played occasional host to the family Christmas gatherings - yet their house guests had a rather more unbridled enthusiasm for it than his parents had ever demanded from Kreacher. The green scheme of the house was now splashed with red and gold and silver, with ivy and holly and mistletoe in the drawing room that he would make a concentrated effort to avoid.

His brother had been singing merrily all day, with repeat bellows of ‘God Rest Ye Merry Hippogriff’ - perhaps in light of the hippogriff still living in their late mother’s bedroom, but Regulus supposed Sirius had liked it well enough as children, too.

Sirius was using his wand to maneuver some tinsel atop a rather tall cabinet when Regulus peeked his head into the drawing room. “This house is unnervingly cheerful today,” he remarked, the amusement in his voice belying his otherwise neutral expression.

“There's something about the crushing feeling of death and despair that makes you want to celebrate the good things more,” Sirius said, trying to wrap the tinsel around the handles of the cabinet. “Being happy is always the best way to get back at shit situation.”

“An unconventional sort of revenge,” Regulus noted, lip quirking up at the corner, “but I cannot argue with the results.”
"I'm sure you could if you really put your mind to it. You've become a very argumentative person, anyone would think we were related." Sirius drawled, but he turned around and smiled. "Do you hate it?"

"The Christmas decorations, or being noticeably related to you?" Regulus quipped playfully with the tugging hints of a poorly veiled smirk as he strolled further into the room.

Sirius half-heartedly threw tinsel at him. "It could be worse. Do you remember the live fairies?"

"I do," Regulus said after he'd swatted the tinsel in mid-air, "Aunt Druella’s enthusiasm for decorative displays was unparalleled."

"They could use a break. Fuck it, we could use a break too." Sirius said, breathing out long and slow. "I don't think I remember the last time I had a Christmas like this."

An uncomfortable truth, if ever there was one. Undoubtedly, the cells in Azkaban were not bedecked with tinsel and holly - unspirited, those Dementors. Regulus shook his head as he flicked lightly at a bauble. "I would say we can make up for lost time, but fifteen some-odd years in one sounds like an overwhelming commitment to frivolity."

"It'd probably be mawkish if you did. Baby steps, baby brother." Sirius retrieved the tinsel, which left parts of itself embedded in the carpets, and there it would likely remain till the end of time. "I think I'd happily settle for everyone to leave the day in a good mood. It might involve dragging Harry out from his self-imposed solitude, I really don't want him picking up all my bad habits. Ah, that reminds me - how's the research going?"

"It’s going."

"Lupin mentioned the Dark Lord’s muggle records, though I have not decided what to do with that yet," he admitted - for rare as it was that he found a source he could not wriggle his way towards, muggle record-keeping may well be one of them.

"I'd say ask Harry about it, but he's still disturbed by his accidental slipping into his mind." Sirius hmmed thoughtfully. "You can't use Legilimency to link two minds, can you? I thought it was yours with another, but I've never looked into it that much. I think the swot genes went entirely to you."

"According to my understanding of Legilimency, it is restricted to the caster and the target. That is not to say it cannot be modified with the right skill and motivation, or we would never develop new spells, but I’ve never heard of such a modification, nor have I ever attempted it."

"I don't know," Sirius said, leaning back against the chair. "I'm trying to figure out if either Voldemort's an animagus, he has a truly special bond with his snake - not a sentence I ever wanted to utter - or if Harry's just having a bad reaction to it. The new body is supposed to be a little serpentine."

"The recent attack, right?" Regulus clarified, lifting his brow. "I recall Harry mentioning the snake bite, but he was watching it happen, right? Wouldn’t that imply the Dark Lord was merely observing?"

"Not exactly," Sirius looked pained for a moment. "But Dumbledore doesn't want it discussed with him, and it's starting to drive me crazy, let alone him. There is a difference between an animal mind and a human one, I've got some experience in the area, and I'm inclined to trust him. I don't want to lie to him and say everything's fine when it may not be."
“I think it’s quite obvious that everything is not fine,” Regulus remarked with a soft and derisive snort, yet his brother’s phrasing was a curiosity in itself as the previous question slotted into place. The lines of conversation seemed random, and perhaps his brother’s mind was simply firing off random thoughts, but somehow he doubted it when Sirius kept circling back to Harry and the attack. “Is the difference between an animal mind and a human mind the thing in question?” His pause was brief, leaving little room for a response before he added, “Hm- Let me see if I am understanding this correctly: Are you speculating whether the Dark Lord might have linked Harry with the snake rather than himself?”

"It sounds ridiculous when you say it out loud," Sirius said, shaking it off. "But Harry does speak snake, so maybe it's linked to that."

“The two girls mentioned that when they were telling me about the basilisk set loose in the school,” Regulus said thoughtfully, shaking his head. “Perhaps it’s a coincidence, but it’s interesting that the Dark Lord was using mental magic in that instance, as well. Possession, rather than Legilimency, but—” A thought struck him. In the case of the diary, the Dark Lord seemed to be channeling his control through a horcrux in close proximity, one that Ginny Weasley interacted with regularly...could it be...? “The Weasleys’ father - I can’t recall his name - did he have anything on his person that he would not usually have?” (Regulus doubted still that they had a true awareness of the horcruxes, with the way they spoke of such instances, but perhaps the father had been targeted as a carrier, just as the daughter had been…)

"I don't think so," Sirius considered. "But it was a normal, if large, snake that bit him. I'd forgotten Voldemort had a pet one until Fred reminded me."

“I see,” Regulus said thoughtfully, though he could not discount the possibility that they merely could not pinpoint the object as being particularly meaningful. The diary had seemed unremarkable to them. This repeat connection to the Weasleys in particular was strange, but notable to consider, at the very least. They were purebloods, it’s true, but not of any particularly special lineage, and certainly not respected - but the things happening to them were not particularly respectable, either. Alternately, perhaps it was unrelated to the horcruxes entirely, and the Dark Lord truly had devised a way to inflict Legilimency between two outside individuals; or perhaps information was disseminating inaccurately as it trickled from person to person, and the ordeal really had been a simple viewing through the Dark Lord’s eyes that was being escalated.

The latter was not particularly interesting to consider, but the first two - they may well be worth a ponder. “Curious, this whole situation,” Regulus added, “but that seems to be the running theme.”

"I've lost you to study possibilities, haven't I? You've got that look." Far from accusatory, the tone was almost affectionate. "I need to finish this decorating. Perhaps we'll all get a break over the holidays."

Before Regulus could respond, their mother’s screeching blasted from below, signaling the entrance of another undesirable. He looked downward, as if the floor would clear away and reveal the culprit, then back to Sirius again with a tight smile. “Best of luck,” he said with a hand lifted in farewell, though he was not entirely sure how well his brother actually heard him.

Regulus had nearly reached the bottom of the ground floor staircase when the Dark Mark burned hot beneath his sleeve, slithering a wash of black ink over the angry red lines. Wincing, he prickled with annoyance and rubbed a thumb along his forearm in some faint attempt to dull the sting. Hermione, it seemed, was the one who had set off his mother, and when she looked back at him, he subtly shifted his arms to cross over his chest.

“Allow me.”
From the corner of the parlour where he was observing a bundle of ivy, Regulus could see Kreacher peering down the hall, mumbling something at what could be literally anyone else in this house except for himself, given the sneering expression.

Perhaps it was the infectious Christmas spirit, or perhaps it was a lingering empathy for (near-)murdered fathers, but Regulus felt a small twinge on their behalf. Though he never asked for the chaotic presence of the Weasleys, Harry, or Hermione, they truly were not as bad as his childhood self would have expected - the twins were close, but even they had not made themselves an enemy - and as his relationship with Sirius began its delicate mending process again, he felt an almost... accommodating wave wash up on the edges of his mind. Sirius had always been terrible to Kreacher, and for that, Regulus could hardly blame the elf for his sour opinion of the other remaining member of the Black household, but Hermione had attempted kindness, and the others did not appear to be mistreating him, at the very least.

Combative history aside, the hostilities felt more and more out of place, and although their returning guests seemed to brush off the insults with little lasting damage, Regulus thought it was as appropriate a time as any to try and explain the current set up to Kreacher. It was an unpleasant state, bitterness, and perhaps Kreacher could use an excuse to shed some of that too.

Approaching the elf, Regulus felt a strange anxiety flutter in his chest. Kreacher was not a direct danger to him, not the way his fellow witches and wizards would be, but Regulus had done little in the way of explaining himself - at least not to those who were likely to feel he ought to have maintained his previous points of view. His brother, the Order, the teenagers - they might doubt his intentions to varying degrees, but that was quite a different sort of doubt.

“Kreacher,” he said, drawing the elf’s attention as he sat in a chair near to the door, “I would like to speak with you for a moment.”

Without delay, Kreacher moved to his side. “What does Master Regulus require?”

“It is about our guests,” Regulus began, and the elf visibly cringed. “I understand that their presence been causing you some degree of distress.”

“Kreacher mourns for his Mistress’s memory, for the defilement of the Master’s great house…” Kreacher muttered, wringing his hands.

Again, Regulus felt discomfort settling in his stomach, but he pressed on. “This may be difficult to take in, but I would like to minimise the hostilities among our residents, both permanent and temporary. I have already spoken to Sirius about his behavior,” - at that, Kreacher’s expression visibly soured - “and as we both know, that is a continual work in progress. Until I say otherwise, I would like you to refrain from referring to our visitors using offensive terminology - terms like mudblood, blood traitor, filth-”

“Nasty scourge, stain upon this house?”

Regulus nodded. “It’s probably best to avoid those too.”

A sort of pained expression twisted on Kreacher’s wrinkled face, over-large eyes focused intently on Regulus. “Master Regulus acts strangely, not like himself, since the cave…”

Leaning forward, Regulus clasped his hands atop his knees. “I know it seems that way, but I need for you to trust me. I will not ask you to be kind to those who are cruel to you,” Regulus clarified, though he suspected Sirius would be the worst of the offenders. “You need only speak neutrally to
those who are kind or neutral in return. Anyone who speaks to you disrespectfully is disqualified, at that time, from any protective restrictions on your word usage.”

“The mudblood’s existence is disrespectful to this house…”

Regulus lifted his brow again, thinking to himself that there was certainly a time when that would have been offense enough. He had to commend the elf’s thoroughness. “I’m afraid that’s not sufficient.”

The discomfort on Kreacher’s face twisted to a pinch. “My Mistress’s heart would break…”

“Look at me,” Regulus said quietly, and the elf did. “I would never want to hurt her. You know I wouldn’t.” The tormented expression remained on the house-elf’s face, but he nodded, nonetheless. “This family means more to me than anything - protecting them, protecting you, is my ultimate priority. The situation simply...grows more complicated by the day, and we must learn to adapt. There are those who deserve our bitterness even more; their time will come, so we needn’t waste it on those who are not antagonising us.”

Kreacher remained uncertain in his expression, but he nodded again, eyes locked searchingly on Regulus. “If Master wills it…”

“Well, if anyone is unkind to you,” Regulus added firmly. “You deserve their respect far more than they know, and I will not permit their mistreatment.”

The elf’s conflict again smoothed to devotion as he nodded his head. “Master Regulus is kind.”

“We'll make it through all of this. Worry not.”

As Kreacher bowed himself away, Regulus watched as the start of a smile formed on his face, the tension beginning to loosen in his chest again.

One down - the remainder of his family and friends to go.

With his mother quieted, their dinner eaten, and Kreacher’s impolite commentary finally breached, Regulus settled into the study to record his curiosities from speaking with Sirius:

**Known**

**H- Obj. (Spec. or Ord.)**

*C: M*

*D: BV & ?*

*E: Pos.*

1. **SL (X) - BV, no pos.**
2. **Unk. (used?) - spell (GMFTI CPOF CMPPE)**
3. **TRD? TR → DL (TR: UPN SJEEMF) (X - HP) - BV, pos. (G)**
   
   *M (16) → TRD*
   
   *LM → G*
4. **WF (SA)?**

**Investigate**

*-D: Other?*

*-HC? RD? GS?*
He could not decide if it was more interesting to explore the possibility of the Weasley father’s accidental interaction with a horcrux, or if it was more interesting to explore the possibility of extending Legilimency to forge between two outside individuals (with an animal as one of them, at that). The former seemed most obvious, despite the clear lack of any lead beyond asking (probably quite suspiciously) about the items in the man’s proximity - yet he wondered, from a magical experimentation perspective, whether Legilimency really could be used as such. A three-way link, perhaps, projecting into two minds at once? Perhaps in conjunction with Occlumency, leaving only the other two to link? The train of thought was increasingly fascinating and increasingly worrisome, for if the Dark Lord recognised the connection with Harry Potter enough to devise such a situation...

Suddenly, Hermione came into the study and sat down without preamble. She stayed silent for a moment, perhaps debating what she wanted to say if anything, then she must have made up her mind. "I'm working on a hypothesis," she said. "But I'm not sure what it means if I'm right, or how everything fits together if I'm wrong."

Drawn from his thoughts, Regulus looked up. "What is your hypothesis?" he asked, neatly folding up his notes to slip them in the pocket of his robes again.

"I've been thinking about it," Hermione said, in a measured tone. "And the only thing that makes sense is that you were, before you left, one of Voldemort's followers."

Regulus’s hand retracted from his robes, and he stilled, eyes flicking over to her exacting stare. There were individuals in and out of the house that she could have feasibly heard it from - her seemingly-good-friend Harry Potter included - but those who knew were aware of it as a certainty, and strangely, her hypothesizing was inconsistent with a tattler. A Death Eater assumption was not a far leap in a house like this, he knew, and yet:

"You think so?" Regulus responded carefully, closing his inkwell.

"The evidence is mounting," Hermione admitted. "But everyone seems to know, so I don't think you still are. Or I suppose you might be, but you don't disappear the way Professor Snape does, so I don't think so."

Tipping his head slightly, Regulus thought to himself that this muggle-born teenager was being awfully matter-of-fact about a revelation that technically targeted her, but he would rather be peered at like a puzzle than like a murderer, so he opted not to contest the point. Whatever her thoughts on the matter, lying about it would do him no favours in the end when so many knew already. There were better, more protected secrets to keep.

"I'm not," he conceded, "but I was when I was your age, yes."
"I thought so," Hermione said, leaning back on the chair so she was almost at a slouch. "And everyone already knows?"

Regulus subtly lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug. "I cannot speak for everyone in the house or for those in the Order. I know the people who knew at the time, and I know the people I have directly addressed it with since returning, but I can only assume the information was passed along to the pertinent parties," he responded, folding his hands loosely in his lap. "There was apparently a meeting prior to my inclusion in the fidelius, so I would guess as much."

"If the Headmaster knows, then I'd think so." Hermione concluded. She was, however, still staring. "Is that why you came back? Because he did?"

For a moment, Regulus paused - a loaded question, certainly - but in the return, at least, Regulus had nothing to feel guilty about. "To state it simply, one could say that was the reason," he began, "For a long time, I assumed the Dark Lord’s initial defeat was the end of it, but clearly, that was not the case. While he yet remains, so too does the responsibility to destroy him and put a stop to the war that formed around." With a heavy sigh, he shook his head. "So here I am."

"But you didn't want anyone to know, because it would have put them in danger to act anything out of the ordinary." Hermione surmised. "You thought it through."

Regulus nodded. "Defection was dangerous for them, too - not just me - so it was safer to disappear, especially with our family’s more volatile allegiances, as of late.” He let out a soft huff. “Most of them are gone now, of course…but Kreacher and Narcissa remained safe, at least. Sirius - he already had a target on his back, but I would not have made it better, that is for certain.” (But Bella, locked away in Azkaban…)

"So you want him gone because your life is on hold until he is?" Hermione asked.

“My life here, perhaps,” Regulus granted, “but not exactly. I've been living just fine, and realistically, I could go back if I wanted.” That village in France rose to his mind, though somehow, it felt strange to imagine going back in the thick of all of this - a hazy possibility, and yet at the same time, not a possibility at all. “There is more than one reason to want him gone, and in truth, too many people have died, both at the Dark Lord’s command and in his name. He needs to be stopped, so I will contribute what I can to that cause.” Regulus crinkled his nose. “But he threw my life off kilter, too.”

Hermione watched him thoughtfully. "What are you looking for?"

“My place in all of this, I suppose you could say,” Regulus responded vaguely, though he assumed it was not what she was asking.

"Then you might want to try asking some of the people who know more about it than you probably do," Hermione said, boldly. "We've all been through quite a lot, and whether the Order like it or not, we're involved, and if I'm going to fail my Defence exams, I'd at least like it to be for a useful reason. Not to mention we have enough people shutting themselves away in various corners of this house at the moment - that reminds me, eat nothing Fred or George have touched, their experiments are getting out of hand - but honestly, the DA is more cohesive than this place. It's a bit silly, when everyone wants the same thing."

“Presumptuous of you, assuming what I do or don't know,” Regulus said dryly, lifting his brow. “I’ve been inquiring as necessary. Until I can ensure my situation will not crumble out from under me, I intend to proceed with caution...And I will extend that caution to the Weasley twins, though I suspected as much already.”
"Maybe," Hermione admitted, pushing herself off the chair. "But it's frustrating to see everyone in their separate corners. Speaking of, I'm going to go chase Harry out from his."

Regulus thought it was not so strange to be isolated in respective corners, but he did not argue it as she stood and disappeared or the door again with ceremony or delay. Collaborating with the Order - though he found them to be decent enough thus far, his success in his mission (as well as his ticket out of Azkaban) relied on the protection of the horcruxes until he could solidify the security of such a granting of knowledge on his own part. They were helpful enough, for now, and he could not expect a teenager who scarcely knew him to understand the complexities of his position. Slowly, he released a sigh, and when the door stilled behind her, Regulus returned to his materials, unfolding the notes once again.

Just days from Christmas, Regulus felt the spirit of the holidays escalating around them, and though the familiar summer holidayers were the ones to settle in for a stay as Christmas holidayers, Regulus noticed an influx of the come-and-go visits. They were clearly in on the fidelius charm and could interact freely, with the obvious conclusion being that they were members of the Order of the Phoenix, or at the very least, trusted supporters. Most were a trickle of unfamiliar faces: Tonks was the only one among the irregular guests that he could now identify with confidence (when she was presenting herself in a familiar fashion, though he supposed there was no way of knowing, were she to present otherwise). Alastor Moody was a name he knew, but (fortunately) Regulus had never had a face to put with it, prior to this Christmas. Interaction with Auror Moody had never been of interest to him as an adolescent, and even now, he could do without it. Among the new faces and the old faces was a woman he was admittedly uncertain about - around his age, brown hair, delicate features, and a more dignified disposition than he would have traditionally expected from the band of vigilantes (and there was a growing list of things he had not traditionally expected from the band of vigilantes). She looked oddly familiar, most likely from school, but placing a name from memory alone proved unsuccessful.

Hovering close enough to pick up her name from a conversation with Lupin - Emmeline, which also sounded vaguely familiar - he tucked it away among the other names he had been learning. Tonks, Kingsley, Hestia were all new to him - a man named ‘Dung’ was referenced as having popped in and out on occasion. Though he and Regulus had never been formally introduced in all the months holed away in this house, Regulus speculated that it was the man who always looked like he’d just rolled out of a rubbish pile. Appropriately named, he was, if that conclusion was accurate. There was another Weasley, too, a young man named Bill, and apparently there was another Weasley, still, who was called Charlie and worked with dragons in Romania.

Hosting occasional Christmases when they were children, Regulus knew the number of people present in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place had swelled as much then as it did now, but never had so many non-family members walked these halls, and certainly not all at once. It was strange, still, and a very different sort of ‘lively.’

Regulus sat in the drawing room now while the majority of the house listened to a Celestina Warbeck Christmas special on the wireless on the far side near the piano (or rather, certain individuals were listening while others mocked it freely). He had completed one of the novels Lupin had left and snagged another, though if Lupin had noticed, he had said nothing about it. Nonetheless, it was not forbidden muggle literature, but rather a text detailing a variety of mental-focused magic that Regulus was presently flipping through. He did not doubt his own theoretical knowledge of Legilimency and Occlumency, but it had been some time since he had even thought about attempting anything more than a basic mental shield. Sirius had made it sound as though the Order was avoiding discussion of the Legilimency issue, so this current text was perhaps more general than was strictly ideal, but the last thing he needed was anyone getting grumpy about it.
Lupin had said so himself that leaving the house was not out of the question for Regulus, at least - perhaps he could venture out and see what the shops and libraries had to say about experimental and theoretical use of mind magic.

When again he looked up, he saw that Emmeline was investigating the bookshelf nearby and that Lupin, too, had found a chair and a book to occupy himself a few paces away (and Hermione, a few paces further still, knitting what looked like little hats and blankets). Tipping his head slightly, he followed Emmeline’s eye gaze to see which titles she was investigating.

"I was so sure I'd seen it," Emmeline muttered to herself, before reaching up on her tiptoes to investigate the bookshelf. She made a noise of frustration. "Does someone have the final volume of Jigger's Opuscule? I was sure I'd seen it here."

"Isn't that a bit low level for you?" Lupin said, though the tone was teasing.

"The first ones are very general, yes," Emmeline shook her head in his general direction, "But the latter ones are quite hard to find, and Nightshade's Necromancy had it in its footnotes...I've never seen a full copy of the final volume before. I heard they'd been confiscated, on account of Jigger going quite mad."

"We have them," Regulus remarked, lowering his book to his lap and twisting around with a gesture. "If I recall correctly, the whole series can be found near the bottom of the far-right shelf, including the final volume...assuming they haven’t been moved. For the most part, the shelves are organised by related subjects, so you will find other potions texts down there as well, should you require them."

"Thank you," Emmeline said, scanning the far right. "But I think they have been. It's not really a requirement, I just wanted to know if he really did start blathering on about secret courts and assassins hiding in the Department of Mysteries in the middle of explaining equivalent exchange in ingredients. I should probably find something more productive to do than sate my own curiosity."

"Nothing wrong with sating a bit of curiosity. Jigger’s final volume is quite entertaining," Regulus said, lifting his brow. "I apparently have need to rearrange the bookshelves, but if you decide you are, in fact, attached to an exploration of Jigger’s conspiracy theories, I can keep those particular books in mind. If not, I must say there is something to be said for productivity, and there is plenty of material for that, as well."

"Who said it was a conspiracy theory?" Emmeline said. "Have you seen the Department of Mysteries?"

"A fair point," Regulus conceded with an amused huff. "I admittedly have not. Have you?"

"I couldn’t tell you," Emmeline said, before adding, "Little work related humour there."

"Unspeakable, I take it?" Regulus concluded wryly. "Very mysterious, indeed. That sounds like an unfair advantage in investigating Jigger’s sweeping claims, if ever I’ve heard one."

"I wouldn't call it an unfair advantage," Emmeline said. "I'd call it making use of excellent, available resources."

"Have you ever seen an assassin-shaped form creeping in the shadows as you do whatever it is you do, then?" Regulus asked, folding his hands loosely atop his book.

"Would I be able to talk about it if I did?" Emmeline pointed out, taking another book, seemingly at random. "Personally, I think he had a little too much herbological experimentation and saw a
lethifold or something of the like.”

“And you’ve never done anything of the sort,” Remus commented dryly, without looking up.

“Only in the pursuit of higher knowledge and creativity,” Emmeline said, holding the book to her chest defensively. “And shush, I don’t want the teenagers to think we were some kind of juvenile delinquents.”

“Just vigilantes.” Remus replied.

“Just...concerned citizens putting their study group to a wider and important use after NEWTs,” Emmeline said.

“Wouldn’t want to act irresponsibly,” Regulus remarked in return. “Conveniently enough, perspective can support that argument in either direction.”

"The pursuit of knowledge can lead to some pretty risky things.” Emmeline opened the book, coughing at the light layer of dust. "I think that's why there's a restricted section at Hogwarts - to see who wants to read them badly enough to find a way to do so."

"Motivation is a powerful thing,” Regulus agreed with a prickle of nostalgia at the back of his mind. Years of gradual exploration had served his own curiosity well, extending prefect rounds beyond their bounds, misdirecting Filch as needed... “I was drawn into that curiosity, myself: an excellent exercise in creativity. Some texts were more disappointing than others when I could read them at home, but I found it to be worth the efforts, nonetheless.”

"Not everyone has their own library,” Emmeline said with a smile. "Some of us had to rely on the Hogwarts one before we could get our mits on the Ministry texts."

“I suppose that’s true,” Regulus granted with a half-smile of his own, shaking his head. For some time after leaving home, he’d suffered such a libraryless existence - and though being alive without a library was still better than dead with a library, the lack of free access had been unexpectedly jarring. “I missed this one quite a lot.”

"It's certainly eclectic," Emmeline said. "Were they hand-chosen? Or just things that've been handed down?"

“A mix of both,” Regulus answered, eyes raking over the stretch of bookcases along the wall. “Many have been in this house for generations, while others have been accumulated more recently based on our own personal interests. The more advanced texts were typically kept in our father’s study, which Sirius and I did not have much access to as children, but I imagine he contributed to the library in there, as well.”

“An occupation or just an engaging hobby?”

For a moment, Regulus looked thoughtful. “For my father? The books were more of a hobby than anything, for the most part, but he specialised in wards for objects and locations alike. Books that contributed to that pool of knowledge I suppose could be categorised as occupational...but in truth, he did not discuss it much.”

"I thought it was just a shared interest," Emmeline admitted, sitting down finally. "Or do you just tend to know every book here?"

“I do read a lot,” Regulus said with a quirk of the mouth, “I’ve been away for a while, but I would venture to say I have a pretty good idea.”
"That's some memory," Emmeline said, with a nod. "Is it a natural talent? You didn't see all that many Quidditch players back school who were very concerned with detail-oriented study."

“I suppose one did not.” Wryly, Regulus shook his head. Though it sounded like an insult to the intelligence of the average Quidditch player, she was not entirely wrong about the average players’ priorities. “I enjoyed Quidditch immensely, but not at the expense of my education.”

"Quidditch is alright," Emmeline said, with a shrug. "It's just a bit too adrenalin-fueled for me."
She turned to Remus, who had openly opened his mouth, "Yes, I know, vigilantism, but I'm a fair dueler, and idiots who muck about with magic without any respect for it really-" she took a look to the other side of the room, "-fries my bacon."

"Fries your bacon?" Remus couldn't keep the amusement out of his voice.

"There are children in the room!" Emmeline retorted with a loud whisper.

"There are teenagers in the room," Remus corrected her. "I'm sure one of them can give you a list of the appropriate language."

"Alright, it's me off, alright?" Emmeline said, "Magic is a gift, not something to be used whenever- if you're laughing at me, I'm going to throw- no, I won't throw the book at you, it's old, and it isn't mine, but something."

“Nothing breakable, please,” Regulus interjected.

"I'm not really going to-" Emmeline huffed in annoyance. "I don't know why I put up with any of you."

"Low standards," Remus interjected, before looking back to Regulus. "Company excluded."

"Can we go back to discussing research methods, please?" Emmeline asked. "Some of us would like the war to end as quickly as possible."

“I'm in favour of research methods,” Regulus said with a nod, and with a carefully even expression, he added, “You're in charge of the Department of Mysteries assassin investigation, yes? This theoretical entity could be of hypothetical use.”

"Which entity is that?" Emmeline asked.

“The theoretical assassins, of course,” he responded in a matter-of-fact tone.

"I don't know how much use theoretical assassins would be," Emmeline shrugged. "They probably have their own motives, and without knowing what they'd want in return, I really don't feel at all comfortable seeking out these alleged assassins for possible war-ending uses. It could be a waste of everyone's time."

“You are the one who brought the assassins up,” Regulus pointed out with a lift the brow, his tone light as he leaned back in his chair and propped his chin on the back of his hand. “But more conventional methods are worth exploring, as well.”

“I'm not against the possibility, I'm just doubting the useful nature of an assassin against a Dark Lord who is part feline,” Emmeline smiled, then elaborated. “Seems to have nine lives.”

Regulus nose crinkled in genuine distaste. Joke though it had been, the thought of hunting down nine horcruxes (six, perhaps, in the absence of the locket, diary, and whatever had brought him
back this time) sounded awful. Hopefully the Dark Lord did not have a fondness for the numerical significance found in cat jokes.

“"I certainly hope not,” Regulus said dryly, “He’s had quite enough of them already.”

“"Hear, hear.” Emmeline agreed and held up the book. “I'll still look into those shadowy assassins as a backup, though. It's always best to have a contingency plan.”

The pinched expression loosened to something more like the tilt of a smile. “"I do like contingency plans,” Regulus admitted.

“"So I guessed,” Emmeline smiled. “Who fakes their death and then returns incognito to continue a vengeful campaign? Other than someone highly dramatic, someone whose plans have plans, that's who.”

“An accurate assessment.” The hint of a smile started to strengthen on Regulus’s face. “I don't know that I would call myself dramatic,” - though it was hardly the first time the word had been assigned to him, strangely enough - “but I pride myself on being as thorough as I am motivated, and I am highly motivated.”

"The grandiose ancient monument with high ceilings and ancient library to pour over books by gaslight? The stealing away into the night to escape a seemingly inevitable situation only to return over a decade later, armed with grim determination and a continental accent?" Emmeline pointed the book at him. "I really don't know how you can't label it dramatic."

Huffing softly, Regulus shook his head with half-smothered amusement. ""Well, when you phrase it that way, of course it sounds dramatic.”

"Is there a way to phrase it that encompasses the magnitude of the situation that doesn’t sound dramatic?” she asked.

For a pause, Regulus wore a thoughtful expression.

"There is a certain weight to it all,” he conceded after a moment, looking over to her with amusement crinkling subtly around his eyes in contrast to the neutral line of his mouth. “I will grant you that.”

"Everyone has their own particular weight to carry here." Emmeline tipped her head. "Perhaps we're all a bit dramatic, then."

"Perhaps so,” Regulus echoed with a drawn sigh. ""Dire situations call for reciprocal action, and this certainly qualifies as such a situation.”

"That's a very dramatic way of calling for vengeance and retaliation," Emmeline pointed out. "I think you may just have to accept that you live a very dramatic life. It may be genetic."

“Perhaps. My life was actually mind-numbingly undramatic for quite some years. I suppose now is the time to make up for it.” Lifting his brow, Regulus quirked his mouth and shook his head. “Such is my burden.”

"A small price to pay for the rare objects," Emmeline told him. "And second chances, but mostly the rare objects."

For a jarring moment, it almost sounded to his ears as if she was referring to the obtaining of horcruxes, but it took only a fleeting second for Regulus to connect that she was referring to the
house and all of its rarities. Subtly releasing a breath he did not realise he'd held, a little smile pulled at Regulus’s mouth.

“Mostly the rare objects,” Regulus agreed as he settled back into his chair to take his book in hand again, “One must have priorities, of course.” With a feather-light mood drifting down, the corner settled again into their reading.

Chapter End Notes

References that Sirius and Regulus make to past Christmases in this chapter (and the next chapter) can be found in our Black family Christmas mini-series, the holiday holly bears a berry (as red as any blood). It's not required for understanding these chapters, but for anyone interested in some of their childhood Christmases, feel free to pop over in that direction as well! There is still one more chapter (Regulus and Sirius POV) to be added to the Christmas mini-series, as of this moment, but it will also be posted very soon.
Winter burned cold against Regulus’s face as he stepped into Diagon Alley for the first time in far too many years - and out into the fresh air for the first time in far too many months. His short-cropped hair was hidden beneath a knitted hat, the swept fringe just barely peeking out above his eyes, and a thick black scarf was wrapped snugly, tucked into his cloak. He had not announced his departure to the house at large - to tell Sirius felt as though he was rubbing it in his face, and the majority of the other residents may not even notice he was gone. Instead, it was Lupin who Regulus informed as a point of contact on the off-chance anyone did need him, though it felt more a precaution than a legitimate likelihood.

With an exhilarating sense of freedom, Regulus soaked in the sight of wizarding London spread out before him with its baubles and decor. Magical flowers defied the chilly weather, greens and reds and enchanted shimmers assaulted the eye from every storefront, and many of the shoppers strode about in Christmas jumpers, red and white cloaks, and holly hair adornments to celebrate the season.

The London skies would give them no snow today, it seemed, but certain storefronts had charmed their own magical flurries where children gathered to make the tiniest snowmen while their parents presumably completed their last-minute shopping. Regulus permitted a soft smile to settle on his face as he saw a little girl casting a charm to harden her snowy hat to ice before she placed it atop the snowman’s head, and a more wry expression as two boys - perhaps brothers, perhaps friends - made snowballs that were certain to land on targets they ought not.

Slipping into Flourish and Blotts, he felt an overwhelming nostalgia, breathing in the smell and looking around at the isles - remarkably no different than he remembered. In his youth, he had spent countless hours exploring these shelves: every set of spells, every bit of history, every tale of magical adventure the shop had to offer. So many of them now sat nestled on the shelves at home, but it seemed that for every book he owned, there were several more he did not as new texts flowed in over time.

Indulgent though it was, he spent some time wandering the sections, flipping through novels and experimental charms, through artifact compilations and theoretical debates, but when at last he reached the section for mental magic, his attention focused to a point, scanning each title for anything that was likely to expand on Legilimency.

For some time, he stood there flipping through the sections of book after book, setting aside those that might be worth perusing further and reshelving those that likely would not. The quickest skims did not indicate any developments toward the projection of mental connections, but even if it wasn’t possible, refreshing his own memory on the theoretical workings of Legilimency and Occlumency, both, would not be a terrible idea.

Settling on the text with the greatest depth and breadth of content, he brave the lines with the self-scolding admittance that entering any store three days before Christmas was an absolutely terrible idea, and he really ought to have known better. He managed to browse through three rather lengthy sections of the book before he finally paid for it and left - funds he had repossessed from his younger self. Though he knew it was his own, it still felt strange, prodding in his room to see if those funds were still there. (In truth, he really did need to exchange his French currency back into galleons and sickles and the like, but it seemed best to avoid Gringott’s for now.) The purchase
closed without a hitch, and as he stepped back into the cold, he had half a mind to return immediately to the house - yet his eyes were instead drawn to the window of a toy store.

A tiny toy dragon was blowing what may or may not be real fire, a ball was bouncing itself next to a wizarding chess set, and a snitch (undoubtedly restricted for not-yet-flying children) was zipping around inside the display box. When he peeked his head in, he could hear the twinkling sounds of a music box: sprouting from the top was an unfolded flower, short-stemmed with petals that floated and shifted with the music. He had been too old for this place by the time he'd left, but a nostalgic wave washed warm and familiar as he stepped inside.

A small man with snow white hair and a caterpillar mustache to match approached from the side, clapping his hands together at the chest. “Seeking something for a child in your life, or perhaps a child at heart?”

On Regulus's face, a smile loosened the line of his mouth; along the wall, he saw the set of magical creatures that the display case dragon must have come from. “Something like that.”

“Should you need anything, just ask,” the man said kindly.

“Of course,” Regulus responded with a nod before stepping away to examine the figurines more closely.

Nostalgia washed warmer as he picked up the Peruvian Vipertooth with its golden scales and flapping wings. Though it had been statue-still on the shelf, it came to ‘life’ when it contacted his fingers, wriggling and spreading its wings wide. He’d had a toy quite similar - a birthday present from his brother, gifted the summer before Sirius went to Hogwarts - along with a number of other magical creatures in the set. The charm on those figures had required a stroke along their back to trigger the charm, but as he set the golden dragon toy on his palm, it lifted to its hindlegs of its own accord.

Again, the toy stilled when he set it on the shelf amongst the myriad creatures: hippogriffs, unicorns, crups, any number of beasts with varying degrees of rarity. There was plenty to look at, but when his eyes fell on the grim, it was his brother he thought of - an eleven-year-old Sirius trying to scare Regulus with his own birthday present for a solid month before the preparations for Hogwarts really took hold. Somehow, it seemed appropriate that his brother’s animagus form was a massive black dog.

Realistically, he had to wonder if the person making grim toys were making them accurately - creating a toy version seemed low priority for anyone who was actually dealing with the fatal fallout of ‘seeing a grim’ - but perhaps it wasn’t such a bad thing to approximate a supposed sign of impending death a little more loosely.

Picking up the black dog-like creature, he felt it wriggle between his fingers as if it was swimming in the air, and with a wry, lopsided smile, he began walking toward the line to purchase.

Snow fluttered down from a deep grey sky, the sun hanging low behind the thick line of flurry-dusted trees filling the park across the street. Spread over the ground was a thin blanket of snow, still unmarred as far as Regulus could see, though to the right there was a young (presumably muggle) boy standing just outside the door of a townhome further down the street, holding out his hand as if to try and grasp the flakes in his mittened fist.

Christmas Eve had fallen upon Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, and with it, the first snow Regulus had experienced in some time. He could not say what percentage of the Order of the
Phoenix was milling about his home, but every person that Regulus had seen pass through the halls over the past six months was in attendance, with the exception of Severus Snape (and Arthur Weasley, who he had overheard was still at St. Mungo’s for the time being).

What had begun as a surreal experience remained exactly that as a motley gathering of people from all Houses, blood backgrounds, and age categories settled into his home in preparation for the Christmas Eve supper Molly Weasley had been preparing. It sounded like the start of some saccharine debate, or perhaps a joke, but this was his 1995 Christmas reality, and the temptation to laugh at the absurdity of it had been bubbling gently at the back of his throat for some time, muddled with a little pinch of anxiety as he watched some of the teenagers (the older boys) playing exploding snap a little closer to the family tapestry than he strictly preferred.

Hermione could again be seen knitting frantically in a corner, and though he didn’t catch what her friends had said to her, she looked rather cross about it. The dirty-looking man, Dung, was eying the ceiling and tops of the cabinets in a way that made Regulus a little bit nervous. Though he’d never caught the man digging through the Black family's belongings, he’d heard tell of Dung’s sticky fingers, and he felt less forgiving of a legitimate thief than he did a couple of teenagers who wanted to see what kind of curses they could uncover.

Just a few paces away, Remus was shuffling up from his seat and gathering his nearby things, drawing Regulus's attention from suspicion to curiosity.

“Where are you off to?” he asked as Remus slipped today's muggle book into a bag.

"Home," Remus said, before looking out the window at the snow and back again. "I suppose it hasn't been home since I was eighteen, so my Dad's would be more accurate. I'll be back early, but I didn't realise how many things I left scattered about this place."

“Good call, gathering them up, lest they vanish, as things sometimes do around here,” Regulus remarked, glancing again to the other side of the room before looking back to Remus.

Remus huffed a laugh, "This is what happens when you consort with criminals. Or people who take things and wander off with them, rather than putting them back where they got them. I assume the reason I have some books back where I left them is you?"

“Who really knows?” Regulus said vaguely, despite the half-smile, though he scrubbed away after only a moment. He had wondered if Remus would notice the missing books, with the size of his collection, but perhaps he oughtn't have been surprised. Regulus would notice in an instant, were they his own. “Vanishing, appearing out of place, appearing in place...This is a house of great mysteries.”

"That sounds like one of my books," Remus chuckled. "The mystery of Number Twelve will have to wait until the war is over. Then I imagine it would make a very good book."

“It's not the only mystery around here that would make a compelling story,” Regulus responded with an amused huff of his own.

"Did you like them?” Remus asked, abandoning his bag for a moment. "The books."

For a moment, Regulus thought about denying it, but instead granted a small nod. “Surprisingly enough, yes. Strange, the solutions they came up with, but constructed in an intriguing manner.”

"People tend to be people, magical or not, so many motives tend to remain familiar," Remus said, clearly pleased with the answer. "Aside from the teen werewolf fiction. I've never experienced a
'love triangle', let alone one with a Mummy. Quality work can be hard to find."

Regulus made a small sound of amusement. “A love triangle with a mummy? I can't say I've ever experienced that, either.”

"Banshee, then?" Remus asked.

“Not even a banshee,” Regulus said with a wry lilt.

"Shocking," Remus said, dryly. "I'll see if I can find some of the Merlin books tonight, but I can't promise they'll be any more accurate either."

For a moment, Regulus tried to imagine how a muggle might tell the stories of Merlin - accurate was certainly not the expectation he would enter with. “I shall wait with bated breath.”

At that moment, Molly bustled into the room, and having given Dung a cursory scowl, she seemed to notice Remus was getting ready. "Oh, are you off now?"

Remus nodded.

"And you've got the dish I sent?"

"Yes, Molly, thank you." Remus replied, good-naturedly.

"And you'll be back early tomorrow? We want to make sure we get up to the hospital for the full visiting hours," Molly pressed.

"I'll be back early," Remus reassured her, before heading out.

Molly turned to Regulus, "What about you, dear? Are you planning on coming down or do you think it's all going to be a bit much?"

Under different circumstances, the remark might have seemed condescending, but there was a warmth to her manner that made Regulus feel uncomfortable - not because it was negative, but unfamiliar. He did not think she was that much older, perhaps a decade, but Molly Weasley seemed to make a point to mother the group of them, and she had been extending a friendlier hand to him since the night of her husband’s attack. Not unlike the forbidden muggle literature, to accept Molly’s maternal extensions felt like a betrayal to the echo of his own mother down on the ground floor, and without consciously meaning to, his eyes flicked down to the floor, trying to picture the mother of his childhood, with her dark hair and grey eyes, the way she had smoothed his hair when he was young or the way every indication of approval could send his heart leaping, no matter how small.

Instead, his chest clenched, and he forced himself to look up again. It felt a little bit like a betrayal, but even if these people weren’t family, they had begun to include him - purposefully, beyond coexistence - and as foolish as it was, Regulus missed feeling like he had a place to belong, free-floating as he had been.

Christmas Eve was upon them; his relationship with Sirius was mending; the Weasleys were awaiting the recovery of their father’s brush with death; the adults of the Order (with perhaps the exception of Alastor Moody) had stopped looking at him like he was poised to curse them in the back; and perhaps what his mother’s portrait did not know would not be so terrible.

“I have no doubt it will qualify ‘a bit much,’ all things considered,” Regulus started with an even sort of honesty, despite his discomfort, “but I think I will come down, all the same.”
“Wonderful!” Molly beamed with obvious enthusiasm. “The idea of having to spend it alone, well, it doesn't matter now, does it? It's going to be wonderful.”

At that moment, there was the now familiar shriek from downstairs and the now equally familiar yell from Tonks, “Sorry!”

Immediately, Regulus winced, fighting the urge to look downward past the floor again. Instead he nodded, turning his attention to the drawing room door where Tonks appeared just a few minutes later. (He supposed Sirius must have helped her, or perhaps Remus, who had left just a moment before.)

"Wotcher," Tonks said, in her usual greeting. She was wearing a red and white hat with a light-up bauble at the end which kept changing colours. She was met with a half-hearted return, but it didn’t seem to bother her much."You really took ‘deck the halls’ to heart, it looks wicked. It almost looks like someone lives here."

“It’s certainly lively,” Regulus responded, shaking his head a little, “As are you.”

"I’m always lively," Tonks winked, before swinging around a small backpack full of small, higgledy-piggledy wrapped objects. "Can I shove these under the tree? I wrapped them myself this year!"

Eying the packages curiously, Regulus nodded.

"Go ahead.”

"I’ll drop by tomorrow if I can," Tonks said, pushing the things unceremoniously under the tree. "But mum’ll be dead curious if I start skipping out on dessert at Christmas, and obviously, I can’t tell her anything. But Merry Christmas. If I don’t, hopefully no one hates anything; I’m rubbish at Christmas shopping. Remus had to come with me, and I think he was ready to kill me by the end of it; he must have a lot of patience that it took that long."

Discomfort dimmed the edges of Regulus’s mind, the memory of his long-estranged cousin casting like a shadow. Andromeda. He hadn’t seen her since he was a little child, and unlike the constant sting of his brother’s betrayal, Andromeda’s had been conceptual in some ways, happening around him rather than to him - a warning delivered strictly then promptly erased as the traumas escalated with Sirius’s increasing rebellions. Though he knew from a logical perspective that Tonks was Andromeda’s daughter, in a strange way, he couldn’t quite connect them, couldn’t quite see his cousin with an adult daughter, sitting around a dinner table or exchanging Christmas gifts.

“He does seem to be very patient,” Regulus said, uncertain of how to respond to the rest of it.

"I better go find Sirius, Kingsley wants to see where he wants to be next week and get it sorted before he goes home." Tonks didn’t seem to pick up on the awkwardness at all, instead looking around the room to look for Harry. "Next time you start getting visions, think sweepstakes, okay?"

Harry, caught between being cross and finding it funny, looked up from the unfolding chess game. "I don’t think Voldemort's playing the pools," he said, a little uncertainly.

"He might be," Tonks said, though the look on her face indicated she was joking. "Financing a government takeover’s bound to come with a big bill. Even the Malfoys don't have an endless supply."

"I think someone would notice if a bald bloke with red eyes and no nose walked into a local betting shop," Harry said.

"He could go in disguise, use a pseudonym," Tonks said, "Or an anagram, like Ted Morello or--"
"Tom Marvolo Riddle?" Harry said, dully. In the corner, Ginny snorted hard enough that he looked at her.

Regulus eyed the exchanged curiously, gaze flicking from Tonks to Harry, then Ginny, and back to Harry again. "It's an anagram?" (There was a 'v' in 'Marvolo,' uncommon in most names - yet the full name had a few extra letters in play, when he briefly sounded through a comparison of the two names in his mind.) "Or were you referring to the pseudonym in reverse?"

"I am Lord Voldemort," Harry said, then seemed to awkwardly realise what he'd said. "I'm not, but that's what it's an anagram of."

(The 'i' in Riddle, the 'a' and 'm' in Marvolo-) "Hm." Regulus slanted his mouth in thought. Perhaps it would be worth confirming later, though he didn't doubt it had been confirmed before, with the way it was said so casually. Marvolo- Marvolo Gaunt had been in the lineage book...

"Didn't realise that."

"No one in their right mind would realise it," Hermione huffed, looking up from her crafting. "Who in their right mind decides they don't like their real name and uses an anagram?"

"You're thinking You-Know-Who's in his right mind," Ron pointed out, as one of his pieces demolished Harry's.

Hermione huffed but didn't argue the point. "Probably couldn't find a good use for the U or the J."

"What J and U?" Harry asked.

"Well, if he's got the same name as his father, he would be Tom Riddle Junior, wouldn't he?" Hermione reasoned.

"I don't think it was exactly the same," Harry pointed out, frowning. "He told the Headmaster, the one before Dumbledore, that it was Tom after his father, Marvolo after his grandfather."

"He also told them Hagrid was responsible for Moaning Myrtle," Ginny pointed out grimly. "He's a liar."

"Pardon my interruption, but I think his grandfather's name was Marvolo," Regulus interjected, looking between the four teenagers. "The last three Gaunts were Marvolo, Merope, and Morfin, if I recall correctly. I was trying to remember if Marvolo was the grandfather or the uncle, but they were the last recorded Gaunts, so it would make sense."

"Never heard of them," Ginny shrugged.

"D'you know, normally have the names of every pureblood family memorised?" Tonks pointed out from the doorway, before gesturing with her head to Regulus. "I expect you do; if you're only allowed to marry purebloods, you have to know the names. I don't think Kingsley's family's too bothered about it, it's just happened that way for them."

"Shacklebolt, isn't it?" Regulus responded. He'd overheard references to the name, though most seemed to call the man Kingsley - an easy enough leap to make when there were so few purebloods left, even if Tonks had said it like it was strange. The Gaunts had required research, but the remaining families weren't a secret. The Shacklebolts were among the neutral set, but with Kingsley apparently in the Order, he had to wonder if Kingsley was the isolated exception. The Prewetts had been neutral too, but even if Uncle Ignatius had entangled with the Blacks, Regulus knew the neutrality had been wavering on the other end of the spectrum, too.
The Shacklebolts were not his primary concern in this, of course, but the Gaunts were a subject of greater delicacy. Perhaps it was better to let that trail of thought fade off.

Tonks gave a nod, "He's the Auror in charge of tracking Sirius, so they like to have some fun with it."

“That's convenient,” Regulus commented, lifting an eyebrow.

"No, that's Dumbledore." Tonks said, with a shrug. "He can work the Ministry in a way I've never seen without a lot of galleons being involved."

Thoughtfully, Regulus tipped his head in the slightest nod before turning his gaze from Tonks to the book he had set to the side. That Dumbledore was possessing of both influence and a fighting chance against the Dark Lord was no secret to him. Perhaps his former headmaster would be the best chance for dodging an Azkaban sentence, but it was worrying, the way Sirius described Dumbledore's treatment of Harry's concerns. Perhaps it was merely due to age, but his own interactions with the headmaster had always been distant, despite all those years of school. It was difficult to get a trusting read on someone who was never around.

(Besides, it was just Regulus's luck that Dumbledore was out of favour, even if he were around.)

Looking to Harry again, still playing chess with the youngest of the Weasley boys, Regulus thought again about the snake, about the likelihood of Legilimency and what exactly had happened with Arthur Weasley's attack. Another curious event surrounding Harry Potter, as it was - but it was Christmas Eve, and such curiosities could wait.

Sirius awoke on Christmas morning to the sight of something dark in front of him on the desk that he was quite sure wasn't there before. He started, sending the offending object flying right into the opposing wall, along with the book he must've been reading the night before but had little memory of. He had little memory of coming into the library either. He must've been dead on his feet.

He got up, cautiously moving across the room before poking at the object: what appeared to be a miniature toy of a large, black dog. Who in the hell would leave that there? It looked a little like him, most grims did, but he couldn't think of anyone who'd find it funny to find one and put it there. It didn't look like the kind of thing Remus would put out, he didn't think Harry would find it funny, Tonks, maybe, she had been there the night before, but in the back of his mind, another explanation formed. He did know someone else with a bizarre sense of humour. Someone who had not taken that particular secret very well.

Sirius harrumphed and left to go find his brother. He ran into Hermione, who gave him a somewhat critical eye (he really needed to go and get changed into clothes he hadn't slept in before he went downstairs) and was carrying a few wrapped parcels. He stopped to give Crookshanks a pet on the stairs, noting the addition of what looked like a catnip toy lying just beyond his reach and apparently, it was out of reach, out of mind. By the time he ran into his brother in the study, he could honestly see the funny side - not that he wanted to let on.

"Regulus Arcturus Black." In all honesty, he did not have the inflection to do an impression of either parent, but he could full-name him. He dropped it almost immediately, however. He was unsure if he was more disturbed that he had not awoken or impressed with his brother's ability to sneak about. "You are one sneaky bastard."

Regulus lifted his brow with an expression that might have passed for innocent if not for the keen
recognition in his eyes. “You think so?”

“I don’t know if I like that you can sneak around without waking me up. That doesn’t normally happen,” Sirius said, though it had been quite some time since they’d tested the point. They hadn’t shared a room since they were babies, nor a house common room, and the only occasion he could think of was a bad case of the flu in his teens when he’d dozed off in the dining room. Still, even Remus still woke him up even when he was trying not to. To his knowledge, James had been one of the few people with the capability, another strange contradiction for a bloke who made a racket everywhere he went. He tried to shake the feeling instantly; not today.

“I take it you found your Christmas present,” Regulus responded lightly, watching his brother's face. “I thought it was likely to lose some of the impact, had I made myself known at the time.”

“You’re hysterical,” Sirius deadpanned, tossing the dog from one hand to another. “Is a death threat really necessary? I didn’t move that many books.”

“It’s not really a death threat,” Regulus corrected, “No need to be dramatic about it. But while I’m in the business of settling scores, I haven’t forgotten that summer I turned ten, and you kept hiding the grim figurine all over the house to try and scare me. For all intents and purposes, we’re even on that front now,” he added wryly, and with a nod, he looked to the black dog-like toy in his brother's hand, “Besides, it kind of looks like you - just a little grimmer.”

Sirius burst out laughing; as surely as he’d forgotten it, the memory returned full force. He had gotten so sick of Regulus doing better at his penmanship that he’d decided to mess with him a little bit, and it had been fun. "You really do hold a grudge, don't you?" He wasn't accusing it, just starting a simple fact. "Are you still annoyed I didn't tell you about that?"

“It isn't the thing I am most annoyed about. Just the most readily available,” Regulus granted, and punctuated with raised eyebrows and a dark huff as he added, “On the scale of annoyances, the Dark Lord still has you beat.”

"What's the scale?" Sirius asked. "Between wasisname getting Head Boy over you and systematically destroying the magical world while parading about as its saviour?"

Regulus nodded. "That's essentially the scale, yes," he quipped back dryly, "It's a broad scale."

"No shit," Sirius replied. Still, if he had to choose between the bratty behaviour and sarcasm versus the silence and arguments, he'd take the former every time. There was an exceptional sort of nostalgia to it; he was clearly having fun winding him up, and that had always been the norm between them. Normal was better. "You're not happy if you can't be annoyed about something. You get that from our grandfather."

“IT’s not my fault the world can be such an annoying place,” Regulus countered with a quirk of the mouth.

Sirius rolled his eyes at him. "What is your fault, then?"

“The resolution,” Regulus answered with a quirk of the mouth, waving a hand at the toy. “Clearly.”

"This is the problem when someone dies." Sirius grumbled, sitting down. "You forget that they're obnoxious brats. Actually, I think you've gotten worse. I've half a mind to blame Remus, since you apparently hang out these days."

“More forthright, perhaps,” Regulus commented wryly, “But he is not to blame for that.”
“I like it,” Sirius said, honestly.

“I’m not surprised that you do,” Regulus responded, then sighed as he settled back into his own chair. “Though I’m sure it will come back to bite me eventually.”

“Only if you don't stick to your wand about it.” There was something about this more settled, dare he say it, actually adult mentality instead of playing at one that suited his brother. “Luckily, there has never been a single person you're related to that was not obstinate as all hell once they'd settled on something. It bodes well, if this is the life you want, especially that something not being sadistic or sycophantic shit.”

“I never felt that those things suited me particularly well,” Regulus admitted, his expression taking on a thoughtful air. “I don't really know what all I want, but I know what I don't want, at least, and I have no intention of relenting on that.”

“You’re not sycophantic, you’re just…”

And part of the problem here was the wealth of insults he’d managed to hurl at his brother over the space of almost a decade; that he was stupid, a crawler, a keener, soft. Regulus was a little soft, but maybe that wasn’t a terrible thing. War had made people harder, and though it meant survival, there was something to be said for being a bit softer. It wasn’t a weak constitution particularly, but rather that he concerned himself with what other people thought of him. He’d faked his own death to get out of confronting people about what he really thought in case it changed how they treated him, so the dramatic roots ran deeply. Even if he didn’t want to admit it, Sirius believed he might even want some of the people here to like him a little. He had began to quietly occupy the shared spaces, to talk to them, to have tea with Remus (which Sirius in no way felt a stab of jealousy about because he wasn’t twelve). Regulus liked to know he was at least tolerated, if not accepted or loved. Growing up here….yeah, Sirius thought to himself, he felt like he was getting a better grip on him since the argument. Sirius had been lucky, for however bitterly short it had been, he’d made a place like that for himself. He didn’t know if Regulus ever had.

(The anger and despair bubbled just to consciousness, but he pushed it away. It was Christmas Day. It was the first one he’d get to spend with Remus in a decade, with his little brother for longer, and with Harry now he was toilet-trained.)

“It doesn’t matter,” Sirius said, shaking it off. “I feel a bit stupid now; I had to go and get you something stupidly normal when I could have gotten revenge. Next year.”

Regulus made a soft, amused sound. “Suffice to say revenge has been on my mind. I will prepare myself for the retaliation,” he said as a little smile flickered.

“Should I be waiting for frogs to jump out next?” Maybe that had been Narcissa, it was easy to lose track. “I hope they got little red and white hats. Go all the way.”

“No frogs. That was a peripheral offense.” The smile on Regulus’s face tugged a little further. “I would not want to overreact.”

"What, you got a list somewhere?" On second thought, he probably did have a list somewhere. "You absolutely have an infractions and enemies list, don't you."

Regulus tapped his temple. “Never forget.”

Sirius snorted; damn, but he was a weird one. He'd always been a little obsessive and weird in his own way, but Sirius had always attributed it to the psychotic need to please and conform to
requirements. He probably hadn't been joking about having more stock phrases memorised about the evils of current society and the traditions than he did. Regulus probably even knew every point he'd even taken as a prefect.

It was weird, yes, but reassuringly weird. It didn't remind him of anyone or anything, it wasn't some trait he could say Regulus was mimicking or some sort of performance for someone else. It was just a rush of a feeling not easily parsed: a sense of nostalgia as even in his thirties his little brother was recognisable as him; the strange realisation that the last time they'd spent a Christmas Day together was twenty years before; and despite the mountain between it all, Sirius did miss him, had missed him, especially that first year, and though this place would never feel anything less than suffocating, it felt a little less suffocating - a lot more confusing - to think of misplaced cats, crazy aunts, chess games, and snowball fights. Forgetting may make things less confusing or upsetting, but it also ran the risk of losing something that felt important.

"Has the house changed much?" he asked, suddenly. "Since you left."

Shaking his head, Regulus folded his hands loosely in his lap. "Not much, no. Obviously it's in a greater state of disrepair, but with the exception of rearrangements by you and our house guests, it seemed to be mostly untouched, at least initially. It was such a strange feeling, coming back. It's not that I expected some drastic change, but...I don't know. It felt unreal and too real at the same time." He shook his head. "And with all of these Christmas decorations... Did you see the fairies in the drawing room?"

"There's fairies in the drawing room?" Sirius made a face at him, and tried to suppress a shudder. "Did Druella sneak in the dark of night, chanting about festive spirit? Oh, that image is going to haunt me."

"She very well might have," Regulus said with an amused huff. "The fairies would not have been received well, when we were children. None of the decorations really would have been, actually."

"I don't think our grandfather is enjoying the tinsel mustache I gave him regardless," Sirius cackled to himself for a minute, because he needed to get that image out of his head. There had always been someone to answer to. That had been one of the reasons he'd wanted out, the idea of being in his forties like his parents and still having to answer to everyone else on things as trivial as Christmas decorations. He hadn't wanted to still be in screaming matches with his mother in twenty years; turns out, it wasn't so bad if you can just leave the room. "She's over the top, Narcissa's the same way. They went to the World Cup last year, Tonks was telling me, and they brought half a field's worth of silk and several live peacocks with them."

Shaking his head, Regulus leveled a dry look. "You're terrible," he remarked, though there was no specification as to which comment he was responding to.

"Thank you," Sirius beamed. "It's called a good mood. Contrary to popular belief, I have them occasionally."

As that dryness pulled to the crooked line of a smile, Regulus responded lightly, "Is that what it is? You're a menace to portraits in every state."

"You could have a point there," Sirius admitted. He was sure McGonagall couldn't actually still give him detention for the Fat Lady incident, but it felt as she could every time he looked at her. "At least I don't have to worry about my own. I imagine that was fireplace stock pretty quickly."

Regulus let out an uncomfortable huff. "I never saw them literally burn, but they haven't been around for awhile."
"This must be the first time I've ever been disappointed in Mum not being dramatic enough," Sirius mused, not totally sure if it was true. Now that he thought of it, he was more surprised the place hadn't been turned into some sort of shrine to her youngest supposed martyr or maybe her husband. He had not even seen a picture of Narcissa’s child here. “I would have thought there’d be more of you.”

Regulus lifted a shoulder in an awkward half-shrug. “I can't really speak to what happened after I left.”

Sirius yawned despite himself; he was too old and not old enough to be falling asleep in his chair. He ran his hand through his hair a couple of times to try and pull himself together. “I’m going to go get changed before everyone’s up. Are you planning on coming down, or is it too many people?”

Regulus looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded. “I think I will, at least for a little bit.”

"I'll see if Remus is back." Sirius barely contained another yawn; it seemed the adrenalin flood from his wake-up surprise was leaving him. However, no sooner had he spoken did he notice a fleeting glimpse of the man himself. Sirius raised his voice, "Alright, Remus?"

Remus poked his head around the door, still looking a little disheveled, and the droplets from what must have been snow clung to his hair. "Morning, merry Christmas," he said in a rush. "Don't go downstairs."

Sirius listened for a moment; no signs of screaming. "What's happening?"

"Molly's a bit, er, upset." Remus looked incredibly uncomfortable for a brief moment, which could only mean one thing.

"Percy?"

Remus nodded affirmative.

“Who's Percy?” Regulus asked, lifting his brow as he looked between them.

Sirius looked to Remus, who simply shrugged at him. "I believe you're the expert on this one," he said, completely unhelpfully. If he wasn't in a charitable mood and it wasn't Christmas, Remus would be getting one of the throw pillows living up to their name in his direction.

"One of the Weasley children," Sirius said, though Percy was of age. Just being a prick. "He's a big Ministry fan, thinks Harry and Dumbledore are cracked, so they're fighting."

"They were fighting," Remus said, quietly. "Now it seems he's just returning things unopened, including asking if he'll go and see Arthur today. I think the twins were trying to help, but I don't think seeing who could come up with the most creative insult was doing anything more than upsetting her further."

“How many Weasley children are there?” Regulus shook his head. “I assumed the one called Charlie was the only one who hadn't visited yet. Regardless, that certainly does sound upsetting.”

"Seven," Sirius said, before counting them on his fingers. "Bill, Charlie, Percy, Fred and George, Ron and Ginny. Percy's just being a bit of a pillock."

"He's very bright, and ambitious. He was Head Boy when I was teaching," Remus said. "But he believes Fudge, and Fudge thinks Dumbledore is using Harry to get his job."
"As if Dumbledore hasn't turned down the job a million times," Sirius replied sourly. "Still, Arthur is his father, and he was on his deathbed, and his kid couldn't get off his arse for five minutes. Like I said, he's a pillock."

“Even you came to our father’s funeral,” Regulus said, shaking his head. “And the other Weasleys seem to like Harry. Skepticism has its place, and I suppose Fudge’s presentation of the matter would be different, but it seems strange to believe someone as useless as Fudge when Fudge is putting more effort into the cover up than preparation for the real issues at hand.” Lifting a brow, he added, “Does he really think everyone here is just making it up because it would be great fun for the Dark Lord to be back?”

Remus gave Sirius a look, and Sirius winced; that was going to be a conversation later. While yes, he had gone to the funeral, he hadn't said that he'd gone and had outright denied it later. He was sure James had known anyway, he always seemed to, but understood he didn't want to talk about it.

"He was Crouch's assistant," Sirius said, dully. "And liked him."

Regulus crinkled his nose. “Didn’t think such a thing was possible.”

"Nevertheless," Remus said, firmly, "He is their son, and Molly doesn't need reminding that her child is not here by choice. Alright?"

"Okay," Sirius raised his hands. "I'm not bringing it up."

“Nor will I. I have a wealth of experience in ignoring such things,” Regulus added.

“It’s true,” Sirius nodded solemnly. “He should have gone into politics, he spends so much time on denial and ignoring things. But that probably would have involved talking to too many people.”

“There's a time and a place for both denial and for people,” Regulus said pointedly, shooting a brow-raised look at his brother.

"There's a time and a place for not acting like a pillock too, but it's not stopping anyone lately." Sirius grumbled. It would never cease to amuse him that Regulus would always take refuge in decorum only up to the point that he could find a good reason or excuse to abandon it. Perhaps that was what he meant.

"Again, please note that I have a less than hirsute appearance," Remus sighed, heading out to leave them to it.

Later that night, Remus had found him settled into his father's study. Sirius supposed he ought to think of it as Regulus', but although the house was a monument to their house in all its supposed glory, there were rooms that held an imprint of people who spent most of their time there. He could still place some of those books at breakfast tables and see, if only in his mind's eye, his father settled into the big chair behind his desk working on some puzzle or other. The business with Arthur had dragged up a lot of his feelings about the old man, but in truth, they'd been only a hop, skip, and jump away from his thoughts for a while. Regulus would always remind him of his father, even if Sirius thought that he probably looked more like their grandfather Arcturus had as a young man.

Except Regulus smiled. His grandfather had been allergic to facial expressions.

Sirius had set up the cassette player, a modified muggle one from Tonks that she'd said had been her own when she was a teenager, as if that somehow made it less of a kind gift, and put in the tape
that Remus had given him. Some of the songs he'd remembered him liking, Remus had said. Music
tended to be classical here, and though both boys had taken lessons, Sirius had loved the music of
the seventies. He and Lily had bonded over it heavily. There was an immediate, heart in his throat
nostalgia to hearing the opening chords to a song he couldn't remember the name of but knew each
line of lyrics the moment they happened. Crookshanks, who seemed content on his knee for a
while, decided to vacate it the moment the Clash came on.

“You like it,” Remus said, having apparently apparated to the doorway.

“I like it,” Sirius confirmed, eyes flicking down to see the stupidly fuzzy slippers Remus had
picked out for himself. “Harry seems to like his books.”

“I think so too,” Remus smiled, sitting down on one of the other chairs. “It's been a good day.”

Sirius nodded, letting Nick Sheppard's guitar music fill the air without fully remembering who
Nick Sheppard was or what band he was playing for.

“Out with it, then,” Sirius said, finally. He knew that wasn't why Remus had come up.

“Did you really attend your father’s funeral?” He looked hurt. That wasn't unexpected. At the time,
Sirius hadn't wanted anyone to know. He'd been too keyed up: ended up on Mrs. Potter's couch
where James had guessed what had happened and yelled at him for being so stupid as to walk into
a den of Death Eaters without backup, made him promise never to do it again, and then provided
the much needed alcohol to get through the rest of the night. No one else had known, he didn't
think.

Sirius nodded, shortly.

“You told me you didn't,” Remus said, quietly.

“I said I wouldn't go,” Sirius corrected; he had. He hadn't wanted to go. He'd gone and still not
wanted to go, but as with this study, there were some things he hadn't been able to let go of. He
didn't know if clearing the place out had made it better or worse. Would it have hurt more or less to
know their father had kept their Hogwarts letters from their professors? He had meant to show
them to Regulus, but they hadn't been talking at the time, and it felt awkward now.

“But you did go,” Remus pressed.

Sirius, again, nodded.

“Why did you?” Remus asked.

Forcefully, Sirius shrugged and managed all at once to feel half his age.

“You felt strongly enough to lie about it but you don't know why you did it?” Remus said again.

“I didn't lie,” Sirius said, gruffly. “I didn't know I would go. I just...found myself there.”

“And didn't tell anyone afterwards,” Remus said, before his face changed. “Except James.”

“Except James,” Sirius admitted. James had always been the exception to most rules. “And he was
pissed off enough for twenty.”

“He worried about you,” Remus said. “We were all worried.”

“Not all,” Sirius scoffed.
“You don't know that,” Remus whispered.

Something icy gripped at Sirius' insides. “Don't you dare,” he hissed. “Not with him.”

“I don't deny that he deserves what's coming to him,” Remus said, a hint of anger to his voice. “But I also don't want to believe he always hated us. I don't want to believe it was all a lie, all of it—”

“Less than a year later, he was passing information on a baby,” Sirius snarled angrily, his stomach flipping over. “He wasn't tortured! He joined the fucking Death Eaters and he sold them out within a week! A week!”

Remus held up his hands, “Sirius—”

“My own little brother, the seventeen-year-old that wouldn't understand free choice if he was smacked in the face with it, still chose death over it when push came to bloody shove!” Sirius could feel his own agitation bubbling up.

“He's on the next landing,” Remus pointed out.

“He didn't know he'd survive it, he thought he was going to his fucking death!” Sirius said, stomach rolling hard.

Remus stilled. “I didn't know that.”

Regulus had asked it not be spoken about with Snape, but he had perhaps expected it to become something spoken about with Remus. But then Sirius had lost his temper and his mind for a little while, and as had become habit, he had not felt like being human enough to speak about it.

“The inferi,” Sirius clarified.

“Terrible,” Remus said softly.

Sirius nodded.

“But something you would do,” Remus said, a hint of a smile playing on him.

“Don't tell him that,” Sirius said, equally softly. “He doesn't particularly deserve to be insulted, especially at Christmas.”

“It's not an insult,” Remus let his smile grow. “You're far more alike than you think. He does remind me very much of you when we were children.”

Sirius scoffed.

“It's true,” Remus said. “That very dry humour, I remember that. You were very polite with me at first. I seem to even remember you knocking once or twice.”

Sirius gasped in an exaggerated manner. “Slander!”

“Not to mention the books,” Remus said, chuckling quietly. “That reminds me, did you give him the books?”

He was referring to the gift Sirius had requested for Remus to get for him. Regulus had been fond of a set of adventure books as a child, but in his own stock take across the house, Sirius hadn't found them. He had also been informed that four more books had been released since they were teenagers. So the boxed anniversary edition of the Mendel books seemed like kind of gift Regulus
may actually use.

“I put it on the bed,” Sirius shrugged.

“On his bed?”

“No, on mine,” Sirius deadpanned.

“I wasn't sure you knew where yours was anymore,” Remus said. Despite the light tone, he was hinting at something, and Sirius wasn't in the mood to talk about his ever complicated feelings about his childhood room today.

“I put it on his bed,” Sirius said, hopefully in a tone that made it clear they wouldn't be talking about it.

“You really do need to get better about respecting personal boundaries,” Remus said with a grimace.

“I respect personal boundaries just fine,” Sirius groused. “I'm letting him have his little secret, aren't I?”

“What secret?” Remus said.

Sirius looked at him. “If I knew, it wouldn't be a secret.”

Remus looked caught between wanting to hit him and rolling his eyes. “Does Dumbledore know?”

“I expect so, he tends to,” Sirius allowed. “But I'm not raising the issue.”

Remus sighed. “Sirius...”

“No,” Sirius said, this time with more force than he had meant to. “It's practicality, if nothing else. He requires leverage with the Ministry. He was a Death Eater, and while I agree there should be consequences for that, I don't think one of those consequences should be locked up in Azkaban.”

“Dumbledore isn't the Ministry,” Remus said, looking pained at the thought. “He wouldn't just let them throw him in Azkaban after he's helped. He would make it fair, not just toss him to the Dementors.”

“Yes, he would let them do that,” Sirius said, and when Remus looked fit to argue, he added, “He did with me.”

He regretted it the moment he'd said it. It wasn't that it was untrue, but Remus looked utterly ashen at the thought, and they'd been having such a good day before he screwed things up again. “I understand why he did it, but –“ But even his brother had scoffed at the very idea of Sirius ever being a Death Eater, could consider no situation nor had any doubt at all that he wasn't, and Sirius had once held a wand to his throat. “There are no guarantees, not for any of us. But I could not send my brother to Azkaban before I knew what it would do to him. I won't send him to be tortured to death, because it would kill him, Remus, he carries the weight of everything, even the things that are not his fault. The guilt would eat him alive. Don't ask me to trust that he'd get a fairer deal than I did.”

The silence between them was tense. It was strange to talk about it calmly, but he felt calm about it; he felt confident that this was the decision he had to make. Regulus would talk about it when he was ready, when he felt like he could trust to do so, and until then, it could wait.
“I’m sorry,” Remus said, tone stuffy enough that Sirius felt a pang of guilt. He hadn't truly meant to upset him.

“It's fine,” Sirius said, trying to help. “It'll all work out.”

Remus laughed, only a little sadly. “Are you becoming an optimist now?”

“New Year’s resolution.” Sirius winked at him. “Bring down Dark Lord, get Harry away from that horrible house and me away from this one, clear name, watch The Old Grey Whistle Test.”

“They cancelled that about seven years ago,” Remus said.

“Shit,” Sirius slumped. “Now I’m depressed.”

Chapter End Notes

Got Christmas Part 2 in just in time for the end of the year, hooray! As a side note, having the opportunity to hear from and chat with some of you through the comments has been wonderful, so for anyone interested in an additional spot to chat/ask questions/see occasional graphical content, we wanted to extend our tumblrs as well. They aren't JUST dedicated to this story, but we know that some people like that forum for interaction, too, so we wanted to open it up. ♥

kuchikopi: djemso@tumblr
tonberrys: preciousreyofsunshine@tumblr
Night had long-since fallen over the house, whittling its occupants down to the holiday residents, when Regulus began making his way back up to his room. As he’d anticipated, Christmas Day had been nothing short of overwhelming in the come-and-go presence of the Order members and their supporters, oscillating between socialisation with their myriad guests and hiding away in the quieter corners of the study or the library.

Regulus was passing by that library when Hermione suddenly popped out into the hallway, her eyes locking on him with a sense of purpose that gave him pause.

"Have you seen Kreacher?" Hermione asked, looking around as if he would simply appear now that Regulus was in view.

Regulus shook his head. "Not in the last few hours. Why?"

The girl hugged what looked like a small bundle to her chest unhappily. "I think he’s avoiding me," she said, sadly. "I’ve been looking all day. I left the present down in the cupboard, I hope that’s alright."

Privately, Regulus wondered if Kreacher was avoiding her to avoid the risk of a positive interaction, but he supposed avoidance was better than the alternative.

“What present?” he asked instead, trying not to show the subtle prickle of concern when he thought back to all the little elf-sized hats he’d seen pile up over the holidays. The girl seemed well-meaning about her crusade, and in most ways, Regulus agreed that there was legitimate grounds for reform in the way house-elves were treated, but he would have to draw the line at releasing his elf from service, if ever it came to such a question.

"Well, everyone else had something, so I’ve been making a blanket. I thought it might get cold down." Hermione looked a little stony for a moment, before shaking it off. "There seems to be a lot of photographs down there."

What subtle edge might have been sharpened had again smoothed with her answer, and Regulus nodded. A blanket was more than fine: though Kreacher seemed rather attached to the spot he had made into his own, there was no reason it couldn’t be comfortable. “I believe he’s rescuing the photographs from Sirius’s war against the house."

"They all seem to be the same woman," Hermione said, a question to her voice. "Dark hair, pale, I don't recognise her."

Resemblance ran strong in the Black family, and there were a great many dark-haired ladies that Hermione would have no reason to recognise - even his mother had looked quite different from the greying portrait on the lower landing - but of all the possibilities, there were only two that Kreacher was likely to cherish. Neither were comfortable to consider.

Eyes flicking down to the bulky bundle in her arms, Regulus asked, “Is that what you are carrying? The photographs?”

Hermione hesitated for a moment, before holding her arms out. "I thought you'd rather have them," she admitted. “They looked...important.”

Accepting the bundle, Regulus peeked inside; as expected, he was met with his eldest cousin’s
heavy-lidded stare. “Bella,” he said, half to himself, allowing himself only a few seconds to take in the pile of photographs before looking up at Hermione again. To see Bella’s likeness was bittersweet, a muddled mess of encouragement and anxiety - and now, she was in Azkaban, out of reach for as long as those walls could hold. “She’s one of our cousins. Kreacher liked her, and Sirius tends to be particularly aggressive with those particular photographs, so they were probably determined to be the most at risk.” Carefully, he folded the cloth to cover them again.

Hermione stared at the bundle for a moment longer, before her eyes flicked up. “That's Bellatrix Lestrange?” she asked, quietly.

Regulus shifted uncomfortably on his feet and nodded. The sobering of her mood suggested she knew who Bella was, even if the crimes against the Longbottoms had occurred when Hermione was a baby, no more than a toddler.

“Yes,” he responded after a fleeting beat, keeping his tone steady as he shifted the bundle, this time. “But she’s in Azkaban now, so her photographs can’t hurt anyone.”

"Do you know why she's there?" Hermione asked, tentatively.

Regulus’s expression drew to an uncomfortable point, mouth setting to a line. Again, he nodded. “I’ve heard.”

"Neville is our friend," Hermione said, the a telltale wet tone creeping into her voice. "I met his mum today."

Misery crinkled subtly around Regulus’s eyes. Torturing Frank and Alice Longbottom to insanity had landed Bella her life sentence - had landed it for Barty too, and for Rodolphus and Rabastan. Sickness lurched in his stomach as he pictured himself with them, alongside Barty as he always was, following Bella's guidance as he always did. Stiffly, he fought a shudder-and palely, he dropped his eyes. “I'm sorry that happened.”

Stiffly, Hermione nodded and took a step back. "I have to get back on my revision schedule."

Regulus nodded uncomfortably, shifting the bundled photographs in his arms before stepping around her towards the stairs.

His mind thrummed with memories he would rather leave in the past, grasping for some semblance of a distraction - and when at last Regulus reached his room, he found one in waiting. There was a shopping bag sitting on his bed - one that he had no memory of acquiring, much less leaving unpacked. After setting the cloth-wrapped photographs beside his wardrobe, he approached the bed with some measure of curiosity. Upon investigation, he discovered a box set of books inside: the full collection of the Mendel novels he’d loved when he was younger, including a few more recent ones he’d never read and a slip of paper that read ‘S.O.B.’ (courtesy of his brother, it would seem.)

All at once, a different flood of memories set loose. Many years had passed since he’d thought about those books, and even longer since he’d read them. They had been caught in the crossfire when the summer he had turned 15 - the summer Sirius left - had connected them to an early memory of his brother. In some play at mentally liberating himself from the plaguing association, he had abandoned them in a tunneled section of a beach at Porth Iago in Wales. They were no doubt in tragic shape by now, unless perhaps another child had rescued them from his adolescent despair.

In nineteen and a half years, he had never gone back to look. Sirius couldn’t know that - may or
may not even realise they were gone, considering the collectible look of the set - but a dry laugh sputtered out, soft and short. He was too old for children's stories, he knew, but whatever his adolescent lashing had wrought, the books were a fond sort of escapism, and a welcome one. The could-have-beens were knocking at the walls of his mind, but he had no interest in allowing them dampen the last shreds of this holiday. Liberating the first from its box, Regulus settled on the bed and opened to the first page.

In the days after Christmas, Sirius deflated. He'd been running about on excitement and people for fuel, and with the inevitable return to Hogwarts for the children, the return home for the Weasleys, and Order work resuming in a more active way, the house would go quiet again. He appreciated that Regulus was also there - the idea of being alone in the house was horrible - but out of the two of them, Sirius had to remain there regardless. Besides, his brother was quiet. It was hard to tell if he was there or not, most of the time.

Except when he decided to run his mouth, of course. There had been more than one conversation that remained between James and himself, a couple that perhaps had never even made it to him because Sirius had felt embarrassed or ashamed to cling onto things when he really didn't want to. He did a pretty convincing job of acting as if none of it bothered him, and that he had no use nor time for anything or anyone from his childhood. But the house - and its other occupant - tended to contradict this. He didn't want to delve back into the muddy waters of his youth. He didn't have the fortitude right now.

But he also didn't want to have to explain to everyone who was around back then why he'd wavered a little. They took enough of a chance on him as it was, these people who didn't know him, and the ones who did know him...didn't seem to have known him particularly well. It was not an easy thing to explain, even to himself, and the last thing he needed was Regulus deciding to mention things he really didn't want to talk about. Who cares if they spent half their childhood playing chess and quidditch with half the people that ended up dead by Auror, imprisoned, or murdering people in the war? It was sometimes harder to match up the idea of it being the same people. It had been hard, and continued to be hard, with Regulus. At least with him, Sirius could say he grew out of it.

It was going to mean the need for a quiet word with him, lest Regulus decide to talk about it and really put him in an awkward position. On a quieter afternoon, he tapped him out and asked if he could have a word in private. Though never a fan of censorship, he wasn't ready to talk about it yet with anyone who wasn't James, and sadly, James was no longer available.

Once in the study, the main room in the house he was sure wouldn't be overheard because this was their father they were talking about, he shut the door with a sigh. "I need to talk to you about what happened the other day, with Remus."

Subtly, a single eyebrow lifted as Regulus responded, "With Remus?"

 Unsure of how to breach it, Sirius jumped in with both feet. "You told him about the funeral," he said, wincing. "I wish you hadn't."

Regulus tipped his head slightly. "I figured he would have known, considering the lengths you went to in communicating how much better they were than us," he said, though his tone was not charged with its normal dose of snide bitterness, so much as a twinge of thoughtful surprise. "Is that why he gave you that look, then? I assumed he simply didn't approve."

"You don't miss a trick, do you?" Sirius grumbled, more to give himself a moment of composure. He didn't fancy the flush of irritation that rose at that statement - they were better then, for the
most part - but the truth of the implication was inescapable. He hadn't explained it. He hadn't had the words to explain it. "I didn't want to talk about it. I couldn't have explained it without explaining why I needed to see you, and I couldn't explain that without talking about what'd happened two months earlier."

Crossing his arms across his chest, Regulus’s expression pinched. “I don’t much like to talk about that particular event, either. For what it’s worth, I did not intend to reveal the funeral out of turn. I will be more mindful in the future.”

"Look, your name had been up there on the board for the Order, and I'd always said no, no way," and Sirius had been utterly convinced, at eighteen, that there was no way. There was no way he had imagined that his parents would have allowed the last heir they had, the mild-mannered swot, to go onto a battlefield. He just hadn't accounted for Bellatrix. Stupid. "And I never...got around to telling anyone any different afterwards, 'cept James, and he wouldn't have done it, not when I said no. I didn't know if anyone else would do the same." The guilt of including Remus in that weighed on him, but they had their own fractures of trust they had not dealt with at the time, and that had played on his mind.

Discomfort settled over Regulus’s expression in a way that suggested he, too, wished Sirius had been correct about his Death Eater status the first time, but instead, he clarified: “But this time around, the Order knows that I was? I have assumed the point was discussed in the meeting prior to my inclusion in the fidelius, but it has only come up in scattered conversation, since then.” With a shift, he added, “More specifically, do they now know that you knew then, too, or is that particular detail still better withheld?”

“I had to confirm it when you came back, because I wasn't sure of what would happen. There were too many lives at stake, and this place was meant to be safe - and at first, I couldn't be sure it was.” And that was the sad truth of it - Sirius could not have been sure if it would stick then; he hadn't known what had happened, and he had not seen the inferi. He felt more secure now. “I didn’t say I knew then, only now, but that’s got less to do with you and more to do with me. They’re taking Dumbledore, and Remus, and Harry's word right now for me, but they are taking mine and mine alone on you. Most don't know me, even Tonks has only scattered childhood memories. I don't know that I want to push my luck, but I also know I wouldn't deny it either. I'd just prefer it didn't come up at all ”

The pinched expression tightened on Regulus’s face, and he nodded. “I’d prefer that, too.”

Hating the expression he was getting more than the uncomfortable feeling associated with saying it, Sirius shook his head. "I know it's safe here now."

Some of the tension softened in Regulus's expression when he tipped his head again. “I just want for this to be over.”

For it to be over, it had to be acknowledged it had started again. Sirius knew this would be a big turning point: when the Death Eaters or Voldemort himself did something undeniable by the Ministry and the media, and they had to acknowledge he was back...and many of his followers with him. It would be something catastrophic. It would have to be for Fudge to pull his head out of from his arse.

"The Ministry’s incompetence is only handy when it comes to me," Sirius admitted. "Voldemort won't stay hidden forever. I don't want something to happen, but knowing that it will and having to sit and wait for it is worse."

“It certainly is worse. The peace of ignorance is out of reach, but so to is the certainty of when,
where, or what that terrible unveiling will unfold.” Regulus released a tense huff. “I don't like it, but the best we can do is prepare ourselves, I suppose.”

"Speaking of things to prepare for, Snape will be here, day after tomorrow." Sirius was less than thrilled about that, but understood the necessity of it. There were no real Occlumency experts in the Order, save for Snape, and though that was enough make Sirius uneasy, he liked the idea that Voldemort could waltz through Harry's mind at will even less.

Regulus nodded in acknowledgement, a thoughtful expression on his face. “Thank you. Consider it noted.”

"They're going back to school after," Sirius informed him, in case he wasn't aware of it. The holidays had gone by too quickly, and Arthur wasn't even home yet, but Hogwarts beckoned.

For a moment, Regulus seemed to be considering something to himself - and with a settled expression, began: “I remain curious about what happened with that attack. Do you think Harry has reached a point in which he would be receptive to describing the situation first hand, before they return to Hogwarts?”

"Give him until tomorrow," Sirius said, thinking about it. Harry could use a small period of quiet before heading back to shark-infested waters, and if his day was already going to ruined by Snape, this wouldn't make it any worse.

Regulus nodded. “I can do tomorrow.”

“NO!” Harry yelled, vaulting over the table and trying to get in between them, “Sirius, don’t —”

“Are you calling me a coward?” roared Sirius, trying to push Harry out of the way, but Harry would not budge.

“Why, yes, I suppose I am,” said Snape.

“Harry — get — out — of — it!” snarled Sirius, pushing him out of the way with his free hand. At that moment, the entire Weasley family descended upon the scene - both Snape and Sirius looking furious at each other, wands at the ready and Harry standing between them.

“Cured!” Mr. Weasley announced brightly to the kitchen at large. "Completely cured!” Then he must have registered the scene before him.

“Merlin's beard, what's going on here?”

Snape pushed by them, with only a fleeting comment reminding Harry of the lesson time.

“Nothing, Arthur,” said Sirius, out of breath and flustered. “Just a friendly little chat between two old school friends.” With what looked like an enormous effort, he smiled. “So...you're cured? That’s great news, really great.”

“Yes, isn’t it?” said Mrs. Weasley, leading her husband forward into a chair. “Healer Smethwyck worked his magic in the end, found an antidote to whatever that snake’s got in its fangs, and Arthur’s learned his lesson about dabbling in Muggle medicine, haven’t you, dear?” she added, rather menacingly.

“Yes, Molly dear,” said Mr. Weasley meekly.

Sirius looked to the door, then to Harry and back again. "I should get Buckbeak his lunch," Sirius
said, leaving without waiting for a response.

"Speaking of lunch!" Mrs. Weasley said, clapping her hands together. "Let's get everyone sorted. Sandwiches, I think, maybe something hot, it's cold out there..."

Harry excused himself not long after the bustle began, but as he was nearing the top of the stairs leading from the basement kitchen up to the ground floor landing, he heard voices and paused his step, just out of sight.

“That was out of line, Severus,” Regulus was saying, his tone quiet but firm. Harry had not seen Sirius’s brother in the kitchen, but he must have heard the racket from another floor. “Sirius isn’t being cowardly - he’s being patient, for once, which is practically a miracle, and one I see fit to recognise. Intellectual as you are, you ought to know that moving about in plain sight isn’t the only way to risk your neck.”

“On the mend now, are you? Your standards are falling if you think that waste of space is now worth defending,” Snape snarled dryly in response.

“My anger is better directed towards the Dark Lord, and so is yours. This arrangement isn’t about liking them or disliking them, but rather putting aside our petty differences to meet a common goal,” Regulus said cooly, “Which means not trying to bait Sirius into running out of here to get scooped up by a Dementor.”

“If he wants to leave, the risk is his own,” Snape said in a sneering tone that suggested he did not think capture was such a terrible outcome, “I was merely making an observation.”

“And I, too, am making an observation. There is no need to-”

“-I’m not interested in the sentimental drivel, Regulus. Like I said to your brother,” Snape was saying with a curl to his lips that was heard more than seen, “I don’t have unlimited leisure time.”

There was silence for a moment, and Harry thought for a moment that the two men might have gone their separate ways before the voices started back up. Regulus’s tone was tense and measured when he spoke again: “I know you don’t like him-”

“-'Don’t like him’ is understating it-”

“-But,” Regulus cut in again, “he’s trying, and if-”

“You must have heard his little nickname,” Snape interrupted darkly, his voice tightening further, “He’s not ‘trying,’ and if you think he has changed or ever will change, you’re deluding yourself. You’re too intelligent to be acting like some desperate child.”

“I’m not desperate, and I’m not a child,” Regulus objected tightly.

“Precisely my point,” Severus countered dryly, thought it didn’t sound much like a reassurance.

Regulus let loose a little huffing sound, but when the soft patter of footsteps began, he spoke out again: “I don’t want to fight with you. We are on the same side, or at least I would like to think as much, and that is already more than I expected, coming back. I would just like to point out that civility is not so terrible.”

“Tell it to that vile brother of yours. You know better than most how he struggles with civility,” Snape snarled frostily. Some of the icy edge flaked away when he spoke again, though it didn’t sound warm and friendly, either. “Good day, Regulus. You should take care. I expect the situation..."
will continue to worsen.”

The words were punctuated again with the sound of footsteps, and when at last Harry peeked out into the hallway at the top of the stairs, it was empty.

Harry abandoned his original idea of heading into the bedroom to eat, or even finding Sirius to tell him not to let Snape get to him because it wasn't true, no one thought he was a coward here. He didn't feel like dealing with the empty portrait tittering at him like he was some sort of thing on display for amusement. Although he'd had his fill of Slytherins for the day, he decided to indulge one more, if only for trying to help.

He checked in the usual spot, which seemed to be any particular room with a load of books in it. It wasn't unlike trying to chase down Hermione.

"Thanks," Harry said, in case he wasn't supposed to be interrupting.

Regulus started, slightly, then turned from the bookcase to look at the doorway visitor. A puzzled look flickered in the muscles around his eyes for a fleeting moment before he connected the likelihood that Harry had overheard. Immediately, he pressed his mouth to a line in smothered embarrassment, then nodded.

“It was uncalled for...even if saying so was a waste of breath,” Regulus said uncomfortably, though there was no regret in his voice.

"He's always like that." Harry winced as he thought about the fact he'd have to spend extra time with Snape and have him go poking about in his head.

With a humourless huff of a laugh, Regulus shook his head. “I know. We inhabited the same social circle, for the most part. He was never my closest friend, but we spent a lot of time together. His surly disposition and the enduring hatred for Sirius that accompanies it is unfortunate but not unexpected.”

"That sounds like a fun group,” Harry said, before he could stop himself. He tried not to wince; he didn't want to make things any worse than they were for anyone. "I think more lessons with him are going to give me more nightmares, not less."

“We weren’t a group of Severus Snapes, and even he was in a better mood among friends. They were fun, for the most part, even if I preferred the company of some more than others, and the small group more than the large,” Regulus said pointedly, the stubborn tone fading slightly as he continued, “But to your second point, I would not want anyone rooting around in my mind, either. I assume he’s going to teach you Occlumency?”

Privately, Harry thought that most Slytherins tended to remind him of a group of Snapes, but he supposed it was probably bit like assuming all Gryffindors were exactly like McGonagall. At least a group of McGonagall's wouldn't get into as much trouble.

"It's not as if I'm rooting around in Voldemort's for fun," Harry grumbled, trying not to think too much about feeling like a snake, nor what it felt like when the fangs went in. "I just want to know how to stop it."

Regulus nodded, making a face. “I cannot imagine it’s pleasant in there…” With a sigh, he crinkled his nose. Pausing, he seemed to steel himself before picking up again, “Though if you would not mind, I was wondering if you would be willing to describe your experience - the recent attack with the snake. I do not wish to drag it up in your mind...but Sirius mentioned some intriguing, if
concerning, possibilities you were concerned about. I’ve been considering the possibilities and following their lines of research, but I thought it might be helpful to hear the direct account from you.” Shifting slightly, Regulus turned his body to face Harry, a mix of sincerity and thoughtfulness settling on his face.

Harry stilled; he hadn't realised they were taking it that seriously until now. Were they still worried about him being used a weapon after all? "Because I thought I was the snake?" he asked, quietly.

“It happened while you were sleeping in a completely different location, so I think it’s safe to say you weren’t actually the snake in question, but it’s curious that you experienced it as if you were. It seems like a trick of the Legilimency - as if you were somehow connected to the snake instead of its master - but I’ve been unable to find a precedence, so it is either a new ability, or something else entirely,” Regulus explained, taking care with his tone.

Harry thought back to what Dumbledore had told him with the basilisk. He'd said that somehow, Voldemort had accidentally transferred some of his abilities to him when he'd tried to kill him. It could be like the parseltongue all over again. "If it's a new ability," Harry said slowly, "Could he have transferred it by accident and not know I have it?"

"Transferred the ability?" Regulus echoed with a look of concentration tugging at the tiny muscles around his eyes, as much to Harry as it was to himself.

Harry tried to think about how to explain it, but he'd had to piece together what happened that night from what Moody - Crouch, who as a Death Eater, might be a more reliable source than Moody in this case - and Sirius and Peter and Voldemort and Dumbledore had all said. He'd learned to take anything the Dursleys said with heapfuls of salt. "Wormtail used my blood to make his new body," Harry said, trying to figure out if that was why it'd gotten worse. "But when I talked to Riddle, the memory, he said we were a lot alike...or maybe he just really wanted to touch me." His look of disgust said everything he felt about that. "He couldn't before."

Regulus measured a look at Harry. “Well, I did not know him as Riddle, but I’ve found little resemblance thus far. Save for the parseltongue, of course. You could hear the basilisk the year it was loose in the school, correct?” Regulus said with a tip of his head, though the thoughtful expression had yet to fade. “It sounded as though that occurred quite a long time before the resurrection...but even so, I would hardly call that ‘a lot alike.’”

"I don't think I'm like him!" Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat, thinking of that night in the chamber compared with what had happened in the graveyard. "But he did transfer some of himself when he gave me the scar, Dumbledore said that's why I speak parseltongue. It's because he does. Could that be why I can see inside his snake?"

Regulus’s eyes narrowed for a moment, then widened again with a sort of dawning realisation. He stilled to a statue as his eyes flicked to the lightning-shaped scar on Harry’s forehead, lingering for an uncomfortably long time. Whatever look had started to form on his face was soon smothered to one of forced neutrality, though his gaze was no less exacting when he finally responded, “Perhaps.”

Harry really had thought they were past the staring portion of their collective interactions, but apparently not. Self-consciously, he rubbed the scar. "I'm going to go find Sirius," he said, a little uncertainly.

Regulus nodded, though he was no longer looking at Harry, falling fast into his own thoughts. Silence had fallen over the room once again, and as Harry slipped out the door, Regulus was already turning to walk toward a big desk at the far end of the study, a quill soon in hand.
Wasting no time, Regulus pulled out the notes he kept on his person, head buzzing with the curiosities opening up before him. The train of thought was probably absurd - a living horcrux, two souls to one host - but even if much of the information was the same, something in the way Harry had said it all rang different. The idea of this Gryffindor child speaking parseltongue had been admittedly strange, back when the girls had told him, but an incredibly rare power being transferred upon the event of a murder sounded suspiciously like the transference of a fragment of oneself. That the Potters’ murder could have been the catalyst for the implantation of a horcrux in their baby seemed a terrible irony, but the more he thought about it, the more sense it made. Harry still did not strike him as knowing what a horcrux was, despite his repeated interactions with what Regulus assumed with some degree of confidence were, in fact, fragments of the Dark Lord’s soul-

-but Dumbledore… If Dumbledore had been the one to tell Harry about the transference of power through some split off piece of the Dark Lord, Regulus had to wonder if maybe Dumbledore did know about the horcruxes…in function, if not in name, though it sounded as if Dumbledore was not being particularly forthright with information-sharing, himself. Perhaps he, too, knew and was choosing not to say more than was necessary.

A difficult judgement call to make with a man so thoroughly absent, yet in that moment, Regulus felt - more than ever - that he was due for a chat with the headmaster. Until then, it was him and his books and his notes:

**Known**

\[
\begin{align*}
H \cdot \text{ Obj. (Spec. or Ord.)} \\
C: M \\
D: BV & ? \\
E: \text{ Pos.}
\end{align*}
\]

1. SL (X) - BV, no pos.
2. Unk. (used?) - spell (GMFTI CPOF CMPPE)
3. TRD? TR → DL (TR: UPN SJEEMF) (X - HP) - BV, pos. (G)
   \[
   M (16) \rightarrow \text{TRD} \\
   LM \rightarrow G
   \]
4. WF (SA)? - HP, another?

**Investigate**

- D: Other?
- HC? RD? GS?
- 2? 3? 4? 7?
- FL - found?
- K (exp.) - after SL √
- Re-use?
- G (exp.) - TRD √
- TR - SS? (HBVOU) sentiment?
- COS (DIBNCFSPG TFDSFUT) → B
- BMCBOJB? √?
- HP - ZS (QBJO QVPO EM SFUVSO)
- XFBTMFZ GBUIFS / TOBLF BUUBL / MFHJMNFODZ - H
- MFHJMNFODZ - vic. Link?
- HP (QPXFSS USBOTGFS - ZS, SJUVBM)
- H - living?
People were not so easy to rely on, but in this, at least, he had some measure of control, and to that he would hold fast.

The quiet that fell over Number Twelve was not as immediate as last time. For one, Tonks and Moody had come back after seeing everyone back to school on the Knight Bus; Molly and Arthur were still coming in and out, seeing as half their things were there; and Remus had been recovering from the full moon the week before, so he hadn't gone anywhere yet. Sirius still felt a measure of loss, but he knew that Harry had the mirror if he really ran into trouble. The boy had been a little clingy after Snape had talked to him; he'd run into him several times throughout the rest of the night, and he always looked concerned. Bloody Snape for getting him upset. They were a week into the new year, and already, he wanted to hex the bastard. After Harry was able to get some peace in his own mind, of course.

However much he didn't like it, Snape's words had stung. Hiding behind his mother's skirt had never been Sirius's style; he was more likely to be arguing with her than anything else, and his general uselessness had been driving him nuts for months. He didn't want to believe anyone really thought he would choose to stay here and potter about if there was something else he could do, but one of the twins had said something similar when Arthur had been attacked. It wasn't him risking his life. It felt cowardly. Fucking Snape.

Despite this, Sirius had managed to settle enough to sleep. He awoke on the couch in the drawing room with an old issue of *Transfiguration Today*, bleary-eyed and confused as to why he was awake when it was still dark outside. Then he heard the portrait. He checked the time on the grandfather clock - which Remus had thankfully fixed - and found it was a little after six in the morning. Who in their right mind was coming in at that time? *Probably Tonks*, he reasoned, maybe she'd taken a guard shift and needed somewhere close to rest.

But it wasn't Tonks; to his surprise, it was an exceptionally harried-looking Remus who was holding what looked like the paper at the same time as trying to close the curtains. Sirius went down to help him, and between them, they managed to get the curtains shut in short order.

"Alright, Lupin?" Sirius asked, quietly.

"I think we should go upstairs," Remus said, looking at the stairs.

"Upstairs when you're barely in the door," Sirius said, giving him a look over but climbing the stairs nonetheless. "I'm not that kind of boy, Remus."

Remus shook his head, not in the exasperated way Sirius had expected, but almost expectant and entirely worried looking.

*Shit.*

"What's happened?" Sirius asked, stopping in the door to the drawing room.

"If you're going to throw something, can you please not throw it at me?" Remus said, handing him the paper without another word.

Sirius looked at the front page, and his stomach dropped into the basement. All at once, even without reading the headline, he suddenly understood both Remus's request and the relocation. If he was going to scream, it was better where he wouldn't wake up every damned portrait in that hallway.

There, on the front page of the *Prophet*, was an image he'd been trying to get away from for
Bellatrix. To his annoyance, she didn't look quite as awful as he thought she might; she still managed to look as if she were smiling, arrogant, and daring. Underneath, the caption said 'convicted of the torture and permanent incapacitation of Frank and Alice Longbottom,' but he'd known that. He remembered, in a fleeting irreverent moment, that it was a very good thing he'd ended up in prison for the rest of his life because he'd never have to face their son, or their friends, knowing what his bitch of a cousin and her husband had done. It just hadn't worked out that way.

And now she'd broken out, because she never could let him do anything without upstaging him.

There were nine other pictures; two he expected, Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrange. Another he almost didn't recognise was Lorcan Mulciber, he'd been a sadistic tosser even when they'd been in school. Demetrius Travers, he'd been a few years older than them, smarmy git if he remembered right. Antonin Dolohov sounded familiar as well, Travers too. When he'd been arrested, he hadn't known who'd killed Marlene. It must have come up later. There were a few names he couldn't place, even though they sounded and looked familiar.

Then he saw the headline, and his brain sputtered. 'MASS BREAKOUT FROM AZKABAN, MINISTRY FEARS BLACK IS “RALLYING POINT” FOR OLD DEATH EATERS.'

"Are you fucking kidding?" he growled. What the hell? Was everyone stupid? Even when he'd been a stupid purist kid, he hadn't gotten on with most of these assholes. He scanned over the article; a leader? The only way Bellatrix would ever have followed his lead on anything would be if there was something that would choke him at the end of it, and she wanted to watch.

"Remember what Dumbledore said about leaving," Remus said, as if he needed another bloody reminder.

Sirius wordlessly handed Remus the paper, walked back into the drawing room, and slammed the door in his face hard enough that the portraits rattled.

It was with a sense of curiosity that Regulus approached the splayed out copy of the *Daily Prophet*, lying abandoned on a table in the drawing room. He had not specifically been looking to catch up on the news, but it was due time for it. Grabbing the newspaper unceremoniously and carrying it over toward the fireplace, Regulus lowered into an overstuffed chair and temporarily set aside his cup of tea to light a roaring fire with the flick of his wand.

The flames met him in warm waves, slowly whistling at the morning chill. Settling into the chair, Regulus replaced his wand with the cup of tea, once again, and began sipping the steamy drink as he flipped back to the front page of the *Prophet*. He was halfway through swallowing when his eyes fell on the cover story, his throat erupting with a sputtering cough when he saw a page of Death Eaters staring back - most prominently, the photograph of Bella. For several solid minutes, he was coughing tea out of his lungs, but even as his chest calmed and quieted, anxiety clenched cold and tight.

“Bella,” he whispered, feeling another cough at the back of his throat but fighting it off as he took in the other Death Eater escapees. Rodolphus and Rabastan, course - and Lorcan Mulciber, the only one of his friends to land in Azkaban and stay there (at least until now). The others held no emotional resonance for him, but he recognised the names, a clamour of dangerous Death Eaters who undoubtedly had an Azkaban-shaped grudge against the wizarding world, at this point.

But Bella - it was hard to see anything past Bella. All at once, he felt like a child awaiting a scolding after running off in a crowd. He hated how much he wanted to see her, and hated how much he didn’t.
'You make me proud, Regulus.' Her words echoed, ever at the edge of his mind - and that earnest approval was like strength in itself... yet that ‘encouragement’ was not always so warm, and again, the haunting image of bloody, screeching rat flickered unbidden, the scene playing back in his mind with too much clarity. 'You are a Black, fully capable of a curse of this magnitude.' Writhing, clawing, a squeal more like a scream than anything a rat had business making. 'See? I know you were capable.'

His cousin had believed in him in a way so few people had, yet for all the motivation such belief inspired, so too was there equal fear of it in turn: There were some things he would rather think he was incapable of.

Taking a slow and steadying breath, Regulus folded the newspaper, setting it aside with a sudden loss of interest in the day’s news, and though the mantle burned with smoky warmth, Regulus could focus on little more than the cold wash of sickness in his stomach. This would not be her first stop, he did not think, yet he wondered - would she search for Sirius here? (Would she find him?) Or would she flee to Cissa and hide away in Wiltshire as the Dark Lord rallied more and more followers for his grand reveal? (A grand reveal that Regulus would be on the opposite side of, if she continued as she was.) The Dark Lord’s Death Eaters had given everything - their service, their freedom, their lives - with nothing of substance in return, and it lit a furious fire beneath Regulus’s feet to think his cousin was playing right back into it. He knew she would, could feel it in his bones, and it unnerved him beyond measure to imagine trying to explain that to her.

There was an element of shame to the realisation that he had started to let himself believe she was in Azkaban for good, and a shame that he had begun to make some effort at dismissing the discomfort of consequence - not unlike the distance of the mother now forever beyond his reach. Theoretical reunions felt a little too tangible, all at once, and though he knew the conclusion ought to be obvious, uncertainty prickled relentlessly at the edges of his mind, prodding at the shadows.

For all the potential distractions around him, the thought of being in a common area where he might have to interact with another human being suddenly seemed unbearable. With tea in hand and a newspaper abandoned, Regulus set off to his room once again, and there, he intended to remain until the storm passed.

When it came down to it, truly down to it, Sirius did not fear Bellatrix. She was a pain, an awful person who threw her life away for a sociopath to play his chief sadist, but that didn't make her frightening or unique. Talented, yes, but it was not like Sirius himself was a total idiot either. They had both dueled, though he was more prone to punching people in a pinch, whereas she threw Unforgivables around. He was more afraid of what might happen to other people; what had been done to Frank and Alice set a frightening precedent, this fate worse than death. In death, at least you know your own friends, your own child. He didn't want those kids, brave as they were, caught in the Lestrange crossfire. He didn't want anyone else to have to give their sanity for this.

And he didn't want her within shrieking distance of his brother for as long as she drew breath.

That would be harder. It wasn't just her, of course, Regulus had always had lousy taste in friends, and despite distancing himself from their actions, intense loyalty was something of a family trait. There had to be some irony involved in a family that blasted people out of its ranks being intense about loyalty, but if he thought about it, it made sense. There was a sense of belonging and immortality to it, to that bloody tree, and they had certainly been raised to believe removal from it was truly one of the worst possible things that could happen. This was going to be a rehash of the age-old problem with Regulus: he still loved her, despite knowing what she'd done to others, and even what she'd done to him. It was different with Narcissa: she was predictable, she was a mother,
and Lucius was a prissy kind of Death Eater who didn't like getting his hands dirty. Bellatrix had nothing to lose.

Bellatrix had taught Regulus the worse curses and managed to get the kid who got upset over bloody house-elves to obliterate and torture. She had taken a fourteen-year-old into this mess and set him up to either end up as cold as she is or die for a meaningless cause. She had a control over his behaviour that Sirius had despised, and still despised now. She had no right to him at all. Sirius didn't want to risk the security of anyone, nor his brother’s sanity, on some misguided hope that someone that absolutely bonkers was still human under the insanity. As much as Sirius had no desire for company, he had to lay it down and just say no. He understood why Regulus cared about her, but no. She would burn the heart out of him or leave him for dead, and Sirius might be useless at protecting people, but this, he could at least try to put a stop to before it started again.

He had not truly expected to find Regulus in any common areas. If he hadn't seen, or had not known, then perhaps, but he despised wearing his emotions in public. It was usually the same family members shrieking about making a scene that made the biggest ones, but there was a compulsion to lose your shit privately or not at all that lingered. Remus had only given him a weak smile, as he fiddled with the radio and awaited more up-to-date news. They should have seen this coming. Even now, what many had done back then drove fear into people barely old enough to have remembered it, and Voldemort liked to incite that fear to control people. Fear with one hand, false promises and praise with the other. No wonder he and Bellatrix got on so well.

He thought about leaving it, letting Regulus emerge in his own time and talk about it then, but they were fast losing such a luxury. There was still too much he didn't know, that they had still not spoken about, and although there was a warm, hopeful feeling to the way things had been happening (a feeling he'd been sure he had lost), this threatened to destroy everything.

No. They had to talk, and it had to be now. There was too much at stake, and sacrifices had to be made. In light of that, he knocked lightly on the bedroom door.

For a moment, only silence met him, followed by the soft sound of movement on the other side of the door as Regulus responded simply - “Yes?”

"You saw the paper." It wasn't a question, but he awaited confirmation nonetheless.

Another beat of silence. “Yes.”

Sirius leaned his forehead on the door, sighing deeply. He swore this was why he didn't bother with knocking. It slowed everything down. "Scared?" he asked, after a still moment.

“‘Scared’ doesn’t feel like the right word for it,” Regulus responded with a dash of uncertainty in his tone.

"Multiple words and syllables," Sirius noted, bemused. "Well done. Are you panicking or being a brat for making me do this through a door?"

From the other side, Regulus sighed, and a few seconds later, the door swung open to reveal Regulus sitting criss-cross on the bed with an unmarked, leather-bound book lying closed on the bedside table.

"I forgot to include the 'I'm ignoring it' option," Sirius said, running his hands through his hair. There was a family-sized headache coming on, and with his family, they were always terrible. "Are you?"
Regulus flattened his expression to a line, sighing through his nose. “It’s a bit difficult, when you ask about it.”

"I'm a difficult person," Sirius told him, flippantly. "Besides, since when has *Bella* ever let anyone ignore her?"

“She doesn’t,” Regulus conceded heavily, “At least not on purpose.”

Sirius crossed his arms, and just took a few steps into the room. He still wasn't a fan of the decor, but he really didn't like having the conversation that way. "I'm sorry," he said, with a grimace.

“For sneaking off to Azkaban and setting loose the cousin you loved *so* dearly, along with nine of her friends? Well, you should be,” he remarked with a wry huff, though the amusement didn’t reach his eyes.

"This is so like her. I do one impressive thing, she has to do it better." Sirius huffed, though he couldn't put much emotion into it either. It did annoy him, yes, but it was an annoyance overshadowed by every other confusing and upsetting emotion under the sun that was slipping in. "She’ll turn out to be an animagus next, just you watch."

“Just what we need.” Regulus shook his head and leaned back into the pillows piled against the wall. “Bella without knowing it’s Bella.”

"Ignorance isn't bliss," Sirius said, and this was the crux of their current issue. He enjoyed mocking her as much as the next Order member, but it wasn't why he came up here. "But that isn't what I was apologising for. I was apologising because I'm going to ask some questions I don't want to ask about as much as I doubt you want to answer, but time is not on our side, and ignorance is ill-afforded."

Regulus made an unhappy sound, caught somewhere between a sigh and a groan. “That does not sound like a promising start.”

"It's not," Sirius admitted. He could ask for honesty, but he didn't want to know almost as much as he did. It was a confusing set of emotions to have about something. "I gathered from the screaming a couple of months ago it was...after I left?"

“Joining?” Uncomfortably, Regulus nodded, though the movement was slight. “The next summer, shortly before my birthday.”

"Fifteen," Sirius breathed, trying to control his temper about it. That was Harry's age, the same age as Narcissa's snot-nosed kid, younger than some of the kids who had traipsed around this house, mucking about. He did a little mental math, and his stomach lurched. "Just under two years?"

Again, Regulus nodded, taking a sudden interest in the bedhangings above, framing his vision in green.

"Did you-" Of course he didn't know what he was getting into. Sirius could look at Harry, and sometimes, it was so easy to see the baby because he just looked so damn young. He swallowed it down. "Was it her you asked, or offered, or--" He cut himself off, unable to frame the words.

There was a strange look pulling around the corners of Regulus’s eyes, but he blinked it away. “Bella was the logical point of contact, yes,” Regulus responded, his voice straining subtly. “She was like a...mentor, I suppose you could call it.”

It made a sick sort of sense, as they had known without comprehending what Bellatrix had gotten
herself into. Sirius steeled himself, because with Bellatrix came not only the question of retaliation and history, but knowledge. "If - when - she decides to burn you, how screwed are you?"

Regulus winced at the phrasing. “If she manages to catch up to me, then very. She was, in a sense, responsible for me on multiple levels, so I cannot imagine she will be pleased with the outcome,” he said with a frown.

Again, not particularly surprising, but Sirius had not truly expected a sense of loyalty from Bellatrix - she'd decided where hers lay. There were a few different things she may end up doing: There was always the imperius, but it had never been much Bellatrix's style. She liked the cruciatus. Everyone knew that. She could kill him, but she'd have to then explain that to a very pissed off Narcissa, so it's more likely he'd end up in front of Voldemort himself. In front of a Legilimens, wasn't that helpful? There was even the chance she'd do it publicly and out his past, if there was a shred of evidence for that.

That was something he could ask, but it was a question he'd been avoiding for months - years, even. "If she decides to confirm your foray into the Death Eaters, is there evidence?" He looked down at his arm, the revelation of the mark having come so recently that he had to wonder.

Regulus's frame stiffened subtly, the muscles around his mouth tightening to a line. His eyes locked on the shadowy folds of the cloth hanging above him as he nodded, thumbing the hem of his sleeve.

"You don't go near her," Sirius decided. If there was a chance he could have handled it, maybe he would have just waited to see what happened, but it all too easy to see the scared, fucked up teenager still in there. Regulus and Bellatrix hadn't been close before he left, but Sirius could pick up things enough to see the shift. He knew this kind of emotional shut down well enough; watched it employed with their mother the few times she had found them collectively at fault. It had always made Sirius want to claim he was just dragging Regulus along, because he didn't want to watch him crumble under the weight of her ire. "If you can't talk to me about it, Bella with her claws out will rip you to shreds. You're not ready. You still love her too much."

Again, Regulus winced. “I wasn’t planning to stroll up to the manor and knock on her door,” he said with a twinge of defensiveness and a pinch in his expression, though he still did not drop his eyes from the ceiling.

"But you'll want to." Sirius gave him a look, before taking a few steps to the bed and sitting down on the end of it. It was not the easiest thing to talk about at the best of times, but the intensity of the reaction unsettled him deeply. It was worse than he had thought. He had never considered Bellatrix close to anyone, she didn't seem like she would want to seem so human as to be attached to someone but clearly, Regulus was attached to her. Sirius thought back to the flood of arguments and conversations that he was still trying to figure out and figured that Regulus, for all his growth, would probably always try to find the good in the people he cared about. He worked hard to keep the accusation from his voice. "Even though you know it's her that should need it, you still want absolution from her. You still want her to love you and you still want to fix it. Don't you?"

Briefly, Regulus spared a glance to his brother as the bed depressed slightly under his weight. “That question sounds like a trap,” he said uncomfortably before looking up to the ceiling again.

"It's not," Sirius said, honestly. Even if he refused to look at him, he had to try and get the point across. "You may be the one person in this messed up excuse of a family who truly does love without condition. You have a fucking big heart, you won't hurt her because it'd hurt you to. But she will hurt you, and through you, everyone you've interacted with, and then make it seem like it was all your fault in the first place. That's the trap."
A frown pressed firmly as Regulus drew his features to a point, sharp with the tension of his brother's implications, and it was conflict - not combative - that burned in his eyes. At first he tipped his head to a nod - paused - then responded with a quiet strain: "I know."

"I'm not afraid of her," Sirius said, trying to be as honest as he could without just shaking him and hoping some sense fell into place. "But I'm shit scared of the effect she has on you. You still have the option to go back, but I don't know if you will, and either way, you'd die. You already put me through dying once, you don't get to do it again. It's not allowed, I'm pulling the older than you card here. No dying because Bellatrix can no longer tell the difference between the family loyalty you're clinging to and the obsession and desires of a mad man."

"I'm not going back," Regulus said with a little more conviction, despite the lingering discomfort in his eyes, and with a shift to sit up straighter, he settled his attention back on his brother. "I know she's dangerous, and I don't want to compromise the efforts being made here, individually or collectively."

"I know that," Sirius said, a little surprised to find out it was true. Regulus had held to it every time, no matter what. He couldn't help the spike of pride it inspired either. "She doesn't. She's dangerous to most people, but most people, myself included, have little problem hitting her back. She knows you."

Regulus nodded, and with a heavy sigh, his whole face tugged subtly to a furrow. "I wish it didn't have to be a fight."

"I don't think she's going to be in the mood for all the logic you're ready to spew at her on why she shouldn't make it one." Sirius grimaced. He sure as hell hadn't been. "She'll go to Narcissa. Andromeda’s family is in more danger than you right now; she's no reason to think you're alive."

"I know. I'm not worried that she will show up here - at least not for now," Regulus said with a frown. "It's just frustrating."

"The thing with the inferi..." Sirius trailed off, thinking about it. "Did she know about that?"

Regulus shook his head, more confident this time despite the tiny chill he smothered. "Not as far as I know. She is aware that I volunteered Kreacher for a task, but I’m not sure if she knew what the task even was. She did not indicate any specifics... I was not supposed to know of the details either, so she is unlikely to be aware of my personal involvement..."

"You have to appreciate that even Voldemort plays it close to the chest, he may not be able to tell you were involved," Sirius mused. He was thankful for the small mercies. There was a chance it couldn't be traced back to him directly.

A flash of uncertainty flickered in Regulus's eyes, but he nodded. "That is my hope."

"What I want to know is how they got out. One person can sneak out, ten is busting out. Did you see who was with her?"

"In the newspaper?" Regulus clarified, lifting his brow. "I recognised Rodolphus and Rabastan, of course, and Mulciber and Travers. I didn't really know the others, but I knew of Dolohov too, and Rookwood. I left the newspaper in the drawing room, if you would like to take another look. I must admit I'm also curious, because however they managed it, their success doesn't bode well."

"They didn't do it how I did," Sirius said, he felt pretty damn sure about that. It may have meant that either they had someone on the inside or someone was playing with the imperius curse again.
If he were putting gold on it, he'd say Malfoy. "I only know of Rookwood because that was Emme's boss back in the day. I've been racking my brains trying to think why Dolohov is familiar before it hit me, he was one of Dad's dorm mates. I've never been so glad he hated people."

Regulus nodded. "A small mercy. I was aware of them in passing, but not in any significant way," he noted, crinkling his nose. "Awareness of our fellow Death Eaters was admittedly kept separate, for the most part, at least in my experience… But speaking of breaking out, that does remind me: How did you get out? I never did ask."

"I do a great doggy paddle," Sirius snorted, just about managing to keep the laughter under control.

"Did you swim out of Azkaban?" Regulus responded with a lift of his eyebrows, the tension seeming to loosen in his shoulders as he leaned forward. "I suppose the Dementors don't sense animals in the same way, if I'm recalling correctly, but that seems comically straightforward."

"Yes, I did, actually. It's just not as straightforward as it sounds." Sirius admitted, lifting a finger and ticking it off. "The North Sea, as you can imagine, is ice fucking cold. I've never been so glad of my fur." He ticked off another. "Then you've got the guards, but while Dementors can't tell whether you're human or not, Aurors do come in and out, so do Ministry officials." And another. "Then you've got to deal with the bars in high security; you have to be practically skeletal to get through those." And then one more. "And then there's the dementor problem. Cast your mind back to the boggart in the drawing room, and try to imagine staying coherent enough to get out of a cell, out of the walls, and away from the island unseen when that's the state your mind is in." He took a deep breath in and out, shaking the cold feeling off. "I got lucky. When Fudge was doing his rounds, I got the paper off him, and I was so angry when I saw Peter was still alive that I was able to focus. I don't believe ten people went through all of that. Can you imagine Mulciber pulling himself together enough? Or Bellatrix being able to resist monologuing? No, they had inside help."

"I suspect you're right. Inside help makes the most sense," Regulus admitted. "But that sounds awful. Well done, surviving all of that."

"We thought the Dementors may have gone to him after Harry was attacked. I think this all but confirms it." Sirius made a face at the thought of it. Misery bred Dementors, and Dementors bred misery. It was going to be harder than ever to keep it under wraps, and that was the one upside of all of this. "But thank you for the vote of confidence. I was not in the most stable mindset last year, Merlin only knows what Bella will be like; she wasn’t all that stable to begin with. I heard about the trial from Harry."

"From Harry?" Regulus echoed, lifting his brow. "Not who I would have expected to share those details."

"He's a curious kid, always was," Sirius said, a warm sense of pride filling his voice. "He went wandering in Dumbledore's office and stumbled into his pensieve. He was thinking about the trial - the Lestranges, and Crouch - so Harry ended up sitting in on a slice of it."

Regulus was starting to nod, though it was cut short at the mention of Barty Crouch - a tight-lipped pause thickened in the air, then gave way to another nod. "That would explain it."

There was that look again. Sirius had been realising, comment by comment, quite how much he'd underestimated his brother's friendship with the Crouch boy, and every time he talked about it, it just brought it back again. "Do yourself a favour," Sirius said, softly. "Don't ask Harry about that one." He didn't need to hear about the gory details.

"Noted," Regulus said uncomfortably.
Sirius thought of the other people who might be affected by all this; there was still a branch of the Bones left despite Edgar and his family being gone, Amelia and another sibling if he remembered right. There were no McKinmons left; he could still remember how distraught Lily had been after that massacre. The Longbottoms, what was left of them. Even Molly, he realised with a start. "Dolohov killed Molly's - Mrs. Weasley's - younger brothers. Those were the Prewetts I was telling you about," Sirius said as he hit the realisation. Everyone around here was walking about with scars of people they'd lost, and all of this was just dragging it up again. "You'd think that family'd been through enough without this."

Regulus frowned with a soft huff of a breath. "I'd say we all have been."

It may have been true, but Sirius hadn't thought he'd say it. Maybe a little time around the Order was good for him. (Would it have changed things, if this had happened back when he'd 'died'?)

"What do you think of them?" Sirius asked, suddenly possessed to know the answer. "The others?"

"Here?" Regulus clarified.

Sirius nodded. "I know you don't have the highest opinion of vigilantism, but people have started talking about you, so I wanted to know."

An awkward but altogether thoughtful expression settled on Regulus's face, looking for a moment as if he wasn't sure what to say. "They've been unexpectedly tolerable..." he began in an understated tone, uncomfortable but carrying an underlying positivity that the words did not quite communicate. "I dare say some are even quite likable." A beat, a shift, and then he added: "What are they saying?"

"It's not specific. It's just little things." Sirius smiled. It was a strange thing, this cohabitation and mixing of worlds, and not one he was sure Regulus would have tolerated then. "Tonks will ask how are you are when she's here; Remus is always checking if he needs to make another cup or not with his tea solves everything approach; Emmeline was saying you reminded her a little of Dorcas, who I don't think you ever met but was a spectacularly talented witch who used to get so annoyed about the sheer amount of Gryffindors around. Molly thinks you should eat more, despite how many times I've told her you're just naturally tiny."

"I'm not 'tiny,'" Regulus objected, though the tone was not as combative as it might have been - awkward, still, but coloured with something that might have been a little bit happy.

"I think you like a bit of fussing, reminds you of Mum before she went completely round the twist. " Sirius said, conspiratorially. "Moody thinks you're playing a long game and will end up murdering everyone, but that's Moody for you," Sirius grinned. It wouldn't be Moody if he didn't suspect someone of evil. "He's probably saying the same thing about me. Maybe Remus too; there's been some werewolf problems up north. Looks like Voldemort wants his army back."

Regulus snorted softly at the mention of Moody, looking for a moment like he was biting back a thought, but as Sirius finished, Regulus instead said a simple: "That's...unfortunate."

"You don't seem too bothered by it," Sirius said, as he started to wonder why he thought he might be. "The monthly furriness."

"For Lupin? I was very bothered when you first told me there was going to be a werewolf transforming in our house," Regulus began pointedly, "but he is staggeringly pleasant, now that I
am no longer obligated to dislike him on principle."

"Your house," Sirius corrected automatically, before frowning. "Actually, I've no idea now. We're going to have to talk to a lawyer at some point, as if Death Eaters weren't bad enough." Dedalus tended to look after the Order in terms of legalities, and he had assured him that there wasn't a problem before all of this started. He didn't know if the wards were linked to blood or law or something else. Their father had not left a manual.

Regulus looked around, as if the walls of his room and the floor below held some answer, then turned his attention back to Sirius. "I suppose we should. I never really thought about it, before. The legal process itself, that is."

"I don't know that Dad ever set down a legal situation wherein I was disowned. Grandfather is dead, and the new patriarch supposedly popped his clogs only for it to turn out to be a clever ruse, coming back swinging." Even to Sirius, the whole situation sounded pretty damned funny when he put it like that. "I'd have thought it'd go to Bellatrix, but I've been assured it definitely went to me. The wards are obviously happy enough with us, but I think those are blood magic, and as for the legalities, just in case something happens, I'd like to make sure it doesn't go to her then, despite you being here."

"I would rather that 'something' didn't happen," Regulus said with a little wince, "but I can agree that it would be poor planning to risk the house going to Bella because it thinks I'm dead."

"I'll see if our resident lawyer can dig things up quietly." Sirius reached over to pat him on the leg, since it was nearest. "We all know when you would rather something didn't happen, it usually does. But I'll be careful. At least Bellatrix being out there means it'll have to come out sooner rather than later that the Ministry's lying, Dumbledore can stop flitting around, and just maybe, I might not have to spend the rest of my life 'hiding in my mother's house."

Crinkling his nose, Regulus let out a huff. "It wasn't fair for him to say that. Not that you were being particularly friendly either, but the point still stands that storming out and begging the Dementors or the Aurors to apprehend you is hardly helpful for anyone."

"I don't care what he thinks of me! I'd prefer he didn't think of me at all," Sirius puffed, not at all in the mood to entertain the idea that he cared even an iota about Severus Snape and his opinions. "I care how he talks to Harry. He's not arrogant, and he's not stupid. He just wasn't raised to know what magic was, through no fault of his own, and-" And at this point, Snape'd probably spent more time with Harry since he was able to form full sentences than Sirius himself had, and now.... "And now he's got an excuse to go into his head and mock him even more. I hate him. I wish I knew what Dumbledore sees that makes it worth him.

"He seems to be helping," Regulus pointed out, "Though I agree that his opinion of Harry is skewed. I did not...get along with James Potter either," - an exceptionally strained expression flickered on his face as he continued - "but that isn't Harry's fault. I must admit he actually seems like pretty good kid."

Sirius shot him a dirty look. "Don't use logic on me when I'm ranting." Then he huffed, because Regulus looked like he was trying to shit out a brick from that expression, and he was more than used to the mutual animosity between the two. He gestured vaguely to him. "That looked painful. O for effort, though."

"It was," Regulus said grimly. "The things I suffer for an O."
Lunchtime was upon them, by the time the Black brothers’ conversation had wined to an end - a meal that proved itself an uneventful affair despite the drama of their cousin’s world-shaking escape. It was not until Regulus had holed away in his bedroom again that he allowed himself to start unraveling his conversation with Sirius, muddling together the heavy and the light.

With the door locked behind him and his spot on the bed re-settled, Regulus twisted around to look at the smattering of newspaper clippings, aged and untouched. A chain of disappearances, the razing of Godric’s Hollow, the poisoning of Tinworth - the less violent and altogether more value-based overtaking of the wizarding wireless network for a brief broadcast - the explosion in Diagon Alley that took his father’s life. Bella had been involved in many of them, himself and Barty in a few - and a masked mystery, in the disaster that claimed Orion Black as unexpected collateral.

Grasping into the murky shadows, he pulled forth that white-hot anger and shoved it down into his chest. Regulus knew his brother was right in this, for all the offenses and all their disagreements peppering the years past. Bellatrix Lestrange was a danger to him, to all of them, and her ability to make him feel at fault for every step out of line was sharp with precedence. (The consequences of stepping out of line were his fault, of course, but to give her such a weapon was a threat to his mission as much as the Order’s.)

It would be so much safer just to hate her-

‘You still want her to love you and you still want to fix it. Don't you?’

The truth of it stung. Regulus picked up the book left abandoned on his side table, fingers brushing over the worn leather. Inside was a childhood of memories, and a few page-flips landed on a page of pictures from the Christmas following his birth. Uncle Alphard had gotten a new camera, he’d been told as a child when he’d asked why that year had so many more pictures than the others. Featured prominently was a photograph of Narcissa cuddling him in a sleeping swaddle, and beside it, a family portrait in which Bella looked incredibly disinterested as Cissa, once again, snuggled him close. Beneath a stubborn piece of opaque spellotape was Andromeda holding a squirming Sirius, he knew - tearing them out of this particular photo without tearing another member had been too difficult in his angered adolescent state.

Tapping the tape with his wand, it loosened to reveal his writhing toddler brother and his estranged cousin, a near mirror of her annoyed sister standing behind.

Again his chest burned, the sight of them all in the same photograph sparking a childish longing. (How long had it been?) Regulus was well into adulthood now, knew so much more than his floundering teenage self had - more about the realities of the world and the wrongs of certain people in that photograph - but if they could understand…

With a frown tensing the line of his mouth, Regulus slammed the album shut with a little too much gusto, feeling the thud echo in his head. Though it did not burn with the call, Regulus pushed up his left sleeve, rubbing at the angry red brand stretching along his forearm.

She knew. She knew everything, and he knew that she knew, and she knew that he knew that she knew - and she was free.

Anxiety knotted in his chest and crawled over his skin like a thousand creeping things, but he shook his head, tugging the sleeve down again and looking to the wardrobe, picturing the broken
locket tucked inside.

No - she did not know everything.

Despite the relative unease of the Azkaban escapes, Number Twelve had managed to resolve itself to its usual equilibrium by Saturday morning. The Weasleys had settled back home, so the house had remained quieter than Remus had expected over the the last few days. It was broken a little after ten when he had to double-take; he had not heard the door open or close from downstairs nor had the portrait of Mrs. Black been agitated, so he was a little surprised to find Emmeline standing in front of it.

"Good morning," he whispered.

She startled, but grinned. "Hello. I didn't know if you'd still be here."

Remus nodded, "For now. Everything alright?"

Emmeline nodded in return. "I was just curious about the spellwork," she admitted, before gesturing to the house. "This place is like a giant puzzle box of interacting wards."

"And you can't resist a puzzle," Remus said, trying to resist smiling. They had remained friends after the war, but many of the closer friendships had felt tarnished by what he had believed happened with Sirius and Peter. It had made it harder to talk to even the oldest of friends.

"Is Sirius up?" she asked, not refuting the claim.

"It's ten in the morning, and no one was scheduled to be here," Remus said, "Don't be ridiculous."

Emmeline snorted. "I can go if you like."

Remus shook his head. He didn't mean it like that. "Tonks should be off guard duty at lunch time, but she went after work, so she may just go home."

"I know, Hestia is going on after her. I said I'd pop in and see her before she did," Emmeline said. "But I guess she isn't here yet."

"There's coffee downstairs," Remus said, his own way of offering for her to stay and wait, in case she still thought he was trying to get rid of her.

"Lead on, Macduff."

"That's not the quote," Remus said, opening the door for her to the basement.

"It is if you're quoting a nineteenth century drunkard rather than Shakespeare," Emmeline said, passing by him on the stairs.

"My mistake." Never get into it with a Ravenclaw.

However, the peace was not to last. Not even half an hour later, the shrieks of Mrs. Black echoed through the kitchen, and Remus rushed up to help. What he found was a bag-laden Hestia Jones with her wand between her teeth, something Moody would have lost his mind over. Thankfully, practice and lack of other stressors to the portrait meant he was able to get them closed relatively quickly.

"Hi," Hestia said, looking a little jarred. "Emme, can you take these?"
Behind him, Emmeline seemed to appear and take them out of nowhere. "Are these from Camden Passage?" she asked. "You braved the markets on Saturday morning, are you mad?"

"I thought snacks might help," Hesia offered. "Research without snacks is just studying."

"Research?"

"I, er, borrowed a few books from work," Emmeline flushed, but managed not to change her facial expression too much. "About linking of minds, especially with animals. I thought we might see what we dig up."

It wasn't a bad idea at all. Though Occlumency would help the link that had been forged between Voldemort and Harry, the snake business was a bit more unusual. "Do you want a hand?" Remus asked.

"More the merrier," Hestia smiled.

As they situated themselves in the newly cleared out dining room with a mixture of food, cups and books, another thought had struck Remus about it. There was a certain nostalgia to this. Though Hestia was new, they seemed to be settling into a fond friendship, and Sturgis (he thought, with a stab of worry for their friend) had been part of that as well. Both he and Emmeline had been part of what they had once jokingly called the Ravenclaw rebellion, despite the fact that Fabian had been a Gryffindor and Dorcas, a Slytherin. It mostly felt made up of people who didn't want to run in headfirst. He and Lily had spent a lot of time with that group, especially when she was pregnant, and he found that he missed it. There was something about the Order’s sense of camaraderie he deeply missed when it was gone, and though the circumstances were awful, he was glad of it now.

But it also made him aware of their own dwindling number and ability to do the work effectively. This is where the second, possibly terrible idea came to his mind. They were not the only people around working on research, and with a resource like books from the Department of Mysteries -

("Won't they notice they're missing?" Hestia had asked worriedly.

"I left decoys." Emmeline shrugged. "As long as no one reads them.")

- they may not have them for very long.

When Remus relayed his idea, Emmeline had shrugged and Hestia simply mentioned she had yet to meet Sirius’ brother. She was around much more sporadically than the others. All in all, if they were not opposed and the boy himself was not opposed, it could be a mutually beneficial arrangement.

With this in mind, Remus headed upstairs.

With Remus Lupin’s appearance in the drawing room doorway, Regulus had assumed it was related either to his brother or to his mother's shrieking portrait (perhaps even both) - but when instead he was invited down to the basement for an impromptu group study session, Regulus felt a strange pull. The horcruxes were his own concern, hardly something he wanted to spread around to uncontrolled variables - however well-meaning these vigilantes might be - but it had been so long since he had sat around researching anything with anyone. (There were members of the Order he might never be able to relate to, but the ones he perhaps could…) Lupin’s extension was small, but it was a little embarrassing how nice it had been to hear.

“I suppose a change in scenery would not be so terrible,” he had responded with a face painted
neutral, following Lupin down each set of stairs until they reached the basement where two women were already sitting at the table with a spread of books. Emmeline, and another - younger, maybe around Tonks’s age, with black hair and pink cheeks. Hestia, as he recalled.
"Hullo," said the younger witch, giving a cheerful wave. "I'm Hestia."

"I don't think I need an introduction," Emmeline said, already flipping through the pages of one of the books. "We were only a year apart at school."

Hestia looked between them hesitantly, "Really."

"Yes," Emmeline said, looking up with an exaggeratedly stern look. "And if that's a crack about my age, I'm taking my books and heading home."

Remus shook his head at the two of them. "We've got some books for a...limited time, so we're trying to make sure we don't miss anything about potential mental projection abilities."

A spark of interest lit in Regulus’s eyes, and he nodded. “Let’s take a look, then.”

Sitting in the empty chair beside Emmeline, Regulus picked up the nearest book, flipping to the contents. As he took in the headings - theoretical essays, extrapolations, experimental results, compare/contrast pieces on various mental-based magic - he leaned forward a little, lifting his brow. He was not foolish enough to put forth the suggestion that he had read every book in existence, but this was not the sort of book one found in your typical library, and he had spent a great deal of time in libraries with all levels of restriction. “Intriguing.”

"A lot of it was banned from use years ago, even for experimentation," Emmeline explained, leaning over to read down the page of contents on his book. "But the Department of Mysteries is unspeakable for a reason. There's little accountability, so our experimentation tends to be more...recent, see?"

"Usually," Remus added, with a thin smile.

"Yes, with Fudge out looking for ways to discredit and destroy all possible hints of You-Know-Who, even we’ve had some trouble," Emmeline admitted, leaning back to her own book with a stormy look. "Still, controlling animals or becoming one is different from being able to read and understand them. It's unusual."

“Quite,” Regulus said, trying to keep the little rush of wonder from his tone as his carefully neutral expression flickered. (Probably-)Banned books from the Department of Mysteries were more rare a treasure than he could have expected, even from Emmeline as the resident Unspeakable, and even if he had not been originally following the research trail in this direction, they looked to be a fascinating read. If Harry really did have a piece of the Dark Lord lodged inside of him, perhaps these theories would be of less practical use than he had once hoped-

-but it was always good to keep one’s options open.

“I've been looking into higher level understandings of Legilimency and Occlumency, but any text I've had access to has shared only partial similarity, if any at all. Even this here,” - Regulus gestured to the passage he had flipped to first - “speaks of experimental Legilimency in which the caster projects a false image into the mind of another, but though there is a possibility it was a projection, the snake was not a false image, per se.”

"I think Arthur can attest to it being a real snake," Remus replied, grimly. He reached over and took another book, carefully.
"My question is if it's only snakes," Emmeline said, punctuating the point with her quill. "There seems to be an affinity for them, but they're not a subtle thing, dirty great snakes going about."

"It worked at Hogwarts," Remus reminded her.

"Yes!" Emmeline said, placing both hands on the table with a frustrated noise. "A secret chamber under the girls loo, and I had no idea. I'm ashamed of myself."

"What was Harry doing in the girls loo?" Hestia asked, keeping her voice down as if it were not a perfectly good question.

"Looking for Hermione?" Emmeline suggested.

"No, she was petrified," Remus said, absently.

"He wouldn't be the first boy to go peeping in the girls loo," Emmeline said, making a face. "But he doesn't really the type. It does make you wonder how many other places have secret hideyholes. I was about to call you Black, but there's two of you - do you mind first names?"

“First names are fine,” Regulus granted with a nod - familiar, perhaps, but nonetheless practical. “And it does not seem much of a leap for there to be more. Hopefully they don't all have basilisks and the like in them, but I'm finding myself less and less surprised, the more I hear about the past few years.”

"We found a few things when we were creating the map," Remus admitted, sitting back in the chair. "Mostly just secret passages, but there were a few interesting things."

"But no giant snakes?" Emmeline asked.

"No giant snakes," Remus winced. "It was a large oversight on our part."

"This place looks like the kind of place that has hidden rooms," Emmeline gestured around the house. "Is there?"

A hint of nostalgia played at the corner of Regulus’s mouth, overriding his curiosity about this ‘map’ Lupin had mentioned. (He could ask on that, later.)

“We did find one as children,” Regulus admitted, thinking of the magically tucked room he and Sirius had found through a portrait before they ever stepped foot at Hogwarts, back when this house was their only castle. It was not particularly secure to anyone who knew about it, his brother at the forefront of that list, but even if it was full of boring adult things, they had been positively delighted. How long it had been - the memory hadn't crossed his mind in years. He wondered if Sirius even remembered… “Suffice to say we spent a lot of time here, before going off to school.”

"I was a little surprised," Remus admitted, turning one of the pages slowly as if it may crumble. "I had expected it to be in a more magically-dominated area."

"It used to be," Emmeline said, twirling the quill in a circle. "I think the major shift happened when the Metropolis became the Boroughs about a hundred and fifty years ago, and a lot more people moved here during the Industrial Revolution. Subsisting in the country was both easier and more economically-sound for most witches and wizards, which is why you don't see too many old families living in the big cities; but this place looks like it may even predate its London inclusion in...I think, around the seventeenth century."

"If we ever have a trivia night, you're on my team," Hestia informed her.
“Impressively researched,” Regulus said, lifting an eyebrow as his attention shifted back to Emmeline. Random, as far as information went, but she was certainly not wrong. “The house is closer to 16th century, though it has experienced renovations.”

"It came up last time around," Emmeline shrugged, obviously quite proud of her random knowledge set.

Hestia crinkled her brow. "How did that come up in the last war?"

"Well, we realised that the reason we weren't able to track a lot of the deaths was because they were happening in non-magical areas, and the muggle law enforcement weren't highlighting them as they thought they were accidental. While the Trace does track underage magic in non-magical areas, it doesn't usually track adult magic, so we were trying to figure out a way to do that without causing a massive invasion of privacy." Emmeline shut the chapter closed with a frustrated sigh, as it must not have had any useful information.

"I remember going through all of the local papers," Remus said, with a shake of his head. "Looking for the signs. It took up a lot of time."

Emmeline nodded in agreement. "It's worse now, because there's a jailbreak but no sign of anything. No one's reported any new snake attacks either. It's almost as if Arthur alone was targeted, but I'm not sure why he specifically would have been. Why use that up on him? No offense, but there are better targets for a secret snake assassin."

Regulus pressed his mouth to a line. There was something distinctly uncomfortable in listening to them speak of the deaths wrought by the Death Eaters during the first war, however aware Regulus might be, and he welcomed the shift to Arthur. Even the unknown was more reassuring, when pitted against more shameful memories.

"I was wondering the same," Regulus said, glancing over before flipping a page to skim the next. "Ginny was targeted with the diary, if not a direct attack. I thought it curious, two from the same family, yet Harry seems close with them, so I suppose it could be as simple as that."

Remus shook his head. "I believe Lucius and Arthur had an unpleasant interaction in the weeks previously, and with Voldemort-" There was a collective shudder from the women, though neither said anything. "-seemingly banished once again with Quirrell, it may have just been good timing to get rid of an artifact that could link them and it was two birds with one stone."

“Perhaps,” Regulus said thoughtfully. He still couldn't be sure if Lucius even knew what the diary had been - Regulus certainly wouldn't have know what Kreacher was doing, had the elf not survived to tell the tale - though it would be easier to dispose of in another way, even dropping it in the Thames, if that was the only motivation… “There are a great many factors at play. It has proven quite the puzzle.”

"Then we better get to it," Emmaline said, settling in with the book.

For the second time that morning, his mother's portrait was making known her displeasure, but this time, at the top of the stairs Regulus found Tonks, rubbing a spot on her leg and nudging away the troll leg umbrella stand at the same time. By the time he reached her, she had begun the agonizingly predictable wrestling match.

By the time they had settled the hallway, he could hear several of his other ancestors tittering from their portraits. With a shake off his head, Regulus stepped back a few steps to allow her to pass on
whatever direction she was heading. “Your ability to set her off so consistently is really, truly remarkable.”

"I'm dead tired," Tonks gave by way of excuse, rubbing her palm across her eyes in some vain attempt to wake herself up. Apparently she had decided not to go in any direction, sitting down on the stairs. "Usually, I'm just clumsy. Things are crazy."

“Mass Azkaban breakout? I can see how that might send the Auror office into a bit of a state,” Regulus remarked with a nod, crossing his arms loosely as he stood opposite her at the top of the stairs.

"The department head's a decent enough bloke, but he's too sharp. He knows something's up, even if Fudge doesn't." Tonks didn't say it in a way that made it sound at all comforting. She instead leaned forward on both her arms hanging over her knees. "He keeps giving me weird looks and breathing down my neck, like he reckons I got something to hide. Which I do! But it doesn't help that half the wanted posters plastered all over the shop look like dead ringers of my Mum neither."

Uncomfortably, Regulus shifted on his feet. He could not pick apart if it was more awkward to draw his thoughts to Bellatrix or Andromeda, as it was, but he supposed in discomfort, at least, he did not have to choose. "It wouldn't help, no," he said, his tone wooden but conceding.

"Did you know her?" Tonks asked.

Regulus shifted again. There was some measure of ambiguousness to the question, yet in truth, he didn't much like the idea of answering either. Clearly Andromeda had not spoken much of them if Tonks needed to ask about him knowing either cousin, but he supposed that was not a surprise. They had pointedly not spoken of her, either. “Bella, or your mother?”

“Bella, as in Bellatrix Lestrange?” Tonks asked, uncertainly.

Yet another awkward shift. “Bellatrix, yes,” he echoed.

Tonks raised her eyebrows. “I guess that's a yes.”

“We’re cousins,” Regulus said with a little spark of defensiveness, “Sirius knew her too.”

"He doesn't call her Bella, he calls her Lestrange," Tonks pointed out, with an expression caught between amusement and weariness. "But Mum does. Though I know they don't get on, on account of all the attempting to torture and murder Dad and me all those times when I was a kid. Not that I remember any of it. It's well weird to know someone wants you die a horrible death, and you've no memory of them."

Stubbornly, Regulus thought to himself that sometimes Sirius did call her Bella - not affectionately, of course, but if they were talking semantics, there was a degree of occurrence. Though the objection was on his tongue, he bit it away. The spirit of the accusation was true, even if she could not possibly understand the depth of the situation, peripheral as she was.

To her credit, he supposed he could not so easily relate to hers, either.

“She is intense, to say the least,” Regulus said uncomfortably, “The violence was unnecessary, but she has never been one to leave well enough alone.”

"I guess I'll find out soon, wish me luck." Tonks said, unsuccessfully biting back a yawn. "I don't need to ask about Mum, though. I can sort of remember when you died. Or, you know what I mean, I was five or six, I wasn't that young and I think it was in Prophet."
Grimly, Regulus nodded. "I suppose it would have been..." Perhaps some might like to stick around and see the announcements, might find amusement in the idea of going to your own funeral, but such things had been so far from his mind at the time, fixated as he was on figuring out how to navigate his new situation - and how to quash the guilt tied to the people he love. How it played out was so miniscule a thing that it was strange to imagine the spot in the *Prophet*, or the funeral without a body... "I wouldn't have expected her to notice."

"If you move a vase out of place, Mum would notice. Besides, I mostly remember Sirius crashing on our couch and making forts with the cushions and the books and these bewitched teddy bears that used to stand guard outside, just in case something bad happened," All at once, Tonks flushed red with even her hair rippling through the shade. "I haven't thought about that since I got invited to the super secret vigilante club. Bit embarrassing, you won't tell anyone about the teddy bear thing, yeah? Just cause I'm the youngest, I don't need no one acting different like I can't handle myself."

"Youngest in the Order, is it? I was the youngest for a long time, myself." (In the Death Eaters, and in his family, alike-) In his family it was perhaps not as long as it felt, because Tonks herself had never been taken into account over all of those years - but Regulus bit his tongue to hold that observation back. A little stab of jealousy panged at the thought of his brother - having long abandoned him, by her timeline - putting so much protective effort into the Tonkses, though he knew on some level that he oughtn't begrudge her that. Children oughtn't be made to feel scared, whatever the situation, however hurt those past-smothered memories might feel.

"You're not in the Order," Tonks said cheekily, but she winked - an understanding that it wasn't the Order he meant, and she wasn't about to blow it up. "Besides, age doesn't mean anything; it doesn't mean I'm less smart, or less capable, or I'm suddenly going to panic because a Death Eater doesn't like me. One didn't like me my whole school career, and he still gave me an E at NEWTs. I'm not worried. Just knackered. This double life thing is hard work."

Regulus rolled his eyes - but as they let the quip lie, he instead responded, "It's true. I detested the underestimation of my adolescence, though I must say, in some cases, it isn't completely without its advantages." He shook his head. "Even so, double lives are exhausting. I suppose it is a particularly stressful time for it."

From behind them, Hestia bustled out with nothing more than a wave. Tonks half rose her hand, then seemed to decide she couldn't be bothered and let it drop. "I've gotta move out. It's bad enough at work, but when your parents know you're lying...At least you weren't lying about it. Or at least, I don't think you were, they seem like they'd have been up for it." She made a face. "My old mum, she does the eyebrow thing, and it makes me think she knows I'm lying and is just indulging me 'til she figures out a way to draw it out. I go home like this. and I'm doomed."

Though Regulus had treasured his parents’ encouragement at the time, once again, Regulus was struck with the feeling that it might have been a relief, had they - had anyone - discouraged the idea of active involvement, but they were long gone, and Andromeda's daughter was hardly the most comforting person to reflect on his childhood with. Anything he said would only open the door to conflicting opinions he would rather brush over.

"She probably does," he settled, though he had not seen or heard word from his cousin since he was twelve years old. Something nostalgic twinged in his chest. (Andromeda had been a Slytherin, too.) "But if you are dedicated to keeping it up, then yes, I would recommend preparing first."

"There is another option."

Sirius appeared on the stairs, having been awoken by the usual screaming of their mother’s portrait
and been surprised to see Tonks and Regulus having a cozy little chat in the hallway. He hadn't considered they'd really talk, but he hadn't truly considered Regulus chatting with any of them, and he kept stumbling upon it. He really needed to stop being surprised.

Andromeda had always been a touchy subject in this house; a young pregnant girl running off and marrying her muggle-born boyfriend, just as the family has become entangled with Death Eaters. She was burnt away almost immediately, out of sight and out of mind. He'd raised the subject a few times, but his parents and hers had gotten crazy about it. It was different when he saw her later. She'd had time to grow in those few short years. She wasn't just the cheeky, soft-spoken spoken mirror of Bellatrix anymore, but a wife and mother. Though they had spent time together, it had never been for long: she had a family she wanted to protect from her sister's pruning wand, and Sirius tended to draw attention. Still, it would be wrong to say he didn't miss her. She'd always been his favourite and felt a little of that reciprocated. The idea that she may have believed what happened - believed he'd killed all of those people - was a difficult one to bear, but she'd had a little girl to put first.

A little girl who was now twenty-one, a member of the same Order he had been and trying to lie, just as he once had. It seemed like distance hadn't made much difference. History liked to repeat itself, and no one was safe.

"Morning," he added, as an afterthought.

"He emerges," Regulus remarked, turning his attention to Sirius.

"You'd think I'd have learned to sleep through people screaming by now, but nope," Sirius shrugged, leaning against the banister of the staircase. "I thought you were on-

"I was," Tonks cut him off as she twisted round, with a tired smile. "Just hanging about to wake up a bit before I get grilled."

"About that," Sirius had been trying to think of a way to figure out exactly how safe Number Twelve was since he and Regulus had talked about the possibility of Bellatrix encouraging the quirky ward interaction that had left him observable but the rest of the Order not. Aside from Narcissa, the rest of the family were either dead or not exactly fond of him, so if it turned out that the ward wasn't working, he'd be in trouble. They both might be. If Andromeda still wasn't aware of her daughter’s involvement in the Order, but had an inkling she was involved in something, it could be the perfect circumstances to check either of their visibility. "I think it might be time to invite her over - without giving her any context of us, nor the Order. I think the charm needs to be tested by someone who might also have a connection to this house, and those are in short supply these days."

Regulus gave a thoughtful pause, then a little nod. "That seems like the safest option," he conceded.

"It'd need running by everyone in case it doesn't work," Sirius admitted, but he gave his brother a nod in gratitude. He could have made a fuss about it, and was choosing not to. Tonks would have to be alright with it as well. It was her parents and their relationship he was about to mess with. "And it'd mean you'd have to admit some of your involvement."

This appeared to cross her mind as well, because her usual expressive face dropped into a neutral expression. "Would it help?"

Of course that was her question. "It would," he admitted, even if he felt nervous about it.

"Then run it past the Order," Tonks shrugged, pulling herself up with another stifled yawn. "If Dumbledore's okay with it, I'll do it. I gotta get home."
"I'll ask on Friday," Sirius promised, as Tonks went to once again bump into the table in the foyer, but she managed to stop herself by grabbing onto the wall with a sheepish look before she managed to make it out the door without a recurrence of the one-woman screaming show that was Walburga Black.

Thinning the line of his mouth, Regulus watched her go, waiting until she had passed the threshold before turning back to his brother. "Sirius," he began, looking for a moment as if he might abandon the thought before he continued, "What might be the best way to go about arranging a meeting with Dumbledore?"

"At the minute?" Sirius scoffed, unable to help himself. Dumbledore had been keeping a low profile even within the Order, let alone at Hogwarts and trying to get a hold of him for any length of time was a difficult task. "Patience, and hope."

"How spectacularly unaccommodating," Regulus said dryly.

"He'll show up at some point," Sirius admitted, not really wanting to admit how much it bothered him that Dumbledore was flitting here, there and everywhere when they still needed help. He knew that the new Defense teacher was a piece of work and the students were in danger, but being left hanging didn't feel great either. "I think he's got his hands full with Hogwarts. Ministry's got their claws in, haven't they? But when he comes here, I'll come get you or make sure someone does."

Regulus nodded, seeming to decide that was sufficient. "Thank you." Moving from the stairway, he stepped back to the middle of the hall. "If you will excuse me..."

The week passed without incident. There was no reappearance from Dumbledore, but there had been no mass deaths or assassinations or any sign whatsoever that deranged murderers were on the loose. The Order meeting, if you could call it that, had been skeletal, and McGonagall took it in Dumbledore's absence. She agreed to the test - not that it would truly have stopped Sirius if she'd said no - but it didn't matter because she felt it was fine, and others had no issue if she didn't. In fact, Number Twelve Grimmauld Place had become a little quieter again as visits became sporadic at best. There had been no word from Harry.

The agreed upon scenario that Tonks had cooked up had been that she would simply ask her mother if she'd come with her, because there was something she felt she might need her help for. Although Tonks had to admit, that was probably arising some suspicion. A lack of ability to ask for help appeared to be a common trait in their family, recognised or not. The idea would be simple enough. Andromeda had spent winter parties, birthdays, a myriad of events and non-events in this house. She knew it well. She did not know it as headquarters to the Order of the Phoenix, though she had been aware of there being some involvement with vigilantism when Sirius had been young. What she saw when she got there would give them a better idea of what Bellatrix may see if she chose to come looking for something in the ancestral fire pit.

Still, nerves kept Sirius awake most of the night and he couldn't say why. Tonks couldn't explain his own situation without tainting the perception that may interfere with the charm, so this could go badly. Andromeda was not her sister, but a vicious streak ran through the entire bloodline, and he didn't want to get into a fight with her.

Regulus had more cause for worry still, as he didn't imagine they had seen each other since before Tonks was born. It had been both of their first real experiences of disownment, and if he thought about it too much, he could still hear their mother telling them they just weren't important enough to her and screaming at him over upsetting Andromeda's parents in their 'suffering'. He could still
remember being pulled in front of her, still smaller than her and Regulus frozen in case she spoke sharply even to him. He still looked the same when he was scared, upset and utterly confused and conflicted about what was happening. Back then, the fate worse than death was erasure from the tree, from all of the pictures, all mentions, from ever having existed. Regulus had always felt stronger about legacy than Sirius himself, but it was possible that it was just because Regulus had never been able to stare down his mother without crumbling.

(Yet he'd managed with Voldemort. What does that tell you?)

"I'm heading down to the landing," Sirius said, poking his head in on his brother. "Show's about to begin."

Regulus looked up, hesitating for just a beat before he neatly marked his place and set the book aside. "My curiosity is piqued, I must say," he said as he stood and approached his brother in the doorway, "though I'm glad to be on the invisible side of the fidelius, this time."

"You hope," Sirius reminded him, moving out of the way. There was a childhood nostalgia to this, to going down to the landing because someone (sometimes, even their cousins) were coming. The house had felt large and empty even when they were small and company had often been welcomed, even if they - read: Sirius - had often been told hanging through banister railings was no way to greet a guest, family or otherwise.

Except he had no idea if he'd end up greeting anyone at all. There was every chance she would see nothing but an old house, no longer crumbling but hardly in its heyday either. There were sounds on the other side of the door and his heart plunged and adrenalin spiked. "Here we go."

Regulus nodded, taking a steeling breath as he rested his hands on the banister railing. Beside him, Sirius was leaning over and peering down - a sight that brought a wry, lopsided smile to Regulus's lips as he, too, looked below.

As the door opened, two voices sounded out: Tonks, and the unmistakable elocution of Andromeda.

"- you know what you're doing."

"Can we just go in?"

Even in daylight, the narrow hallway of the house looked dark, and lights were always on unless everyone was in bed. It cast a hazy glow of nostalgia, something Sirius didn't feel particularly often about his own childhood, but this was one of the things he loved. One of the people he loved. She looked a damn sight older, resembling her father far more than her mother and more than a little like his own. The one he had the vaguest memories of a child, before everything had changed and shifted.

The thought made him uncomfortable, so he forced himself to focus. Her hair was long and darker than he'd remembered, but she still carried herself the same way she always had: poised, as her mother would have called it. He called it faking. Narcissa had been the only ladylike one out of their cousins, and Andromeda (and Bellatrix, he thought with a treacherous stab of upset) had always rolled their eyes and taken the instruction with varied degrees of humour and disdain.

"It looks smaller than I remember," Andromeda said, as her eyes flitted across the hallway with a scrutinising look.

Tonks hit the table, and Sirius's head hit the banister. He knew the hallway wasn't exactly well lit.
and it was cluttered, but he had to be amazed by the sheer amount of times one girl could trip over things.

"Nymphadora!" Andromeda said, the image intersecting with a woman fifteen or so years before trying to get her little girl to stop mucking about.

"Oh no," Tonks grimace. He knew why. They all knew what was about to happen.

The curtains flew open and the screeching diatribe of traitor, and the apparently new addition of lying with filth (charming woman, their mother) filled the air. Tonks hurried over to shut it, but it wasn't Tonks he was watching. Despite an initial step back from the onslaught, he found that Andromeda was standing stock still. He couldn't see her expression, but she was looking right at it.

"Good god." Andromeda breathed, in the ensuing silence.

"Sorry, mum," Tonks said, sounding utterly miserable for the first time since he'd met her.

He saw Andromeda move her head sharply, then shake it. "Try to look where you're going," she said.

"I do set her off a lot," Tonks admitted, crossing her arms and eyes flickering up to the landing.

"The incognito part of all of this appears to still need some work." Andromeda said, dryly. "I don't think I'm supposed to know that."

"Probably not," Tonks agreed, mouthing what he thought was an apology at them. He couldn't judge her for that. She was clearly having trouble just watching to see what her mother would do.

"Was that all you needed?" Andromeda asked.

Tonks looked back at the landing helplessly, clearly trying to figure out a way of making her look around without making it obvious.

It turned out she needn't of bothered.

"Or has it more to do with Sirius reliving his childhood on the landing?"

Tonks blinked.

Sirius looked to Regulus, to see if there was another comment about him coming, but perhaps she didn't recognise him. It had been a very long time since she'd seen him.

"I can explain," Tonks started.

"I imagine it starts with 'Mum, I've become a vigilante' and ends with something about this being an excellent pigeonhole to avoid being seen, given the wards on it." Andromeda crossed her arms, taking a few more steps and partially ascending the stairs "Is this your doing?"

"What? No!" Sirius suddenly had the intense feeling of being caught doing something wrong. "Wait, you said vigilante."

"I did."

"You didn't say Death Eater," he added confused.

"Unless you've decided to put thirty years of competitive animosity aside and asked Bellatrix to tea,
then why I would I?"

"I-" Sirius looked to Regulus for some sort of support, then remembered he'd had a similar deadpan reaction. "You don't think I am one."

"Don't be ridiculous, they wouldn't take you. It's like trying to herd cats to get you to do anything you don't explicitly want to do."

Was he supposed to be insulted by that? It was almost a compliment, but it still felt a little like an insult. "It's what the Ministry's saying."

"The Ministry is also saying Albus Dumbledore is a powermonger, that Fudge is a powerful Minister, and that the Dark Lord is gone," Andromeda pointed out, sparing a look back to her daughter. "Since when has it ever been a reliable source of information?"

"I don't know what to say to that," Sirius admitted. "I was expecting a little surprise."

"I had an inkling when I saw the street," Andromeda confessed. "It's the last place anyone who's met you for more than ten minutes would think to look for you, unless in the most dire of circumstances. Circumstances are looking pretty dire."

"And...it's just me you can see," Sirius once again looked to his side, unsure if he liked that or not. It was safer for Regulus, certainly, but he wasn't sure it made him feel any better.

In the better light of the stairs, he saw Andromeda's face tense. "Are you playing games with invisibility cloaks again?" she asked, looking around unseeingly.

"No, I'm just-" Sirius shrugged at Regulus. "With being disowned, I wasn't sure how the wards would interact."

He supposed that answered that question. She'd been expecting to see him, so she did - she had no reason at all to expect to see Regulus, so she did not. The ward may hold for his brother, at least. As for Sirius, it wasn't like he slept much anyway. He didn't mind keeping an eye open.

Not for the first time, Regulus had selfishly (and privately) wished it could have been Cissa that he saw first, no matter how well-reasoned the arguments against it, but the sight of his estranged cousin hit like a hurricane. There was an echo of familiarity to her voice, older though she was, and the nostalgia that came down upon him was jagged with the torn edges of the past two decades. Those prongs were sharp, agitating the lingering wounds, yet his heart did not burn with the rage that had wedged itself between him and Sirius for so many years. Andromeda had not left behind an angry teenager, but a confused child, and some part of him still did not know what to do with that rejection. (There is nothing more important than family, 'his mother had told them firmly the winter Andromeda left, a mantra that had never left him - and shatteringly ironic.) Even now, standing in this house as his brother and cousin chattered about the absurdities of Sirius’s alleged Death Eater status, those words clanged loudly in Regulus’s head with unsettling clarity.

The condensed offences Sirius had inflicted were escalated - tangible - personal - but grasping at Andromeda’s offences was like grasping smoke. He had dedicated his childhood to trying to forget his estranged cousin, just as his mother had instructed, and in a strange way, the ghost of that hurt felt different - distant, almost, but no less present. She was a gaping hole in his childhood, his first real symbol of the consequences one could expect for stepping out of line - and even if she had been able to see him, he wasn’t sure what he could possibly say. (Cissa had been the one to cuddle him, always...Andie had favoured Sirius, even before she left, and some part of him feared that
perhaps it was not even much of a loss for her, in the end.)

Perhaps he would know someday, perhaps he never would. He could reach an arm out and touch her, yet he was as much a ghost to her as she had been to him, for a long time, and more literally.

Surreal (and perhaps uncomfortable) though it was to see Andromeda in their ancestral home after so much time, the reality of it was nonetheless better than a surprise visit from Bella - and though Sirius’s visibility remained troubling, Regulus himself, apparently, was shielded. He had half a mind to be insulted that the house was excluding him, but in truth, it was more likely due to her expectation of his death - and that, he maintained willingly.

“This is certainly informative,” Regulus commented quietly, though there was no particular reason to keep his voice down when she could not hear him anyway.

"It means it'll only be a problem if Bellatrix chooses to grace us with her presence," Sirius said, sourly. "And only if she thinks I'd come here."

"I doubt this place has been frequented in a decade," Andromeda replied, clearly thinking he was speaking to her. "There's no one left to fill half the properties, so it appears this place has been left as some sort of museum. It's more morbid than I remembered; I'd forgotten about Elladora's little tradition."

"The Black family museum is a little grandiose, even for this family," Sirius said, following her eyeline to the shrunken elf heads.

Crinkling his nose, Regulus shook his head, thinking he could do without those particular decorations too, but somehow it felt wrong to disrupt the house as it was. His eyes met Sirius’s, briefly, as he shifted on his feet.

"Dramatic restraint has never been commonplace," Andromeda said, now having made her way up to the first floor landing. "Speaking of, did you curse your mother’s portrait?"

"No," Sirius said, frowning.

"Really?" She sounded skeptical. "Are you sure? You don't think the clawing is a little much?"

"Swear it," Sirius said, with his eyes flickering to Regulus in case he perhaps thought similar. "The old bat must've put it up like that. I've been trying to get it down, but she's put a permanent sticking charm on it."

"It's..." Andromeda shifted, perhaps thinking of the word."-disconcerting. In the hallway? Where everyone can see? I suppose there weren't many guests, but."

“That’s enough with the criticism session,” Regulus cut in uncomfortably. In truth, he could not reasonably deny that the clawing was anything short of unsettling, but on some deep level, he didn't like them talking about it. (She certainly would not have liked it, and somehow it felt particularly shameful to do so when portrait was just below - when the walls of her house were shielding them-)

'Your house,' Sirius had corrected not so long ago, though it did not quite feel like it.

Tonks must have heard, because she beckoned her mother back down to go and check something in the kitchen. Andromeda gave a scrutinising look to Sirius and the space where she would have seen Regulus if she were able, before walking down to join her daughter.
"That almost sounded commanding," Sirius whispered, when the sound of the door to the stairs close. "You might get the hang of this head of the family business yet, what's left of it."

Trying not to look surprised at the swift resolution, Regulus turned to his brother. In front of Andromeda was not the place to argue directly, he knew, but no move had been made to throw in one last jab - it would not have been difficult when Andromeda could not see or hear the objections - but it was not just the words omitted that gave Regulus pause.

‘Head of the family,’ Sirius had said - a vague, hazy thought that had hovered at the edges of his mind, not really sure what to do in light of their fractured mess of a situation. With a flick of a glance toward the drawing room down the hall, he nodded. Head of the family, indeed.
Tonks did not linger after their little Andromeda Experiment drew to a close, though even if she had, Regulus would not have known. Like some buzzing insect caught in a knotted web of family complications, Regulus had wandered into the drawing room, settling in a chair across from the family tapestry, expansive and ancient and severe in its judgements.

The deaths - the scorch marks - so little remained of their family, now, though there were a fair few more than the tapestry realised. (Fewer than history would realise, if viewed through such a legacy.) His eyes flicked over the names, each one as familiar as his own (and some the same as his own), though he had only known a small percentage in his lifetime. Propping an elbow on the arm of his chair, Regulus rested his chin in the palm, breathing out a measured sigh.

"I don't think you'll find the answers on that thing," came Sirius's voice from the doorway, where he had decided to linger and watch for a while as if it were some sort of spectacle.

Twisting towards the door, Regulus met his brother’s eyes for a fleeting moment - then turned back around to the extensive lines of the family tree. “I suppose it depends on the questions,” he responded.

"Unless the question is what date Crazy Aunt Cass died, I don't think many questions can be answered by it," Sirius said, tone light but leaving no uncertain terms that he believed that. "What question were you thinking of?"

Regulus frowned, though he knew Sirius couldn’t see it. “I was just thinking about how it feels as though the family shrunk to a fraction so suddenly… Of course, sixteen years isn’t all that sudden, from the broader view, but most of them I only missed by a few years…” (Aunt Lucretia, Uncle Cygnus, Great Aunt Cass - both of their grandfathers, just a year apart…) “Not that I would know what to say to them, but…”

Sirius said nothing for a moment. "Ninety-two must have been a nightmare. That's what, Lucretia, Cygnus, and Cass?" Finally taking steps into the room, Sirius strode up the old tapestry with a critical eye. "That's three in one year. Hasn't been more than one funeral in a year since before I was born; yours was in 'eighty. Of course, according to this thing, I wasn't born at all."

Regulus shook his head, though his gaze did not waver. “It looks like Cissa, Lucius, and Draco were the only ones left by the time the last funeral of ‘ninety-two happened. The three of them and Great Aunt Callidora, I suppose. It’s strange, when the family used to feel so big.” Even as he said it, Regulus wondered if Aunt Callidora would have even gone - to Aunt Cass’s, maybe, but would she have gone for Uncle Cygnus? (Perhaps. Perhaps not.) As he remembered, their Great Aunts Callidora and Charis had been more distant than the siblings of his grandparents - and that was before Frank and Alice Longbottom had been tortured to insanity by Bella. Frank had been Callidora’s nephew - an Auror, but not a true blood traitor by the views of society…

And ‘traitors’ or not, they had been been pure of blood - such unnecessary targets for the Death Eaters, he would have once thought.

“Though it’s a bit off, there at the end,” Regulus added, “Funeral or not, I haven’t actually died yet.”
"Legally, you are still dead," Sirius told him, with some level of amusement colouring his voice. "It doesn't matter what size it is, at the end of it you have two people - one of whom is supposedly dead, and one who is disinherited - neither with any sprogs. It dies out with the old guard. The fact I've never changed my surname is the only reason it's gone to me."

Regulus shook his head - less in protest, but rather in unhappy acknowledgement. For so many years, it hadn't mattered what he did - no one was watching, no one was affected, and even if he had children, there was no point, because they would not be Blacks in name, anyway. No one was pointedly watching, yet if Regulus Black lived, then the family would be affected, in the end. Even now, he could still leave, could walk away from Britain and the war without legal complication, and they would be hard-pressed to find him - yet he couldn’t really. (Or perhaps just wouldn’t.)

The prickling advance of expectations crept up, and Regulus released a slow, heavy sigh.

Sirius turned and looked at him, as if trying to work something out. "Alright, out with it. What's eating you?"

'What isn’t?’ Regulus nearly said, though for all the drama of the thought, it wasn't entirely true. The prospect of stepping forth had been in play from the moment Sirius walked out the door, but what that would look like now did not follow the script so neatly.

"I'm not sure how to describe it,” Regulus admitted, pausing for a beat before adding: “It's… what I expected - but not how I expected?"

"You expected to have half a boat full of people to explain every decision to." Sirius tapped the tapestry lightly with his wand. "Now it's just Narcissa, who would just like to be on the winning side, and Bellatrix, who's never going to forgive you. I suppose if we're counting me, I don't give a shit what you do as long as it doesn't hurt anyone, including you. Just do what makes you happy."

Pressing his lips to a line, Regulus nodded, though he could not quite settle the anxiety twisting just slightly in his chest. His brother's logic sounded simple, though it did not feel simple at all - and somewhere deep in his mind was an echo of similar sentiments: His grandfather, Arcturus, explaining more clearly the role of the patriarch, the importance of holding firm as others (family included) ‘flapped their jaws.’ It felt as irreverent now as it had then, but more relevant in the wake of his grandfather's death than it had been following his father's.

'Strength comes in many forms,’ Arcturus had said all those years ago, and Regulus knew he oughtn’t take the advice lightly. The thought of Bella hating him forever made his stomach turn, but Sirius probably wasn’t wrong.

“Grandfather said something vaguely similar after Dad died,” Regulus said distantly, shaking his head with a wry pull off the lips as he took focus again. “I don't think he meant it in the same way, though. It was more along the lines of 'Do what you think is best, even if they sometimes disagree,' rather than basing it upon happiness."

The look of distaste that flickered across Sirius' face said how annoyed he was at sounding like either grandfather in any shape or form, but it passed. "Yet he caved, didn't he? Said a load of rubbish at that funeral, instead of growing a pair and telling the truth. That people running about trying to please a nutter cost him his son. I sure as hell wouldn't have taken that if it’d been mine."

"I wondered on that, too,” Regulus admitted, tone taking on a thoughtful air as his eyes rested on the place where their father's father rested on the tree. "The eulogy was so upsetting at the time - it still is, really - and I struggled to piece together why he would bother telling me to do what I thought was best when he knew he was about to support that rubbish narrative...He had to have
known it was rubbish..." Furrowing his brow, he shifted his eyes to Bella's spot on the tree, to Cissa's and to Draco's. ". . . but I don't know that the truth would have accomplished anything but chaos, and not the productive kind. Dramatically pointing fingers at the attendees - because it could not have been anything but - would not have gained us sympathetic, righteous indignation, but rather a freshly painted target. It was the good of the family that he emphasised when we spoke - the safety of the family." With an unsettling rush, Regulus remembered the choice that had once laid out in front of him - to push the truth, or to slip away. His own decision had not been so different. "When I think about it now, the memory is no less upsetting, but if that was - perhaps - the perspective he was acting upon . . . I think I might understand it."

Sirius let silence lay for a moment, before crossing his arms. "What you're describing are the actions of someone who was frightened. He wasn't a kid, he was trying to guide a family with enough wealth, power, and influence to make a difference, who could question if it is truly worth the lives of innocent people, in a way people may actually listen."

Sighing, Sirius leant back against the wall and let his head touch it. "He had the choice to see the bigger picture, to see that his own child had been murdered pointlessly for someone else's ambition and do something about it. He could have battened down the hatches, told Mum and Cygnus to get their children the hell out before they were next and made it clear to the other old families, hell, to the monster himself that if he decided to come after his family, he was ready to fight for it. And declaring open warfare on one of the oldest pure families, who were staunch in the bullshit purist beliefs he was supposedly promoting? Either it would have been stupid and cost Voldemort a lot of his own people, loyalty has never been treated lightly, or he'd have cut his losses and moved on."

He made a shrugging motion. "Instead, he toed the party line and everyone - almost everyone - followed suit."

Tension knotted in Regulus’s shoulders and the tiny muscles in his face, taut with the need to defend their grandfather, though he could not entirely disagree with Sirius's argument either. Regulus had felt it, had felt the burning in his chest to strongarm them all into understanding that following the Dark Lord was a disaster waiting to happen to them - but never to the Dark Lord. Regulus had not known how to communicate it then, and he was not sure how to communicate it now.

"I tried that briefly, and it did not work out particularly well," Regulus said, crinkling his nose slightly.

"It's almost like you were a teenager and not the patriarch of old, powerful, and purist family, and it wouldn't have had the same weight from you," Sirius said, rolling his eyes theatrically.

Leveling a sharp look at his brother, Regulus leaned back into his chair, dropping his arm to rest along the arm of the chair. It sounded like an insult, but whether it was directed at them both or just their grandfather was a little unclear. "I'm just saying that the situation was complicated," Regulus said in a smoothing tone, "Traitors in the family do hurt one's credibility, even if there might be other families who would prioritise blood over the Dark Lord's agenda. It's hard to know who those families are..."

Either Sirius didn't get the sharp hint or he ignored it. "Gotta love that choosing your own flesh and blood over Voldemort is being a traitor, but family is the most important thing. I swear if people actually listened to each other instead of just getting stuck in the routine of 'there is only bad and there is only good, and it's not worth considering anything else,' the magical world would not be in the mess it's in."

"I'm not saying I don't think it's stupid and exceedingly counterproductive to put the Dark Lord
before blood - I think it would be wonderful if people would actually listen." Regulus turned his eyes to Sirius, mouth pressing a little before he added, "But it's not always as easy as shouting it into the crowds."

"Even if you're calmly reasonable, it's no guarantee," Sirius said. "No one likes conceding that someone they're in a fit with has a point, myself included, but some of it has to be a case of 'I've made my bed, so I'm going to lie in it and hope for the best,' even though they probably know it's the wrong thing."

Regulus shrugged uncomfortably. He certainly had not wanted to admit anything to Sirius, at the time, though he had gone about his rebellion quietly, nonetheless...but before that, he had done his fair share of lying in a bed made in anger. Neither were being proposed as particularly positive, but Sirius's more direct approach had not made much change either, so it was hard to say what the 'right' choice really was. "Perhaps..."

"Or they're frightened of being branded a traitor," Sirius mused. "It's not for everyone."

Regulus frowned, eyes flicking to the different burn marks on the tapestry before them. Even now, his insides lurched at the thought, though his mother could level no such fate from beyond the grave. The threat was gone, yet the ghost of it lingered at the back of his mind, dark as the scorches peppering their family for generations back.

"You have to give Mum her due," Sirius said mildly, as he looked him over. "She's been dead for a decade, and even the mention of ending up like this-" he ran his fingers across his own burn mark, "-makes you look like you're going to throw up."

"It's not unreasonable to not want to be erased," Regulus said defensively, staring hard at the tapestry without lifting his gaze, though he felt the eyes on him.

"You can't be, it's your tree," Sirius pointed out.

At that, Regulus flicked his eyes to meet Sirius's for beat, then returned to the expansive generations of their family tree. Sirius was not wrong on that front, either. No one could burn him off now - not really - and there was something liberating in that fact, however the guilt might prickle.

"It is," Regulus said quietly (and with significantly less defensiveness), odd though it felt.

"I know I gave the place for headquarters, but I don't think anyone is under any illusion that this place - and everything else that comes with the capital h house - will not default back to you if you choose to take your life back in a legal way after this," Sirius said. "It might all be down to you, because even if I were still technically family, like hell am I ever reproducing, but it means the good stuff with the bad. Or you may choose to remain legally dead and live in quiet obscurity."

Regulus nodded. "I know the strings attached quite well," he said, wondering how he was meant to have proper pureblood children when most of the families would want to murder him soon, but he didn't much like the idea of letting the line die either, however unmotivating it might feel to hunt down a proper marriage. (As if the thought had not been anxious enough before he'd left…) "I assumed I was quite done, but reality had other plans, it seems…” He let free a small sigh. "I won't say the thought didn't cross my mind when I came back, but… I suppose I'm not really sure what I want."

After a beat, Sirius frowned. "You weren't done. You kept the door open just in case."
"I didn't know what I would find," Regulus admitted, uncomfortably. "Productivity in my task would have been much more difficult if Mum herself had still been here. Quiet obscurity does make it easier in some respects."

Sirius shot him a look. "I don't mean the literal front door. I meant when you left, you didn't burn your bridges. There was no finality to it. Here one day, gone the next, and equally welcome to reappear should it be desired. You didn't have an explosion, you didn't come near me, no one knew anything, so the door was open."

Once again, discomfort shifted to defensiveness. "We just established I was a teenager no one listened to, did we not?" Regulus pointed out tersely. "At the time, I assumed I was going to die, which renders all bridges a moot point, regardless. Everything felt miserable enough already, and it was quickly obvious from my attempt at an explosion that I wasn't going to be successful, so there was no point in making an even more miserable show of it." Regulus shook his head, face pinching. "I survived, despite my expectation, but I couldn't just come back."

“I get that,” Sirius said, uncomfortably. “I don't understand why death was preferable to talking to me.”

At that, Regulus's face softened with a frown of his own. “It wasn't a matter of ‘preference’...Talking to you would not have changed the circumstances - it would not have made the inferi any less of a reality…” His expression steeled subtly. “And to be quite frank, I did not trust your band of vigilantes. I did not trust your friends. Truthfully, I had no idea if I could trust you to choose me over them if they raised an objection - and even if you did, whether it would make a difference.” Regulus was staring at his brother’s scorch mark beside his own name, as much to avoid Sirius’s face as anything. “Set before me was a task of paramount importance, and I could not risk whittling away at that security. It wasn’t about whether or not I wanted to talk to you.”

“They didn't,” Sirius swallowed thickly. “We talked about the possibility after I knew - not that they knew that. No one raised an objection. I know it doesn't mean much now, but I think you ought to know.”

For a moment, Regulus was silent, lips thinning to a line. It was unclear if Sirius meant his friends, the Order, or both, but regardless of the specifics, it was only a small comfort to know the immediate plan would not have been Azkaban. “Yet your allies left you, of all people, to rot in Azkaban for over a decade,” he said quietly. “Perhaps it would have been fine, perhaps I would not have been a scapegoat waiting to happen, but between the uncertainty of people who had no reason to care what happened to me and the security of obscurity…” Shaking his head, he let out a huff through his nose. “It was not a risk I was willing to take.”

Sirius gave him a grim smile. “I just love that you added ‘of all people,’ but...the war changed about a year after you left. Things happened that changed people, things happened that you don't know, and because they are truly the purview of the Order, I can't share openly.” And looking back to the wall, he let out an unsteady breath. “But nothing is certain. Everyone was being very stupid back then, myself included. I'd convinced myself of Remus being a Death Eater - Remus. I can't blame him for doing the same, and I can't blame you for not coming to me, even if I still wish you had.”

Regulus nodded, and for a moment, he was silent, allowing some of the tension to ease in his shoulders. It was strange to think that the war could have truly changed that much when it had already felt so out of control, but it must have - and so many deaths on both sides, as he had heard, more than once… And as broken as his relationship had been with Sirius, when first the Dark Lord
rose, Regulus felt some tentative (but strengthening) measure of hope. Perhaps things could be different... “Hopefully we can avoid such a trajectory, this time.”

"Don't be thick," Sirius scoffed. "You really think I'm letting something happen to you now?"

It was a little awkward, the feeling of rekindled solidarity, but Regulus looked back to his brother with a nod: A little smile pulled sideways at his mouth, unexpected though the declaration was, and he felt a settling comfort - one that came more easily, these days. The nerves inside told him that he ought to be more skeptical, that it would not be the first time a sense of security was ripped out from below, but he found himself welcoming it, nonetheless.

“'I will try to keep that particular strain of paranoia to a minimum,’” Regulus said, trying to sound dry but mostly just sounding grateful.

"At the risk of descending into gross sentimentalism, you are important. Not what you bring the table in terms of the seemingly endless fight against tall, bald and scaly, but just...you, as you are.” Sirius shifted uncomfortably. "So if you decide to go again, even if this is over, at least say goodbye this time. Don't follow my shitty manners."

"That absolutely, completely descended into gross sentimentalism," Regulus remarked, mouth still quirling a little, but he could not help the smile lingering behind his eyes. It seemed so simple a thing, an expression of importance, yet there was a rarity in the separation of the self from functional competence. 'You, as you are.' It was not the sort of thing that was so often expressed - and if ever it had been, the presupposition was that the 'way he was' tied closely with a desire to please the person in question. It might have been a manipulation, might have been passive-aggressive in some other case - but saccharine as Sirius’s words might be, he again let himself believe it was possibly even true.

"You really are a terrible example," Regulus spoke again, cutting through the awkwardness with a sprinkle of dry humour, "but I can agree to that."

"Fuck off," Sirius laughed, biting back a slight blush of clear embarrassment. "You're the one who said I never say anything nice about you. You're still an idiot, and a brat, but I don't like you thinking that somehow cancels out the good stuff or that it is in any way okay to do suicide runs and piss off for another decade. The family's all but dead, a chunk of kids I used to know turned into sadists, half my friends are dead or worse. You'll have to forgive my wanting to hold on to what little there is left in this world that I give a shit about."

"You don't say nice things about me. I had a panic response," Regulus said with a small, amused huff, feeling some measure of the awkwardness start to peel away. With a wry twist in his smile, he tipped his head. “But honestly...thank you. For caring. Which sounds so insincere in its phrasing, but I mean it in the genuine sense. I don’t have much left here, either, but it is a comfort to know I can rely on you. I truthfully wasn’t expecting that.”

"You don't have to thank me for that, it's not a chore. Dealing with you day to day sometimes is, but I suppose I'm not decent all the time either, and regardless of Mum - I assume Mum - being temperamental with the burn marks, we are related." Pushing himself off the wall, Sirius picked up one of the random frames to fiddle with more than look at. "Besides, it's not like I'm some scared kid anymore, and whatever you thought of them then, you seem to get on alright with at least some of the people knocking around."

“'They aren't so bad, I must admit, at least not all of them,’” Regulus said in a begrudging tone, light though it was. “What is the world coming to?”
"You purloining the Ravenclaw rebellion," Sirius pointed the frame at him for emphasis.

Regulus lifted an eyebrow. “The ‘Ravenclaw rebellion’?”

Sirius snorted to himself. "I didn't think up the name, I think that was Marlene - no comments. alright? Just the resident study corner, people who tended to favour behind the scenes stuff for one reason or another rather than charging in."

“To be perfectly honest, I was a little surprised such a thing exists,” Regulus said, shaking his head, “but it is a point in their favour.”

"There's logistical problems to vigilantism they tried - try - to combat," Sirius pointed off, listing them. "First and foremost being injuries: you start showing up at St. Mungo's with dueling injuries all the time after a fight, and even the Ministry isn't that stupid, so we handled our healing in house when we could. I assumed Death Eaters did the same, though private care wasn't out of the question, given the bank accounts involved. Then you have to deal with training: my first full Death Eater duel, I got hit in the stomach and threw up on them. I have no idea who it was, but they deserved that. Then you've got the dark creatures that allied themselves: we had something not dissimilar to what Harry's lot are doing, trying to learn the advanced Defense. Then you've got things like portkey creation, which is handy when you can't apparate for whatever reason. We weren't ill-prepared. We're still not. It's just hard work. Not for me since I'm sidelined, but for most people."

“Ah, portkeys,” Regulus said with a wryly reminiscent huff at the inconvenience of his first year among the Death Eaters - too young to apparate, despite the grasp for involvement. He’d never much liked the anxiety of relying on them, but he hated the idea of being stranded without them even more. “It does not sound so different than my experience.” (They spent more time on Dark Arts than Defense Against the Dark Arts, of course, but it did not seem an important point to emphasise.)

"No, we just don't do it with masks, and despite being promised a slow and painful demise the one time I tried to help out the swotty corner, probably less violent." Suddenly, Sirius frowned. "Wait, you were fifteen - were you using portkeys to get around the whole time?"

“I wasn’t fifteen for long,” Regulus responded with a shrug, “but considering sixteen was no better for apparition, I experienced quite a few portkeys, yes, and the occasional sidealong...Though the first year was mostly just training with Bella.”

"Bellatrix has the patience of a paper plate. I'm surprised she could train anyone," Sirius said, but he couldn't help the unbidden laugh that erupted. "I'm sorry," he wheezed, "It's just - you must have looked like you were going out for Guy Fawkes or being babysat for Halloween."

Rolling his eyes, Regulus once again leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms loosely, though he could not quite muster a fully exasperated expression to match. “It’s not that funny,” he objected lightly, “Didn’t you just say the Order used them too?”

"Yes, for people who were injured or for places with apparition lines!” Sirius' shoulders were still shaking with silent laughter. "It's just very funny, at sixteen, she was quite a bit taller than you. It must have looked like a take your kid to your murderous hobby day."

“Ha, ha.” Wryly, Regulus leveled his look, though it was hard to truthfully argue with the points themselves, however subjectively inflammatory they were. He could remember attending a meeting alongside his cousin, standing and listening and absorbing - as young as he was eager to do well. To contrast that with Bella’s imposing form was stark, if nothing else. He remembered it
The annoyance he had experienced in relationship to his age and his size (and the interaction between his age and size) had been palpable. "...I suppose it was a little bit like that... Though it did not seem particularly amusing at the time."

"I'm not sure I want to see what passes for amusement in Death Eater circles," Sirius commented, finally having settled enough that he put down the frame. "Though I begrudgingly admit your dueling had improved."

Regulus rolled his eyes. "It isn’t as though my sources of enjoyment suddenly morphed into variations on puppy-kicking," he said pointedly. No comparison points had been summed, but Regulus was confident he had spent more time playing quidditch than participating in Death Eater activities. "Dueling, however, never did become one of those sources of enjoyment, necessary though it was."

"I loved dueling," Sirius said, honestly. There was the briefest hint of a smile about it. "But you’re more theory, and I’m more practical. If you feel like getting out of the house, Lupin tends to teach some of it for people wanting to brush up. Given that you’ve seen our usual communication method, a strong patronus is something he’s making sure everyone knows how to do. He taught Harry his."

Regulus nodded thoughtfully. He had made minimal progress with the patronus as a teenager - wisps, but never anything corporeal - and regardless of the communication factor, if the Dementors were somewhere between rogue and under the Dark Lord’s control (or even if they were still under Ministry control, given his previous Death Eater status), brushing up on that particular skill was essential.

"That seems like an important spell to master, all things considered," Regulus granted.

"You'll have to make time in your busy social schedule," Sirius said.

"My time is a precious commodity," Regulus said, mouth slanting again, "But I think I can fit it in."

""Why is Master Regulus moving the table?"

Regulus could see the flickering anxiety in Kreacher's eyes as the dining room table settled gently on the floor again, a few paces from its place in the middle of the room. Scarcely a day had passed since Regulus had proposed the patronus revisitation with Lupin, who had agreed immediately - but with that scheduled time upon them, sufficient space was necessary. (The small garden, too, was protected by the fidelius, but the day was unusually chilly, and even with warming charms, it was not worth the biting breeze on his face.)

"There is a particular spell I must practice with one of our visitors," Regulus answered as he eyed the space again. "This spell with allow me to better protect myself, should the need arise."

"He mixes with the traitors and the filth..." Kreacher was muttering quietly under his breath, more despairing than scornful, "What is old Kreacher to do? But if Master Regulus will be safe..."

Regulus still did not quite have the heart to tell Kreacher that he could hear him, instead giving the room a once-over before turning back to the elf, crouching beside him for a moment. "We should not be long. The changes are merely to account for the possibility of a spell going awry. I will set it to rights again."

It was then that the door to the dining room opened, and as Regulus glanced over to the new
arrival, he was not surprised to see Lupin.

"You certainly seem prepared," Lupin said, a spark of amusement in his voice.

"Always," Regulus responded, standing up and leaving Kreacher to wander as he pleased.

"I don't know why I was surprised," Remus admitted, looking around the newly cleared room. "When was the last time you attempted a patronus?"

“It has not been a focus since school,” Regulus began, stepping to the side as Lupin entered the room. “I've been lucky not to cross paths with any Dementors, over the years, and distance from the war admittedly reduced its priority level.”

"It is also considered to be a hindrance in the use of dark magic," Remus pointed out. "But the patronus can change as the person changes, and as Dementors are not its only use, I find it more useful to have in the arsenal. I take it you're familiar with the basic steps?"

Regulus tipped his head with a subtle crinkle of the nose. “I'm sure the dark magic bit didn't help. But yes, I'm familiar with the basic steps. Think happy thoughts, circular wand movement, incantation,” he listed, demonstrating the wand movement with his own.

"I would say it works better for most to focus on a single, intense memory, but yes, that's the gist," Remus agreed. "The wandwork is wholly accurate. Now just comes meaning it."

“That's often the catch with these sorts of things,” Regulus said with a thoughtful nod. Though he did not want to say as much, finding such an intense memory of happiness had been a point of difficulty when learning the spell as an adolescent - motivation enough to conjure a cloudy wisp, but even if the class had covered corporeal patronuses (which it never had, even in NEWTs), he somehow doubted those pain-splintered memories would have been sufficient, anyway.

Even now, it was hard to say what the strongest, purest moment of happiness was.

“Suppose one just tries different memories until it works?” Regulus added, lifting his brow.

"It's one approach," Remus allowed, bobbing his head. "But personally, I prefer to search through for a memory once I've mastered the wandwork, and if I doubt it has the intensity, it probably doesn't. What I have found is that many memories, even the ones that bring intense happiness, are also a mixture of other things - perhaps sadness, bitterness, even anger or fear can become mixed in, but it doesn't make the memory itself less potent for a charm like this. Often, the issue people experience with the patronus charm is trying to separate a purely happy memory from those other aspects. My advice is to think of something, regardless about whether you have mixed feelings about it, that makes you feel a sudden spark of happiness or the urge to smile. That initial reaction without deconstructions tends to work best. It is not so much about the memory but the instant, instinctual response."

Regulus nodded slowly, lips pressing to a line as the words sunk in. A slew of memories began flashing in his mind, snapshots of a life peppered with good and with bad, but mostly with complications. First to rise to his mind was the destruction of the locket - a memory that had represented freedom and closure for so long, but now felt comparatively hollow, standing in that same mire again. He thought of Sirius, of their childhood of adventures and clumsy attempts to understand each other, yet so much of it still shot anxiety through his veins at first thought, the happy nostalgia creeping in only as his mind calmed. Connections were forging again, yet they were a hodgepodge of moments, indistinct and difficult to focus on in any sort of totem sense.
Barty, too, rose bittersweet in his mind, yet it was the bitterness that felt hazy and distant with its second-hand horrors - the Barty of his memories did not have a cruel smile, but a bright one. Winning a quidditch game against Potter and Gryffindor, an unbridled if smirky delight that Barty met in turn, yet sports were so small a thing in the grand scheme of life. He recalled the childish explorations of their first days at Hogwarts as the anxiety of Regulus’s sorting crumbled away, those spaces filling instead with a sense of tentative safety in his new friend. With such memories rose the confusing muddle of adolescence, of sitting too close (but for once, not minding) and grand silly plans they’d made in isolation of the war.

Through a knotted web of expectations, all Regulus had wanted was to be near his closest friend, to read with him, to talk theory with him, to dream with him, to joke with him, to believe that Barty would put him first in all things - despite the harrowing fear he'd experienced when faced with the chance to test it. With heads pressed together, they had poured over shared books, had turned inward and left the world looking at their backs more often than not, and threaded between had been immeasurable fondness and a sense of security.

The feeling was warm and sharp - more than a little painful when he thought too much about it, but ‘potent’ seemed an apt description. Such were memories that could not be touched with the damning realities of the present, walled off and protected like precious things.

(Lupin was still waiting patiently, and though Regulus was quite certain Lupin could not peer into his mind, it was nonetheless embarrassing to reminisce with an audience.)

Steeling himself, Regulus focused on a memory of his friend - before Sirius had left, before they had joined the Death Eaters - tucked in a nook with their books, chatting and practicing spells and thinking about a future beyond the war. So much of his life had felt steeped in script and expectation, but there was a sense of freedom to those intangible chats, an opportunity to be himself in a way that the others would mock, even if the reality of the future would not be so kind. That moment had felt like forever, though like every moment, it had not lasted long enough. With a focusing breath, Regulus lifted his wand again for the swish.

"Expecto Patronum." From his wand, a glimmering wisp slipped out and began to swirl swiftly just above the floor, shaping at last to the lithe form of a silvery fox. Trying not to look as surprised as he felt, Regulus watched the creature (did it qualify as a creature?) pad at the floor and glance backwards at them.

"Well then!" Remus declared, as he clapped his hands together. He was smiling warmly. "It would be nice if it always went as well as that, but the ability to cast is always impacted by emotional and environmental factors. Regardless, being able to do one right off the bat is quite impressive."

Again, Regulus nodded slowly. “Past attempts were admittedly not so successful.” Gently flicking his wand, the fox trotted back and forth. Casting corporeally had never felt like a focus, but it seemed silly now, to think that it hadn’t been. The different uses were not so thoroughly explored in his lessons with Bella - but he supposed she’d had rather a different plan. “Does the communication aspect require an additional spell?” he asked with curiosity.

"Are you sure learning a communication method only used by the Order is something you want to be learning?” Remus asked mildly.

“From a theoretical perspective, I find it interesting, regardless of who is using it,” Regulus responded pointedly, flicking a glance over to him, “You don’t have the monopoly on intriguing application of spellwork.”

"No, but we do have a myriad of pureblood society and Death Eaters who know it as an Order
Clinking his nose, Regulus let out a conceding huff. “I suppose that is also interesting,” he admitted. Interesting though an untrackable communication across distances might be, concealment was one of his most favoured approaches with magic, and indeed more practical...

“You suppose,” Remus echoed, with obvious amusement as his own assumed its usual, more wolffish form.

Regulus’s expression smoothed a little, his mouth instead lifting to a lopsided quirk. “So is it a matter of fuzzing the memory in turn? Modified wandwork?” he speculated aloud, brow lifting in curiosity.

“The patronus is considered to be a manifestation of a hidden part of the self,” Remus said, giving his own patronus a vague look of disdain. “Something not easily seen, or perhaps hard won in acceptance. As such, concealment is more about balancing the feeling of needing to hide it at the same time as experiencing the emotion.”

Nodding, Regulus looked between Remus’s hazy patronus and his own, and although the glow of the spell softened the look of a corporeal patronus, there was a very clear difference in visibility. “I see.” He could relate well to the idea of veiling the sort of deeply personal thoughts needed for such a spell - the last thing he would want was anyone invading those private memories, though he wasn’t really sure what a fox said about him. “So it’s dependent on the interplay of potency and discretion, delicately balanced. That makes sense.”

“A patronus is delicate magic. It’s weaponised vulnerability,” Remus pointed out as he whisked his wand away and the patronus faded. “Of course, there are a number of factors that impact what a patronus is at any given time, as it is with your ability to cast it. Much as a wand can change upon re-evaluation, I suppose. But the steps to casting remain the same.”

“Delicate, indeed,” Regulus echoed, and with a swish of his own wand, the silver fox faded - a termination he found was not so easy for the totem memory in his mind.

Such was the way of things.

When the inevitable slow down of visitors to the house that happened after the holidays, Sirius found himself restless. By the end of the month, Remus had left again, which meant that there were no more study periods held in the house, people generally popped in and out on an ‘as needed’ basis, and most of the time, they did not need it. The war was far from overt, so safe havens were not particularly needed as yet - except for Sirius himself. As much as he appreciated not being alone in the house, and as much as he still felt a sudden spike of something warm and happy to randomly come across his brother working away in one of the rooms or staring at some artifact or the tree like it meant something, it was different.

Regulus was choosing to remain in the house. Sirius thought that perhaps if he had the choice to come and go freely without getting a spectacular bollocking from all concerned about leaving, then this house wouldn’t bother him as much. The freedom to come and go had never been associated with life here, and it was a strange concept, but one he thought would make it easier. But it didn’t look like that would happen any time soon. It had now been almost six months of the same walls, and while the visitors tended to make that easier, it also just made it a lot harder when they weren’t around. This house had more ghosts than people in it at the best of times. Just not literal ones.
The strangest thing was that the house was beginning to look more like an actual house - it had never looked much like a home in all the time he had known it - which wasn't helping. If anything, it merely pulled again at the sense of nostalgia and stood as a reminder for every single argument, every horrible moment crystal clear and brought to life as the house began to look like itself again. It brought the strange vertigo that came with being able to sit in the library with his brother and talk about the same books they had twenty years ago, in the same room, with the same restrictions, and half the time, with their mother having a screaming fit elsewhere in the house. In those moments, it felt easy to slip and forget they were supposedly both adults. It was easier with the kids here.

Sirius had not spent as much time with Harry since before he was a year old. He had just started to get to know him a little better and desperately wanted more time, but he didn't want to demand that of him when he was obviously upset and frightened most of the time. He didn't want any of them to be upset or frightened. Those kids looked young, regardless of being around the age that he and Regulus had begun their respective choices in regards to Death Eaters and vigilantism. Half of him wanted to push them on, let them fight as he had, and another part wanted to shy them away because they just looked and sounded so young in these sudden, random moments.

He wasn't doing great without something to take his mind off the claustrophobia. He didn't want to dwell and obsess, but even the house needed a lot less work than it had, and the enclosed walls of the garden were a poor substitute for being able to go anywhere he wanted. On some days, he found himself sleeping through the daylight and getting confused when it was another day, and other days, it felt as if he couldn't rest at all. He'd tried doing something, anything, but he either didn't want to because it made his stomach lurch, or he just couldn't focus on it. He took books off the shelves and would get three chapters in only to realise it'd been two chapters since he'd absorbed any of the words; he'd tried to remember childhood piano lessons only to find the piano was out of tune, which led to him trying to find the manual, and then the pertinent charms books, and by the end of it, he'd ended up forgetting what he was going to do in the first place. He had sat outside, but the rain made it miserable to do it for too long, icy as it was, and then when the sunshine finally came, he couldn't figure out anything to do out there that he couldn't do inside and wasn't doing.

He must have gone through half the rooms in the house trying to find some way of doing something, but he wasn't a great cook. He hadn't the patience for potions or research work without a direct cause; sitting in his father's office still felt as if he was going to have to apologise to a man who'd been dead for a long time for looking at his private things; and arguing with portraits had gotten repetitive. The simple fact was he didn't know how much longer he'd have to stay here, and that returning thought interrupted any attempt at productivity, so nothing was getting done. He hated feeling useless, but as much as he postured, the idea of going back to prison still scared him, and even more than that, the idea of his friends, and godson, alone without the option of help, was enough that he was staying put until circumstances dictated otherwise.

It didn't help the echoes, but if he was going to miserable and restless for a while, it was nice to have a good reason for it.

There was a certain frustration to deciding one wanted to share a grand, important secret only to be met with the complete inability to communicate with the recipient in question. Regulus had been忙着 himself, as he always did - practicing the obscurance of his corporeal patronus, thinking about the implications of living horcruxes and how one might go about destroying a horcrux beyond repair without necessarily murdering it (to which he had come to no helpful conclusions), refreshing his theoretical grasp of Occlumency and Legilimency, any number of other things… but Dumbledore was nowhere to be seen, nowhere to be heard, at least not as far as Regulus had
experienced.

The end of January was upon them, and with it had come the completion of his most recent set of texts. Regulus thought it high time for another outing, but it was as he was tucking a scarf around his neck that he caught sight of his own toy grim that Sirius had tormented with on his tenth birthday - and with it came a (questionable) thought, niggling at the edges of his mind.

All holiday guests had been gone for a month now, and various members of the Order came and went as best suited them, leaving Regulus and Sirius alone in the house, more often than not. With the absence of their guests had come the return of his brother’s complaining in full force, the bouncing from room to room as Sirius sought something that Regulus could not quite guess at, and though Regulus himself could leave at any time, he felt a rush of empathy for Sirius’s situation. His brother was confined within these walls for a reason, Regulus knew, and the last thing he wanted to do was put either of them in unnecessary danger-

-yet it was a black dog everyone was looking for, and Regulus's own identity was not a tip-off in the way Harry Potter at the train platform so blatantly was. If they could manage to disguise Sirius's dog form, and were mindful of their location and surroundings… perhaps gifting his brother with an off-the-record outing was not so out of the question.

(If Bella were to show up, chances were in their favour that the authorities would notice her before she noticed them.)

Getting into a bookstore would be more challenging with a 'dog’ than it would be alone, but the more he thought about it - the more he couldn't stop thinking about it.

Reaching into his desk drawer, Regulus pulled out the two rings he had charmed some months ago and slipped them on - silver band and serpents alike. As he pulled his gloves from the wardrobe, he felt the silver band trigger with a warning spell, and within a minute, triggered two more times.

Restless, indeed.

Regulus poked his head into the open doorway of the study and eyed his brother, whose head was buried deep in one of their father’s cupboards.

\textit{Knock, knock, knock} - three soft raps in quick succession. “Sirius?” he followed up politely.

The was a stuttered bang as Sirius let loose a string of elaborate curses and moved back out with a wince. "No, it's just a bump on the head." For a split second, his mouth flattened into a line, but almost at once, it was gone again. "Are you going toy shopping again?"

“Book-shopping was the original plan, actually,” Regulus admitted without missing a beat, “but I had a different thought, should it be of interest. Have you ever considered changing your colouring?” He paused only a second before adding: “As a dog, that is.”

"I think it's just a distinguishing feature," Sirius asked, frowning at him and an obvious joke about leaving one book infested place for another. "Like McGonagall and her glasses markings. What’s wrong with it?"

"There's nothing wrong with it," Regulus responded, shaking his head, "Just the fact that it is distinguishing when blending in might serve you better." For a moment, Regulus hesitated, pausing the thought with a small flicker of embarrassment before pressing on in a matter-of-fact tone. "I was curious if the colour of your fur could be changed to make you look more like just another absurdly massive dog. Breeds of that size may not be as common as other breeds, but paired with a
seemingly random person that no one is likely to be looking for..." He shrugged a shoulder, a little uncomfortably. "I thought it may not draw as much notice, at least not from authorities or Death Eaters. If it even worked, that is."

Seemingly satisfied that he was not being insulted, Sirius nodded his head slightly as he thought. "It's probably possible, as long as it's not transfiguring the actual form. There's just not a lot of variation to the breed, actually, about as much variation as tends to be in the family: white, brown, black. I just don't have the capability; the lack of opposable thumbs is a hindrance on wandwork."

"Well," Regulus began loftily, "Should you be interested in testing it, I happen to have some opposable thumbs on hand. Two, in fact."

"Your puns are terrible," Sirius said, but contradicted it by snorting with laughter. "I've never done cosmetics charms, have you?"

"Not many - too concerned about the prospect of accidentally turning my hair a ghastly shade by mistake and being unable to fix it," Regulus admitted with a pinching expression, "but I dabbled a bit when I was making a lifestyle of obscurity and overall unrecognisability. I never tried it on an animal but imagine the principle is the same."

For a moment, Sirius looked pained but it soon shifted into resolute. "Don't fuck up my fur," he said, by way of assent.

At that, Regulus, too, snorted softly. "Obscene colours would do us no favours in going unnoticed," he granted, pulling out his wand. "Let's try it, then."

The neighbourhood looked different from an angle roughly half his usual size, but other than that, it was a little surprising how little had changed. The park was largely unchanged, with the bare sloping trees winding around a path that he was glad to stretch his legs around. All four of them. If he got distracted by a squirrel or two, it was only expected. Sirius couldn't be expected to keep every canine impulse under control, and besides, they seemed more irritable than anything else. No real harm done.

There was a light sprinkling of rain, but a thick coat took care of that for both of them. His own was currently smattered with white, but he could hardly complain. He was happily trotting to the side, taking in their former streets by daylight, and as far as he could see, only one person stared, and it was probably at the lack of lead and size of dog more than anything else. There was no sign of anything or anyone magical at all. They passed by the old pub, but he couldn't see if it'd changed its name. The post office, the old theatre, and the old church were all familiar sights, regardless of the angle. The book shop remained, at least he thought it was the same one, and he really shouldn't have been surprised when they lingered outside it.

Beside him, Regulus was pulling his coat more tightly around himself against a whip of wind, but he smiled, nonetheless, the barest hint on his lips as he peered through the window. For several minutes, he seemed to be studying something on the nearest shelf, but it was as the man behind the counter seemed to take notice that Regulus stepped back, shuffling both of them down the line of shops.

Despite not knowing where they were heading, Sirius sped in front and waited the few minutes for his brother to catch up. It may have been a little embarrassing to have a bounce in his step, but there was something about the freedom to just walk about at his own pace that he'd missed. He didn’t really care where they went; what mattered was they were going somewhere.
For some time, they merely walked (or bounded, in Sirius’s case), passing the shops and circling back around to the park again for a quick run - and some hour and a half after leaving the house, they were again crossing the threshold. As Regulus closed the door behind himself, he pulled off his gloves, checking the two rings on his fingers before sticking the gloves in his pockets.

Nearer to the ground, a different routine was in motion.

There was an expediency to getting dry when your animagus form could just have a good shake. Sirius somewhat doubted that any of the lined portraits were entirely pleased with the wet dog deciding to cover the hallway in excess fur (more of a mildly dewy dog, spring was coming), but given the hammering adrenalin, the fresh air, and having been around actual normal people, Sirius wasn't even in the mood to antagonise them. He popped and stretched out his human legs, which were going to throb like hell tomorrow from running around for the first time in almost six months. The thought made him smile, still a little drunk on the feeling of freedom, however fleeting. If it had worked once, it would work again, and that alone made him feel like jumping up and down.

Though it would never (again) feel like home, coming in from the cold to the warmth of the hallway and sleeping portraits wasn't completely unpleasant. He knew the feeling wouldn't last; it would feel enclosed and heavy soon enough, but for now, he was damn well going to enjoy a brief spell where it didn't feel awful.

There was even a mild nostalgia to it, though it was extremely peculiar to watch Regulus go through the same steps after coming in that their father had at roughly the same age, as Sirius could remember watching him do so from the landing. While Regulus generally favoured their father in appearance, there were enough significant differences that most of the time, it didn't occur to him - but in a moments like this, there was a strange vertigo of the past meeting the present. Orion Black had liked his routines and liked things in their proper places: something he had passed onto his youngest son. As fuzzy as memories from before Hogwarts were, and as easily as the bad ones were triggered the longer he stayed in the house, every now and then, a more neutral memory would pop up, and in that haze of nostalgia, they could almost pass for a good memory. He had no idea what to do with those moments. The strange mix of remembering when he could fit through the bars of the landing and trying to imagine doing the same steps (he never would, he'd never been one for outdoor ephemera beyond a coat if it was nippy) and being that old. At thirty-six, their father would have had a six-year-old and a four-year-old and still been considered a bit of a late bloomer by the maternal side of the family, who seemed to want to get it all over with their teens.

It was an odd line of thought. Perhaps Regulus and his talking about trees and legacies had gotten under his skin and he hadn't realised.

"You look so much like Dad when you do that," Sirius said in a low - what he hoped was neutral - voice.

A faint, sobered smile flickered on Regulus's face as he began loosening his scarf. "Force of habit, I suppose."

Unable to help himself, Sirius smirked. "Just...smaller."

Like clockwork, the smile flattened to a line. "No one is interested in your commentary," Regulus responded dryly, "And it's not by much."

It wasn't, but it didn't mean it wasn't still funny as hell to watch him still get instantly annoyed about it. Of all the things for Regulus to still have as a sore spot - being a Death Eater, animal cruelty, Unforgivables, their parents, Crouch, Bella, being legally dead - it was a little funny to get
such a consistently grumpy reaction to being pointed out as still being the smallest.

"Thanks," he said, before he lost his nerve to say as much. "I guess that rebellious streak might not just be me after all."

"It's more the 'getting caught' that I take issue with," Regulus admitted, folding his scarf neatly in sections.

"You are a flincher," Sirius agreed. It was something he was still worrying about with a horde of bonkers Death Eaters on the loose, one of which had special interest in inciting such flinching. "But can I please remind you that I didn't get caught that much? Not in the overall numbers. The amount of deeply stupid shit I did even before I fucked off that I should really have gotten bollocked for still astounds me. And it's something I haven't even done yet that fucks me. Go figure."

"I don't think that will ever stop being endlessly ironic," Regulus said with a shake of the head.

"No," Sirius agreed, because it really was funny in a horrible sort of way. "Fun though, right?"

A quirk of a smile played at the corner of Regulus's mouth. "A little bit."

Chapter End Notes

As a side note, although we've already mentioned our tumblrs, I want to make an additional mention that I (tonberrys) am making an analysis/meta tag on my tumblr (found here) that will be specifically dedicated to Renascentia-related character ramblings. In conjunction with this chapter, I wrote one focusing on Regulus and Barty's relationship, in light of Reg pulling for those memories instead of trying one of the memories that occurred to him first (the locket's destruction, Sirius, etc.) The meta isn't specifically focused on dissecting the patronus scene specifically, but his relationship with Barty affects it, and that relationship is still somewhat spottily represented.

As with all additional content, this meta (as well as any to follow) is by no means necessary reading, but for those who are interested and/or want a fuller grip on that dynamic from our perspective, I wanted to draw specific attention to its existence. ♥ A more full analysis of Reg's opinions on purism/blood supremacy will also be coming up, along with whatever else strikes our fancy to dig into beyond the story itself.
Due to the nature of the safe house, it was not entirely unexpected for Sirius to come downstairs and find someone he didn't expect sitting there. He had once come down to Emmeline looking in one of the cupboards before squeaking "Nothing!" before he'd even asked, seen Dung many a time looking at and probably pilfering bits and bobs, and Remus himself was a mainstay in the kitchen around the full moon, given its proximity to warmth and easy access to hot drinks and biscuits. (Strangely, it was a bit nippy today, despite the fire.)

So coming down to see Bill in the kitchen wasn't unusual in the strictest sense, though he tended to shack up at the Burrow. Sirius thought he had his own place as well, but couldn't be sure. What was unusual was the charged atmosphere.

"Alright, Bill?"

"Hullo," Bill said, strained.

At the precise moment Sirius was going to ask what was going on, something cold smacked into the back of his head. He turned before he could even process it to the sounds of manic giggles and a flash of purple. All at once, he put together why it was cold (the back door was open), why Bill sounded strained (he had been trying not to laugh), and upon poking his head out said door when he heard a sudden clatter, realised it had been snowing. Standing next to a sorry excuse of a snow ridge was Tonks, who had clearly collided with a well-wrapped up Remus, sending them both into skid on the disturbed white.

"Gripping charms!" Remus reminded her, flapping his arms as she turned a deep shade of pink that matched her current hair quite nicely.

Sirius dug his hands into the snow, grabbing a poorly formed ball and lobbed it back at his cousin. However, he wasn't exactly awake, and he hadn't been expecting the frozen feeling of the snow. This meant that he managed to hit Remus right in the face, causing him to rise up in bluster and Tonks to crack up laughing as she sat there.

"You realise," Remus said, calmly removing the snow from his face with his scarf, "That this means war."

"I'm with him!" Tonks chirped, as she tried to step up.

Sirius poked his head in the door. "Bill, little help here?"

"I'd love to," Bill said, putting down his mug, "but I've been dibsed."

"Seriously?"

Bill looked torn on whether or not to laugh.

*Oh, for fuck sake.*

"That joke was old before you were born."

Bill shrugged. "Should have gotten up earlier."

Sirius scowled. "Betrayal on all sides."
Thankfully, Sirius had one other possible source of backup. Despite his outwardly bookish nature, Sirius was well aware that Regulus was a deeply competitive little brat (anyone who'd seen him play quidditch or chess would understand) and that he had a love-love relationship when it came to snow (it was all to do with a birthday where it snowed). He was pretty sure it'd been a long time since Regulus had done anything as frivolous as a snowball fight, but like some of the younger Order members, maybe he could use a bit of a break too.

Sirius took the stairs two at a time, heading up to the door and reluctantly giving it a few sharp bangs.

A beat passed before the door to the library swung open to the reveal Regulus sitting back in a chair with a book in hand. "Can I help you?"

"I need your help," Sirius said, as earnestly as he could while still breathing hard. "I'm completely outnumbered."

Frowning, Regulus examined his brother's face with a flicker of concern. "Alright. What do you need help with?" he asked even as he stood, setting the book aside and crossing to meet Sirius in the doorway.

"Grab your coat, it's freezing out there," Sirius said before bolting to the stairs.

Regulus processed the movement, first - something hurling towards them through the air. His wand, already gripped even as they opened the door, swiped in a shielding charm just as a glimmer of white exploded in front of them.

It was the blanket of snow, peppered with footsteps and hand swipes, that he noticed next, followed by three familiar faces huddled behind a makeshift snowbank. Turning his head to Sirius with a look of mild (but not altogether unamused) exasperation, he shook his head. "It's a snowball fight? You sounded like it was something serious."

"It is serious!" Sirius insisted, pointing at the purple spikes currently half hidden under a lump of snow in the garden. "I'm getting beaten by a kid I used to babysit! You would hate it if - you have never babysat anyone in your entire life, have you?"

For a moment, Regulus looked thoughtful, his mind calling back to his France - to his friends' children, though he had never watched over them in isolation from other adults. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, another snowball struck his shoulder, and he looked back to their three opponents, all of whom looked pleasantly guilty.

"We are not ready yet," he objected with a pointed look to each in turn.

"You seemed ready a second ago," Bill pointed out, hands lowered beneath the bank in a manner that made Regulus wonder with no small amount of suspicion if more snowballs were being formed.

Regulus crinkled his nose. "We're having a conversation. You can wait." Turning back to Sirius, he added, "And no, not strictly speaking. Unless you count."

Sirius frowned. "Count what?"

"Count you," Regulus responded with a flicker at the corner of his mouth, pointing at Sirius with the tip of his wand. "As someone I have babysat."
Sirius did a remarkable impression of a surprised guppy while there was the distinct sounds of stifled giggling from behind the makeshift snow barrier and clothing.

"I hope your aim is more sharp than your wit," he said, flipping him off for good measure. "You in or what?"

The hint of a grin grew at the edges of Regulus's mouth, and he nodded. "Can't leave you to flounder alone." Pulling his gloves out of the coat pocket, he cast a warming charm on each to guard against the wet chill of the snow. "Let's destroy them, shall we?"

It ended the way most snowball fights do: when everyone was too cold to keep going, sniffling and running on empty. Tonks ended up declaring the fight over as she flopped backwards and waved her arms about in the snow to make what was supposed to be a snow angel but looked considerably more like a snow billywig.

"There are towels on the side. Put warming charms on the blankets before using them," Remus said as everyone bustled back into the kitchen.

It was surreal, and sounded like one of those three men walk into a pub jokes. Five people shuffle into the Black townhouse: a cursebreaker, an auror, an ex-Death Eater, an ex-prisoner, and a werewolf. However, there was no sign of a punchline. It had just felt like one of those spontaneous moments they had from time to time, where they could just have fun despite the looming darkness and responsibilities.

"Alright, who's having hot chocolate?" Tonks announced, shaking her hair out into a long brunette and managing to smack Bill in the face with it on the way down. It was mostly taken as a rhetorical question, as the ingredients began to fly unceremoniously from the kitchen.

"Are we really not going to talk about you getting beaten?" Sirius said, rubbing his fingers.

"No," Remus said, ducking as mugs began to assemble on the table. "I told you that you should have put gloves on. Warming charms on skin are finicky."

"Don't put brandy in his, contrary to his genes, he doesn't drink," Sirius said, waving at Regulus. "And don't be embarrassed, Remus. We all know you're the only person here who didn't play quidditch. No one expects you to have perfect aim."

His aim wasn't that bad. The towel hit Sirius smack in the head.

With a soft snort, Regulus shot them both a sideways glance, then pulled off each of his gloves in turn, drying them and slipping them in his pocket. "He seems to be managing," he remarked to Sirius, "even if it tragically was not enough."

Sirius rolled his eyes and dropped the towel on Regulus's head with a flourish.

"I've never been glad to be an only child," Remus said, watching the two with a headshake.

"Me too," Tonks agreed, going to pick up the drinks. Remus hastily took them before she could.

"I'd have no idea," Bill said.

"Seven kids in eleven years," Sirius winced, flopping onto one of the chairs without ceremony, and in the chair next to him, Regulus was settling with more care. "Terrifying."
“Yes, we all know how you feel about commitment,” Remus rolled his eyes. “And children.”

“I like kids!” Sirius replied. “I just don’t want to inflict me or my genes on anyone.”

(At that, Regulus rolled his eyes but seemed to be biting back a comment of his own.)

"Charlie's alright," Tonks said, taking a drink and giving herself a white mustache in the process. "We went to school together."

"Is he still mucking about with dragons?" Sirius asked.

Bill nodded. "He's still in Romania, but he'll help when he can."

"Him with his dragons, you with your frog," Tonks sniggered.

"Charlie isn't dating his dragons," Bill pointed out.

"How is the charming Miss Delacour?" Tonks drawled.

"Butt out of my love life," Bill said, giving her a warning look. "Go get your own."

“Believe me, I’m trying.” Tonks grumbled.

The name rang all too familiar.

“‘Miss Delacour?’” Regulus lifted his brow, his mind immediately leaping to the Beauxbatons champion, Fleur Delacour, though it seemed a bit farfetched to assume as much. The others seemed to know who Bill was referring to, but he supposed he had not had much access (nor a particular pursuit of) their personal goings-on.

"Fleur Delacour," Remus filled him in, with a quick shake of his head. "She's working at Gringotts with Bill."

"She's trying to learn English," Bill explained. "Though my French is horrible."

"Mine too," Sirius admitted woefully. "We went a few a times as kids, do you remember? I think there's a couple of places there. After a while, you sort of lose track."

Regulus had not lost track of such things at all, but in that moment, Regulus was recalling a little girl with blonde hair, little Genevieve, who would be incredibly jealous that he was speaking to someone who regularly spoke to Fleur Delacour, convoluted though it was. Saying as much still felt too strange in such company, but all the same, he felt the twitch of a smile.

“Paris and Cagnes-sur-Mer,” Regulus instead confirmed with a nod, accent slipping comfortably into French as the cities rolled off.

Sirius gave him a pained look. "Could you possibly sound more pretentious?"

"He could've said it in French," Tonks said, throwing a wink at them both. "What's it in French anyway?"

"Paris et Cagnus-sur-Mer," Bill pointed out, sounding considerably less French with a deep west accent.

"Blimey," Tonks shrugged. "Guess it's not just the snogging parts she's teaching you."
"Will you leave it alone?" Poor Bill had started to go a little bit pink around his freckles. "You know Mum's starting to reckon I like you!"

"Does she really?" Tonks grinned, before fluttering her eyelashes in an exaggerated way. "And don't you?"

"Piss off," Bill said, before laughing at her.

"You're not my type." Tonks gave a slight shrug.

"Glad to hear it," he replied. "Can we please stop talking about love lives? There's a war on."

"Gotcha." Tonks grinned. "Besides, Mum already said she didn't think those freckles would go well with my cheekbones when I went out with Charlie."

Bill blinked. "When did you go out with Charlie?"

"For about a week when we were twelve," Tonks shrugged. "I told her it was a bit soon to be thinking about the marriage and babies part. I was pretty convinced we were going to have to go in some kind of balloon and fight acromantulas for a living, then. Of course, then she told me her mum had her sister when she was only a couple of years older than me. I thought she was having me on 'til I looked at that tapestry! Totally mental."

Regulus exchanged an awkward look with Sirius, sipping his mug of hot chocolate, and after a beat, Remus spoke up: "How is the search going?"

Tonks drew serious. "I dunno. Scrimgeour's been closing ranks, and everything's gone 'need to know.' He's a good bloke, but...."

Regulus assumed they were talking about Bella and the other Death Eaters, and in that moment, he thought that - despite all the chaos and frantic searches - he could probably find them with very little difficulty. Subtlety had never been Bella's forte, and it was undoubtedly Cissa who was shielding her now. More likely than not, all it would take was calling on the Malfoys for at least some of the escapees to come out of the woodwork...

(…Yet the idea of being live bait was terribly unappealing, fruitless searches or not.)

"Has anyone thought to check the Malfoys?" Sirius rolled his eyes, putting his mug down on the table.

"You try getting past Lucius Malfoy and his lawyers," Tonks grumbled.

"If only we had a vigilante group not bound by that," he deadpanned.

"Then you have to think about the other people who could get hurt in the process," Remus reasoned. "Not only are they bound to have an impressive warding system which could injure anyone trying to break it, but there are innocent people, potentially innocent children, on the inside. A little caution will not hurt."

Regulus nodded. "They had a thorough set of wards in the past, so I can only assume they still do. Perhaps even more so." (And children… Draco was off at school now, presumably safe from any raid for the next few months, but in truth, he had no way of knowing which children may or may not be there at any given moment...it had been so long...)

"A little patience," Remus said, quietly. "That's all."
Frowning, Regulus tapped his fingers on his mug, not wanting to think about what would happen to his family when the Order's patience ran out (or the Aurors got their warrant). "I'm in favour of patience."

"Shocking," Sirius said, sarcastically. "Is there anything you're not patient about?"

"Rash decisions have wrought more mixed results. I would say patience has served me well," Regulus remarked lifting his brow and sipping his cocoa. With a moment of further thought, Regulus thought of Dumbledore and how devastatingly annoying it was to still be waiting for any sort of private meeting, but it felt too uncomfortable to mention as much with the other three present, so he let the thought pass.

"As long as you don't wait so long you get blindsided," Sirius pointed out. "But fine, patience."

Another Order meeting came and went, but the way his brother shook his head in response to Regulus's own inquiring look upon the meeting’s dismissal, Regulus gathered that Dumbledore was once again absent from the attendees. As far as grand resistance leaders went, he was turning out to be quite the disappointment, but Regulus supposed it was still better than the alternative.

Severus was nowhere to be seen either. His absences stacked higher during the school year, it seemed, though Regulus could not always determine if it was a matter of slipping out immediately or failing to come at all, when Regulus had yet to experience the other side of those doors during a meeting. It stung a little that his old friend had grown more chilly, rather than less, in the peppered interactions, especially when it seemed they were still on the same side...

...and tentative though it was, that side was becoming less and less disjointed. It felt a bit like a betrayal of self, wondering if it would really be so bad to work alongside the vigilantes - like a trap waiting to happen - yet the lines had been blurring, as of late. Sometimes, Regulus tried to convince himself it was only the additional sources of information that he was favouring, yet he found his argument less persuasive as time passed, however valuable that external information perspective might be.

Occlumency had been the focus of Regulus’s attentions today as the Order chattered away in their meeting, anxiety mounting at the prospect of crossing his cousin with minimal mental protection, but theory only took you so far before hitting a wall. He recalled that Severus was teaching Harry in hopes of protecting against whatever that connection with the Dark Lord was, horcrux or not. Having another person on hand was essential to testing those bounds—

—but there was no one here would trust enough to practice with anyway, so he supposed he would have to hope Bellatrix wasn't feeling too aggressively nosy, should she evade the law for long enough for them to someday cross paths.

Wandering back into the drawing room to return his book to the shelves near the window, Regulus saw Emmeline peering into one of the open cabinets. Lifting his brow, he stood there for several seconds in silence before speaking: “Are you looking for anything in particular?”

Clearly caught unawares by the sudden company, Emmeline squeaked and spun around. This resulted in her catching her side on the cabinet corner and hissing in discomfort, so she managed to look surprised, pained, and embarrassed all in one caught red-handed expression. "There was something moving! I was just curious..."

"As long as you aren't stealing anything, I don't care if you look," Regulus said in response to what seemed to be an unspoken apology, given her expression. Moving closer to take a glance, he saw a
large, corked flask - nearly the size of a palm - with some dark, slimy substance that crept along
the glass like gravity-defying molasses. Nothing else seemed to be moving at the moment, though
it was hardly a confirmation of what may have been moving a few moments before. "I would
advise against touching it. If you haven't been told already, that recommendation is best applied to
all of the various cabinets and display cases, in general."

"I don't take things without asking," Emmeline said, but then she openly dithered. "Alright, I took
the books from work without asking, but that was Order-related, not personal-curiosity-related.
And I'm good at identifying wards, so I don't trigger them, meaning I guess I could be a master
thief if I wanted to be, but I really don't. I'm not helping my case, am I?"

Regulus's mouth tugged a little, and he shook his head. "Not really, but fortunately for you, I do
agree that there are situationally-appropriate times to take things without asking." The locket had
been truly stolen - though Bella's books were more...indefinitely borrowed...and the restricted
section, a temporary but unsanctioned time of access... "So long as the things don't belong to me, of
course, which I would consider to be the key distinction."

"It also depends how you feel about bribes," Emmeline said, indicating the cabinet. "Because I
wouldn't mind a more tactile examination of a few things, and I'm really not above it. I think
vigilantism has ruined my scruples."

"Perhaps an arrangement could be made," he said, glancing in the cabinet, then at Emmeline
herself, hands overlapping in front of him to clasp along the spine of his book. "Which objects are
you curious about?"

"The box," Emmeline pointed out, before bending to get a better look at it. "It's been bothering me
for weeks. Everything else potentially illegal and lethal is out in the open, what would be in a
box?"

"I could just tell you, but I suppose you'd like to see, hm?" Regulus commented, though it was
more rhetorical than not as he took out his wand and flicked it at the shelf with a mutter, lifting the
most recent touch-activated curse he'd placed on the items some time before. Slipping the wand
away again, he carefully plucked the ornate box from the shelf, a dusted silver finish with intricate
etchings along the surface. Holding it in front of himself, he added, "However - before I permit you
to experience these incredibly intriguing Black family treasures, I do need to know what it is I'm
getting out of this bribe."

Emmeline scrunched up her face in thought. "I have seen you coveting my work books. It probably
wouldn't be terrible if a couple more...had an outing..."

Smothering a grin (and feeling a rush of excitement at the thought of another opportunity to flip
through such rarities), Regulus instead offered a neutral nod, feeling that he absolutely was getting
the better end of this deal. "I accept these terms." Extending the box a little further, it soon
exchanged hands with care, and again, his hands clasped in front of him.

Emmeline put her finger on the clap, then stilled it. "It's nothing alive, is it? Or nothing that was
alive and may still jump on me?"

"Assuming nothing has crawled in there during the last sixteen years, that should not be a concern,"
Regulus assured, though he supposed he couldn't really account for that either way, given some of
the pests they'd cleared out over the months.

"Very reassuring," Emmeline snorted. Nevertheless, she opened the box tentatively and raised her
eyebrows at the cluster of vials. These were not blood red, though a few did have tints of colour to
them. They didn't look much like potions, not in such small quantities but rather, an ingredient. “And the reason these aren't in the pantry is...they wouldn't be great to consume?”

"I would not recommend ingestion, no," Regulus responded, shaking his head. "These vials contain a small collection of venoms, some more rare than others. The one with a bit of a pearly, deep green sheen-" he gestured to a vial tucked in one of the corners, "is from the American horned serpent. These two," he pointed out two more," are runespoor venom, then an ashwinder vial - it has the slightly orangey tint - and the last is boomslang venom. It's a bit harder to tell the runespoor venom from the boomslang because they both look black at first glance, but the runespoor does have a very slight coppery sheen. The empty vial," he added with a tone that was carefully filtered of the sudden annoyance he felt, "I believe used to be basilisk venom, but it has been empty for the entirety of my conscious memory."

Unable to resist quirking a smile, Emmeline rolled across a couple of the vials. "Given the matter of fact tone, I suppose having a load of venom in one's cabinet is not considered unusual for you."

"Not particularly," Regulus responded, "Though some of these cabinets are in need of organisation. Venom and jewelry aren't really thematically consistent. And this one," he pointed at another small vial filled with a black substance, "I'm pretty sure is just an inkwell. I'm not sure why it is isn't in a desk, but I suspect it would not be prudent to test it at the moment."

"They're thematically consistent if the jewelry is cursed." Emmeline pointed out. "But that this doesn't bother you is a little bit funny. You're not even a little unnerved by potentially lethal display cabinets in your own home or possibly evil inkwells."

"It has always been like that, since before we were born," Regulus responded simply, his brow lifting subtly. “And I say 'before we were born,' but I would hazard a guess that it has literally always been like that. The curses are generally reversible, so long as you know the counter-curse, and you learn them quickly enough.” He tipped his head, looking into the cabinet at a more simple, nondescript sort of box near the back, nearly blending in with the dark color scheme. “But as for the jewelry - the pieces in that plain box in the back are actually quite harmless.” Reaching in and lifting the lid to peek inside, he nodded confirmation before retracting his hand. “They are just gifts my mum didn't want. I think it was a case of shoving them somewhere out of the way and never coming back to them."

"At least the clutter is interesting, bar the jewelry." Emmeline handed the silver box back, sliding the lid back on. "We mostly had these little baby figurines that had eyes that followed you no matter where you went. And plates. And commemorative thimbles. We've never been a very exciting family, I'm afraid."

“There is a lot of history to the house - and to the family,” he said, his tone warming a little. “A lot of people with a lot of different interests and knickknacks and treasures, accumulated over centuries. Sirius would prefer to throw it all out, of course, but that has always been a bit of a running theme.” He lifted a shoulder in a shrug, though the words were free of the bitterness they would have possessed some months before. “Some of the other family properties were decorated in what might be considered a more conventional manner, but it depended in part on who was living there at any given time. I recall a great many decorative plates in our grandparents’ manor - our father's parents, specifically, though it was not just them.”

"You can't change the past. Well, actually you can, and if I were allowed to speak more about it, I would talk about how disastrously it goes wrong when you try." Emmeline mimed putting a zip over her mouth, but she looked very grim on the subject. "I don't think you can change your history is what I'm saying. I'm supposing you know this better than most. But stuff like this, even if it's a
little weird to me, they're things people cared enough about to keep. There's usually a reason to have them: a friend gave it you, a family heirloom, remembering a holiday. Living memory, the difference between a house and a home. I might think the plates are ugly, but they remind me of my grandparents, so I couldn't part with them either."

With a sobered nod, Regulus let out a soft, slow breath. “Nostalgia can be a powerful thing.” He felt a little twinge in his chest: it seemed beyond measure, the number of things in this house alone that had memories associated with them. To hear such a thing being acknowledged was strangely comforting, even if he knew he didn't need their permission to care about his own house. “There is a lot to be learned from history - whether it is your own, or vicariously through another.”

"There's also something to be said for not carrying your whole history around with you all of time. You can't choose your history, but you can choose what parts you want to be part of your future." Emmeline adopted a conspiratorial tone. "I have the greatest respect for Nana, but when a reasonable amount of time has passed, I'm finding somewhere to bury those figurines and hoping they won't claw their way back like an unholy army of porcelain. I think I'd rather have the venom."

“And you imply my house is frightening,” Regulus said with a little snort. Perhaps there was a place for picking and choosing, but he had a hard time imagining throwing even a subset of things out, regardless of whether they would officially be his, soon enough.

(Except for the house-elf heads - those, he could very likely do without.)

"I didn't mean it was frightening!” Emmeline scoffed crossly. "Interesting, very dramatic, a little strange to normalise this much illegal magic in children without them becoming extremely confused by mainstream acceptability, but not frightening."

“No need to get flustered - I was only joking.” Regulus said with a quirk of the mouth, shaking his head, “Rest assured that your open mind is noted and appreciated. Perhaps it seems strange, but truthfully, I don't think mainstream acceptability was the priority, so I suppose it follows the course of reason."

"No, I'm sorry, it's a charged word." Emmeline raised her hand, then let it drop sheepishly. "I have my own feelings about mainstream acceptability, and while I don't think there's ever been a benevolent use for the cruciatus, for example, most magic just isn't that straight forward. You can be magical, have been magical for a hundred generations, but the most amazing thing remains that we could spend a hundred more studying magic and still not fully understand something that's integral to our very existence. It's innate, toddlers can control and bend to will, but somehow this ability seems to get lost because it's not seen as acceptable in Western magic to practice before a wand chooses you. It's as if we've forgotten that magic itself is not learned, but responsible magical practice is. And..." She went a little pink at the ears. "I'm rambling. I told you I had a lot of feelings about it. It's just interesting to see a different perspective, even if it also involves potential murder weapons."

Regulus nodded, a thoughtful expression settling on his face. “Certainly. It's a complex concept, and to take all regulations at face value doesn't always serve you well. Our perspectives may not actually be completely different, at least not on the subject of your noted points, and I think such examples illustrate it well: The cruciatus is problematic, to say the least, and is rightfully considered to be culturally unacceptable, on the whole - but something as natural as underage magic is also punished and stifled.”

Glancing momentarily at the family tapestry across the room, he thought of how many of his ancestors had disregarded the rules as deemed appropriate, and in truth, could not imagine a
scenario in which his family wouldn't. "Our parents were not terribly concerned about underage magic laws, and Sirius and I were picking up old wands lying around the house and practicing spells long before our letters, even if - technically - society would dictate that our parents ‘control’ it beyond school walls." Looking back to her, he added, “I think you raise a fair point in that the concept of ‘responsible’ magic is a key point that isn't always considered critically.”

"The trace makes that interesting though!" Emmeline chirped. "It can pick up a specific spell used in a specific area, and identify an underage witch or wizard in that area, but seems to only enforce it if there is not another adult, human magical presence. I know it can't identify someone after the age of seventeen, but it seems as if it also can't tell - when in the presence of an adult - who the caster is, only that the spell was cast, when, and where."

Suddenly, she blinked a couple of times and let an indistinguishable noise. "The trace records!" Emmeline said, excitedly. "When the Chamber was opened, the Dark Lord - the boy - he was only sixteen. Any magic between that and his seventeenth birthday months later that wasn't in the presence of a magical adult would have been recorded! He didn't live in a magically-designated area! Somewhere in the archives of the Improper Use of Magic Office, there could be records of his movements because of citations!"

Regulus had been preparing to say that he’d known the loopholes of the trace quite well, but memories of his magical childhood were swept aside in favour of intrigue, interest lighting his eyes. His grasp of the Dark Lord’s childhood remained fuzzy and disjointed, but if the Dark Lord was steeped in muggle society, casting magic - perhaps there was serious merit in such a lead.

(Could he have been creating horcruxes, even then? Might there be clues?)

“Do we have means to gain access to those records?” he asked with a certain thinly-veiled earnestness.

"It shouldn't be heavily guarded. It's not exactly an office anyone wants to go to. But we might be able to do it without resorting to that." Emmeline was half-pacing on the spot, clearly trying to figure out her line of thought. "That's ‘forty-three, we would just need something to look up from the same period. Forties...that's the Grindelwald Revolution, so maybe Dumbledore. Fudge will take any chance to humiliate him, and Dumbledore initially abstained from the war effort. It might be enough to get in and make some copies undisturbed. But past actions might indicate what exactly the Dark Lord is trying to do, or was trying to do. He could have unleashed the basilisk on the wizarding world, but instead, there was only a single fatality, and of course the diary. That implies there's some sort of larger plan, even at that early stage, or could at least give indications of past locations that may still be in use now that he's in hiding.” Finally, she deflated. “Or I'm overthinking it and about to spend a lot of time in half-a-century-old memos. But the chance is there.”

That is my hope, Regulus thought to himself with growing certainty, a hint of satisfaction flickering at the corner of his mouth. “I would be very interested in such an investigation.” If Dumbledore wasn’t going to make himself physically present to be helpful, at least he might be able to help in this respect...

"I'll see what I can do," Emmeline replied.

Nodding, Regulus made no effort to bat away the smile on his face, already turning over the exploratory options in his mind. “Wonderful.”

It wasn't a total surprise for Sirius to find Emmeline standing in the hallway like a truant student a
few days later, but with Remus heading off for another couple of days to play translator, he had expected the house to remain quiet again.

“Ten points from Ravenclaw for loitering, Miss Vance.” He said, as sternly as he could without raising his voice.

Emmeline rolled her eyes, and he noticed that she was disheveled. It was a little unusual. Her family were well-to-do, and she didn't like to be seen as anything less prim.

(Marlene used to tease her so much about that.)

“You could polyjuice into Professor McGonagall herself, and that still wouldn't be convincing,” she said.

Sirius put a hand to his chest. “My secret fantasy revealed!” When she snorted in response, he dropped to the bottom stair. “What brings you here? Is there trouble?”

“Only the kind you see when looking in a mirror.” (Sirius tried not to preen at that. He wasn't successful.) “I might have a lead.”

That caught his attention. “On?”

“You-Know-Who. Or rather, something from when he was still using his birth name. There's a few small citations for use of magic in non-magically designated areas before the trace was lifted, so I started digging.” Emmeline hesitated. “Some seem run-of-the-mill. Obliviation, clean up, nothing we haven't done. It could be another witch or wizard in the area, someone off the designated areas but we won't know until we snoop about.”

As far as leads go, Sirius supposed it wasn't bad. “But why would what he was doing as a kid matter now?”

“The diary,” Emmeline said, with a shrug. “If the memory inside it already referred to itself as Lord V-v-voldemort, then by sixteen, it was name he was already using. And the graveyard, didn't Harry say that it was where the muggle father had lived? In the house? He had already killed him, but the trace didn't pick it up, so he had to have had a legal adult near enough to him. An early follower, maybe, or he found a way around it. I'm just hoping by going back to the beginning, we'll find more clues on how to end him – permanently.”

That was consistent with what Harry had said, but it wasn't something Sirius would have considered. Hopefully, that means it's something Voldemort hadn't considered either. “What made you think to look?”

“Well, the Ministry loves it's paperwork. It keeps records on everything, no matter how mundane.” Emmeline stopped, then plowed forward. “And truthfully, I was talking to Regulus about the trace.”

Sirius blinked. “Why?”

“Because of this house,” Emmeline gestured to it. “You were both casting long before Hogwarts, but weren't cited.”

“We may have had sorry excuses for parents, but they were magical,” Sirius pointed out.

“I know,” Emmeline said. “But we've known each other a long time, haven't we?”
Unsure of where she was going with this, Sirius nodded.

“So I'm betting there's no way you confined yourself to only using magic here. Not if you moved around as children.” Emmeline shrugged. “But no citation, even though I highly doubt there was an adult within fifty feet.”

“I admit it's got some loopholes,” Sirius said. It was true enough – various relatives, the street, the park, the tunnel system on holiday. All long before he was of age. Not to mention being an illegal animagus.

“But that's the point, they assumed since you had magical parents, they would sort it out. Riddle did not. It stood to reason at least some of his actions would be enough to catch the attention of the trace.” Emmeline crossed her arms defensively, clearly getting annoyed that perhaps he wasn't appreciative of her theory.

“Then thank Merlin for the Ministry being a bureaucratic nightmare,” Sirius shrugged. “Did you call a meeting?”

“No,” Emmeline admitted. “I wanted to talk to you first.”

“I'm starting to get sick of repeating myself,” Sirius said, dully. “But why?”

“Because we're spread thin, and this could be nothing. If something happens at Hogwarts, and we're busy mucking about in muggle areas, then we're going to have trouble getting out without being seen,” Emmeline said.

“Okay,” Sirius said. “But you shouldn't go alone. Remus should be—”

“I'm going to ask Regulus to come with me,” Emmeline interrupted.

Sirius had to stop and retrace the sentence in his head. He immediately wanted to ask why again, but he was getting sick of the question. This was why Ravenclaws were such nightmares to deal with. “He's not in the Order,” Sirius reminded her, instead.

“I know,” Emmeline said, clenching her jaw. “But he is privy to much of its comings and goings on your request. You told us at the meeting you felt he was genuinely remorseful for the pain caused when he was in school, and that he wanted to try to make up for some of it. If he truly wants to make a difference, and you believe he's trustworthy, then it falls to us to test the waters.”

“And you're offering,” Sirius said, doubtfully.

“We get on,” Emmeline shrugged. “And we're less visible than most. If we have to ask questions, there's less chance of it being linked back to the Order.”

The real hesitation was not the mix of the Order and Regulus so much as who else they may run into if they're looking up old Voldemort haunts. Ashamed as he was to admit it, as much as he trusted his brother in any other circumstance, he didn't want someone to walk into a situation he couldn't be positive they would be safe in. Either because of a fight they may get into, or because there may not be a fight when there should be.

“Mulciber's out there,” Sirius said. “So is Bellatrix.”

“So are Travers and Dolohov,” Emmeline said, gaining some steel to her tone. “And I can't promise to keep my head around them either. You don't have a monopoly on the desire for revenge, nor difficulty in controlling yourself around certain Death Eaters.”
“I don't know how he'll react around them,” Sirius said, quietly. “It could be anger, but it could be something...trickier.”

Emmeline shrugged. “I'm not twenty anymore. I can fight if I have to, I'm accomplished.”

“I don't doubt that,” Sirius said. After all, she was part of Harry's guard. “I don't want either of you to get hurt.”

“What happened to 'some things are worth dying for'?” Emmeline said, not unkindly.

“There are,” Sirius said. “But there's been enough needless death, hasn't there?”

Emmeline looked him over in an uncomfortable way, before she seemed to settle. “The first sign of trouble, I'll apparate. Both of us, if need strikes. But if we're ever going to stop this, we have to at least try to work with that we have.”

“Yes,” Sirius said, even if he couldn't completely dampen the worry in his stomach. The Order would say no. The Order would want to wait. But hadn't it only been days ago he had wanted something, anything, some kind of progress to be made? “I know.”

“Cheer up. He might say no,” Emmeline said, with a quirked smile.

Sirius's eyes flickered to the landing. “He won't,” he said, grimly.
Chapter 21

Emmeline Vance had always been a practical person.

At the age of eight, after a meticulous list of pros and cons, she had decided that Ravenclaw was the house that suited her best. She liked to think of herself as hardworking and loyal, but she also had to admit she struggled to focus on a project if she still had more questions about it. There always seemed to be more questions. Her curiosity overwhelmed most everything else, and it had been the deciding factor. Her parents had assured her the Sorting Hat didn’t make wrong decisions, and if it was what she was meant to be, then this would be her house.

(She imagined, looking back, that describing some of the charms that would go into making a hat like the Sorting Hat and doggedly asking how the rest of it worked had also paid a large part in her sorting.)

Overall, she had been an exemplary student. She had been a prefect; president of the calligraphy club (the vote had been unanimous among the other two members); she had always been well-mannered and achieved excellent marks across the board in her exams. She applied to the Ministry well in advance of the deadline, wrote her essays on practical applications of the study of magic, and came with two glowing recommendations. As far as on paper went, she was the farthest thing from a vigilante you could imagine.

Yet in the summer of 'seventy-eight, Professor Flitwick had asked her in earnest, and she agreed almost instantly.

The decision made little practical sense. The Vances were half-blood, but she doubted anyone could actually name a muggle relative. They were not considered blood traitors, erring on neutrality, and having money didn't hurt matters. They had never been high society, but were considered 'alright, for half-bloods' so it had never been a question of being potential targets for Voldemort and his followers. She was a decent duelist, but hardly incredible. She wasn't terribly outspoken about muggle-born rights, though she did deeply believe them. In short, she had no reason to rock the boat.

But she chose to rock the boat.

Above all else, Emmeline believed it was choice that defined a person. You could be an exceptionally kind person, for example, but unless you chose to engage it, there was no point to it. Emmeline was a curious person, and she had little trouble engaging it.

There were other factors to it too. Despite her friends within her own house, Emmeline found herself gravitating towards the Gryffindor table after striking up an unlikely friendship with Marlene McKinnon in their third year.

(It was not a spectacularly interesting story. Marlene had told her she looked posh, Emmeline had given her the sea-faring origins to the term, they'd spent the rest of the day discussing pirates.)

It was here that the neutrality seal was broken, piece by piece. Far more so than in her own house, she found people sniffling at the table, frantic readings of the Prophet in case someone had not notified them - the presence of fear, but also the presence of bravery. In her N.E.W.T. years, she became closer to the group in general. She got to know Remus during her prefect rounds; she got to know James when - around six months in, as she had begun to realise the dates Remus was missing and began to form what had turned out to be an accurate hypothesis – he came right up to her to
inform her Remus was a wonderful person and to threaten her if she told anyone; she got closer to Lily when she found out about that and yelled at him on Emmeline's behalf; gotten to know Peter when.....no she didn't imagine she must have known him at all, but she had gotten to Sirius when he had asked for help looking into less than legal wards, since he was moving out. (Later, she would realise that this was a monumental thing from someone who despised asking for help and imagined that Remus had something to do with it.)

These were her friends, she realised that one day in her seventh year, and she was worried about them. Marlene's father was in magical creatures, Lily was muggle-born, James had run right into the fire, Remus was a werewolf - which came with its own set of worries about what people would think of him - and Sirius, she supposed, had run into a similar problem because of his background, but he'd never talked about it, and anyone who suggested he was even slightly purist-inclined got punched for their trouble. She had always assumed this was a temper problem, but having spent a considerable time in Order Headquarters, she began to suspect it ran a little more complicated than that.

When she had been asked, she thought of them, and the choice had been an easy one.

The fact she was unassuming had worked in her favour. Many of the friends she had made within the Order had not. She had idolised the strong women of the Order: Dorcas Meadowes, Alice Longbottom, Minerva McGonagall, and even though she’d lived, McGonagall wore scars of the losses they'd had. Emmeline had thrived within her group – the mad inventors in the Prewetts, long since murdered by Dolohov. Benjy Fenwick, they’d ended up picking up the pieces of him in the end. Dorcas had supposedly been hauled in front of You-Know-Who himself and killed. Alice....she would like to go and see Alice, but it didn't seem fair to cry over things she and Frank could no longer understand. Her heart bled for their boy, and for James and Lily's as well. In some ways, it had been a blessing that more children had not been orphaned from this.

At least, as far as she knew.

Sirius had been right about one thing, even if she'd been surprised to hear him of all people say it. There had been enough needless death. There would still be plenty of needful death. If there was a chance to end it before it stacked too highly, she wanted to take it. Not just for the next generation of Order members, but the realisation that the next generation of Death Eaters were also at that school. Fifteen-year-olds fighting in wars all because of this man. This was what it had come to last time, and how it was shaping up to happen again if they didn't find a way to snuff out the threat.

It was certainly something worth dying for, but perhaps more impressively, something worth living for.

This brought her onto the current divisive person cohabiting their headquarters. It was not as if they could do much about it; it was his home, and he had chosen to return to it. Even if his loyalty against the Death Eaters had been untested, Emmeline could appreciate that the decision in someone else's hands may have gone differently. She could not deny her curiosity pinged again at the idea of investigating the Death Eaters. She had questions, but the idea of speaking to Severus Snape about them filled her with discomfort. They weren't friends, and never had been. She did not understand his choice to join, nor the choice to leave. She despised not knowing things.

She had never been friends with Regulus Black either, but it was possible that they could be. If nothing else, he was definitely curious. She was good at curious. She’d had plenty of practice. Despite only a year between them at school, they had never really interacted beyond perhaps brief moments at prefects’ meetings, or perhaps when Emmeline had made it down to the pitch.
Somehow, even with this limited knowledge, she had trouble matching the person with the concept of the Death Eater. She understood these organisations had nuances, but there was something disturbing about how different it felt.

Perhaps it was age. Everyone who’d survived had changed in some way. She was not quite the same person who had guiltily taken a joint at a party at eighteen, not the same person who had wept into Gideon’s shoulder after her first fight, not because anyone had been hurt, but because it had been quick, overwhelming, and not at all what she’d been imagining. She couldn't shake the feeling that in many ways, they were all still pawns being moved around a board by a handful of players and not understanding any of it while players on both sides were sacrificed.

But here they all were, and they all wanted the same thing. You-Know-Who removed from this world, permanently. If the magical world were ever to feel safe again, it had to be done, and with the Ministry denying it and the Death Eaters quiet, it was left to a subtle approach. That subtle approach had led her to ask Regulus Black to accompany her to a village graveyard in Yorkshire in search of answers to questions from fifty years before in the early hours of the evening.

Surrounded by overgrown weeds and faded, higgledy-piggledy graves encased inside the stone walls, it almost passed for peaceful. The mausoleums were degraded, but no less royal standing. It was hard to believe what happened here only half a year ago.

"This is it," she said, with a quiet but audible breath in and out. "There shouldn't be a Ministry presence, but vigilance is recommended."

Beside her, Regulus raked his eyes over the dreary graveyard, lingering on the towering statues and grazing the names as they walked. Behind the structures, a cloud-hazed sun settled on the horizon, ushering in the evening, and he, too, let out a sigh.

“Always,” he agreed quietly, taking a few more steps in silence before adding, “Do you have a description of the grave? Harry did not go into detail during our conversation, and I did not specifically ask.”

"Marble, large, worn. Three names." There had been three deaths under the name Riddle: two Thomas, and one woman, Mary. "Dumbledore saw the aftermath, but it's been a long time. I doubt there remains anything else. Even so, it is best to start at the beginning. Were you not aware of his heritage?"

Making a bit of a crinkled expression, Regulus shook his head. “Strangely enough, it never came up in the rallying speeches,” he muttered dryly.

Emmeline puffed a quiet laugh. "I don't know, it looks like a grand estate," she pointed to the village over to the house on one side. "I would imagine he'd boast. But if it's muggle, perhaps not."

“He knew his audience, I will grant him that,” Regulus said, eyes following the line of her point as they walked past a group of vases with long-dead flowers. “Muggle areas are one thing, but muggle wealth is quite another.”

"The exchange rates are terrible at the minute anyway," Emmeline said, looking around for a large chunk of faded marble. She was starting to think perhaps someone had come out here to clean it up just in case. "Are you worried? Being here?"

With a little twist of his mouth, Regulus let out a soft huff. “Because of the escapees?” he asked, keeping his eyes flicking over the various graves in search of their large, marble target.
“Because this is where it happened,” Emmeline clarified. “It's where everyone gathered last June.”

"I find the people more unnerving than the place," Regulus admitted, mouth tightening a little. "Not that it isn't unsettling to imagine the scene, in a place like this, but the graveyard is just a graveyard, significant though it might be. It's not out of the realm of possibility that they could come back to it at this precise moment, could be watching for just such an investigation... but there is still some possibility that they would fail to jump to immediately inconvenient conclusions. I was seventeen when last they saw me, and dead the last they heard - circumstance can only mask so much, but it is something to hope for whilst preparing for the worst."

"So that is just the possibility of the Ministry, the Death Eaters, and the current residents not remaining immobile to worry about." Emmeline said, before she remembered what had happened a few months before and winced. "Sorry, I don't actually believe that will happen. I just can't stop my line of thought sometimes."

"It's the story of my life right now," Regulus said dryly, shaking his head with a subtly pinching expression. "As long as everything aligns perfectly, opposing sides stays in place, and no one pays too much attention, things will be fine."

"Do things ever align perfectly? I thought that was a myth." Emmeline stopped at what felt like some sinking ground, not just because she didn't want to get a trapped shoe, but because it bore resemblance to the description. Sure enough, faded names on marble. "Here."

"I think someone has dug up the rest of the remains. Probably as a precautionary measure."

Whatever Regulus had been intending to say fell fast from his thoughts, and instead, he peered more closely at the marble, then down to the upset expanse of dirt as he nodded with a more heavy expression on his face. "Makes sense. Harry said they used bone from the Dark Lord's father for the resurrection ritual. I could find no indication of a reversal for any such ritual, but I suppose it's more convenient to have the stash on hand, should it be required again," he said sourly.

"I don't believe it would be that simple," Emmeline said, crouching down to feel the damp sinkhole in the earth. "While I can't place the potion either, at least two other ingredients would have to change. Blood extracted from a foe is not hard, many foes could be considered, but he went to great lengths for it to be Harry's blood for the new body. A willing sacrifice of flesh is not out of the question either, though given Peter owes Harry his life, it is possible it may offer some sort of protection as the new flesh if it truly came down to the Killing Curse again."

"Nothing about this has been simple," Regulus muttered, shaking his head, "Not then, and not now, but in the infinite wonders of magic, all options must be exhausted. Harry mentioned that his blood was used specifically to counteract the enchantment that had spared him as an infant. Presumably, that enchantment would not reset, so I would not expect the Dark Lord to need Harry's blood again, were the potion required once more. A tangential thought, perhaps, but one that makes the ritual another step closer to accessible for them, should we manage to stop him again..." A strange, frowning look crinkled around his eyes for a moment before he continued, "The role of Pettigrew's debt is a curiosity, if that is true, but it is difficult to predict who it would benefit, or if there would be any benefit at all."

"A debt is old magic, and I've long found the oldest magic is the most intense. You can find more loopholes in modern spellwork." With a heavy sigh, Emmeline stood up and looked across the hills as night began to settle. "I don't know if that's why Harry's blood was used. It may have been simply because he felt something to prove, as a baby did take him down last time, or if there are other factors." Like prophecies, for example. "I can't say how any of it will interact, but there are far too many things at play for it to be coincidence. There is something determined: he and Harry
should echo one another - both with muggle lineage on one side and a very old magical line on the other, the sibling wands, the parseltongue, even being raised in the muggle world against the odds. The amount of things that have had to align for that to be the case...I don't put much stock in divination as a whole, but sometimes, it is as if magic has a will of its own."

"Harry seemed to think the use of his blood was connected to the enchantment," Regulus pointed out. "Apparently the Dark Lord could not physically touch him due to the enchantment's protective qualities, but the use of Harry's blood in the resurrection ritual removed that barrier." For a moment, Regulus seemed to be reeling through his own thoughts, but only a beat had passed when he granted a frowning nod. "I wouldn't call it a matter of divination, but I highly suspect there is more than coincidence at play."

"Harry doesn't have all the information yet, and I don't know when he will." Emmeline made a face. "That sounded judgemental. I know it's more complicated than that and that he's still young. He ought to be thinking about OWLs, or girls, maybe boys, quidditch. No one truly wants a teenager being what stands in front of the destruction of the magical world as we know it."

Lifting his brow with a measure of curiosity, Regulus turned his attention from the scene back to Emmeline's face - but only briefly, before he looked off toward the Riddle estate. "No, certainly not..." he said a little more distantly - uncomfortably - before stepping back from the grave.

"I'm making you uncomfortable?" Emmeline asked, before gesturing up to the house. "We could skip the house. I'm sure Tonks will understand, and we'd find another way to look."

"You aren't the source of discomfort," Regulus said, shaking his head. "I was just thinking... I would still like to take a look at the house."

"Is it rude if I ask what you were thinking about?" Emmeline said, trying to scrape off her shoe with moderate success on the embedded stones.

Regulus let out a little huff, hands burying in his pockets as they started the trek toward the large house in the distance. Silence lingered for a stretching moment, as if he was deciding whether to answer at all - then another beat later, he spoke: "Just thinking about teenagers and war."

Emmeline nodded in understanding. "I'm not sure how much you've heard about what's happening at Hogwarts, but I'm not sure it's better the war."

"I've heard about the chaos that has followed them from school year to school year, yes." Regulus said, shaking his head. "There are a great many factors at play, but it is my hope that we can resolve this in an more timely manner - or at least stifle its escalation."

"I meant this year," Emmeline said, looking around to make sure they weren't about to disturb anyone or anything. "The Ministry has sent a High Inquisitor to prevent all practical study of Defense, observe all classes, and if the more awful rumours are true, utterly terrorising the children, with a particular distaste for Harry and his little group. I imagine they want Dumbledore to step in simply so they can remove him, but the longer he doesn't step in, the more I worry."

With a flicker of surprise, Regulus shook his head. "Sirius mentioned that the Defense professor was dreadful, but I had heard nothing to that extent. Even if the Dark Lord was not a very present concern, they need to learn practical Defense for their OWLs this year."

"Not everything comes back to Sirius, and for good reasons." Having cleared the stone walls, they made their way towards the large hill through crunchy grass.
For a moment, Regulus was silent, then after a beat, he asked, “I must ask, though, on the subject of Dumbledore: is he always so difficult to contact?”

"No, not as a rule. I believe he's been trying to track something down without raising attention, and it has meant getting hold of him in his present state is harder. If nothing else, he ought to be back in a month or so, when the school term is over. Other than that, we usually go through McGonagall or if you're feeling particularly brave, his brother."

A spark lit behind Regulus's eyes, and as they walked, he pressed his lips to a thoughtful line. “I see.”

"Normally, we'd run something like this past him, so I'm afraid we've gone a bit rogue," Emmeline admitted. She wasn't altogether comfortable with it, but they really couldn't wait. "But there are only a few possible locations. We know a little about the family, just from Tonks going and talking to people. It's a small village, and people talk. Three murders at the main house, in the summer of 'forty-three. They owned a lot of the land but weren't particularly pleasant people, supposedly, so no one was all that bothered. It should have caught the attention in terms of citation, so that one does not exist is more than curious. I suppose there must have been a mother, so perhaps there is another magical family in the area, and as such, it isn't classed as a muggle area. There was one more death, around a year and a half ago, someone who worked for the family. I suppose he may be cleaning up, so no one goes looking for a heritage he would prefer they did not find."

“Too late, hm?” Regulus remarked, though his expression had focused to a point, visibly turning the words over in his mind. “I assume that the two Thomases and the Mary listed at the grave were the three murders… It may not matter, but do we have a name for the worker who died?"

"Bryce. No magical connection, I'm afraid." Emmeline had thought to try that one herself, but it appeared a little too good to be true. "The only citation I found was some twenty years earlier, for a minor breach of statute. Hives, if I recall correctly. Again, not a name I know of, though pureblood history is not my strong point. It was handed off to the MLES. Scrimgeour has locked down everything there, so it's a little harder to track down what happened afterwards. I don't want to risk anyone getting fired on a hunch."

“Too late, hm?” Emmeline shot him an exasperated look. "And if a muggle in 'nineteen-twenty getting hexed with hives is what piques your interest, we may have to re-evaluate this tentative friendship. Books, cursed objects, ugly jewelry, and illegal breaking and entering are one thing, but bodily sores are
not the type of activity I enjoy."

"Not that kind of interest," he responded firmly, shooting her a pointed sideways glance in return. "Sirius has hexed far more people than I have. I just recognise the name."

"I wasn't comparing you," Emmeline said, giving a somewhat curious look in response. "Just a little humour to lighten the mood. I'm glad we may be on the right track."

Tension loosened in Regulus's shoulders and in the pinch of his expression as he nodded. "I think we are."

"Stop," Emmeline said. She immediately followed her own advice, pulling her robes around her. As much as this was a test to see if they worked well enough together without it falling apart, it wasn't a compare and contrast of the siblings nor some elaborate set up. "I didn't ask you because I was trying to trip you into saying something, for lack of a better term, Death Eater-eque. You have knowledge that I don't and may spot something I don't, and unlike a certain bright pink haired witch I can see from here, a knack for subtlety. I know Rome wasn't built in a day, but at least establishing some level of trust would make things easier. You're not an easy person to get a feel for, so a little leeway while I figure out navigating the nuances would be very much appreciated."

Regulus's mouth thinned to a line as he watched her face, as if taking a measure of the words - then settled on a nod. "I, too, am still trying to determine the expectations at play." He paused for a just a beat, tipping his gaze back to the Riddle house before adding: "The past six months have not gone the way I anticipated - not negative, so much as rife with a lack of context, I suppose you could say. But so much of this goes beyond positive, negative, neutral: There is a great deal at stake, in more than one respect... I suppose I don't want to mess it up, despite seeing clearly in my mind all the ways it could."

"You will find that no one is unaware of what's at stake, particularly those of us who've lived through it once before. While united by a common goal, yes, many of us became friends simply because spent so much time together, and for me, that makes it easier to weather the risks. Not for everyone," Emmeline raised her hands, thinking of Aberforth and his glowering, and Snape with his...general personality. "The only true expectation is secrecy. No one remains in the Order if they decide they don't want to, and Merlin knows I won't blame Sturgis if he decides he's had enough. And in terms of outside collaboration, it's much the same: secrecy above all else. You were just unexpected, and your knowledge of the Order is unprecedented, but no one was going to argue with Sirius about it. We all have things we have to show contrition for, and our weights to carry. While I cannot promise that everyone is thrilled at the idea of some information exchange, given your past, I'm not alone in believing that judging someone for their actions at sixteen and that alone is narrow-minded at best. I don't think we'll ever heal the fracture within the magical world if we split it into absolutes." Well, actually..."Beyond the absolute that You-Know-Who must be destroyed, of course."

Heaviness lifted from Regulus's expression as he nodded. "That is - without a doubt - an absolute I can agree with." Stepping forward again, he released a thoughtful huff of a sigh. "For what it is worth, I place high value on secrecy and discretion, even beyond the bounds of a charm. It is not easy for me to trust this situation either, when Azkaban could be an ill-tempered whim away..." He glanced back briefly to make certain she had begun walking to, before continuing his stride toward the Riddle house. "Even so, these months could have gone very differently - far worse - and I recognise that extension of trust, variable though it might be."

"You're secretive? I'd never have guessed, you hide it so well." In the gardens of the cottage was Nymphadora Tonks, human windmill. Clearly the girl wanted to make sure she was seen, but
waving her arms around was unnecessary with that hair. Emmeline winced and gave her companion a look of exasperation. "Did I say something about the need for discretion? I feel as I did."

Unbidden, a little smile played at the corner of Regulus’s mouth. “They are but words in the wind,” he remarked wryly.

The looming Riddle manor was dusty and boarded, tells of neglect found with every step as Regulus and Emmeline slipped through the backdoor kitchen and into the foyer. This had not been the Dark Lord’s home, Regulus knew, but rather the home of the Dark Lord’s muggle father. It was hard to say if any clues could possibly remain if there was, in fact, someone tracing these old steps and smothering all access to that history - but there was more than one historical curiosity in place, and it was a starting place, if nothing else.

There were knickknacks of wealth all around, though there was an eeriness to them, uninhabited as the house seemed to have been been for some time. In what looked to be there drawing room, there was a large armchair situated before an unlit fireplace, but it was a small collection of photographs that called his attention.

It felt dizzyingly surreal to set eyes on the young man featured in so many of them, for though the elder parents were more comparable in age to the Dark Lord himself, he found himself both nauseous and unable to tear his eyes away from the snobbish young man. The youth rang wrong, the skin not pallid enough, and though the aged photograph - so still and lifeless - had no color, he was willing to bet those eyes had not been a harrowing red.

Even so, the resemblance was uncanny - jarringly so - and for a moment, he stood rooted.

"He is definitely covering his traces, I don't see any sign of-" Emmeline sounded to a stop behind him. "Everything alright?"

Twisting his mouth downward just slightly, eyes fixed with intent, Regulus nodded, lingering with a beat of silence before forcing himself to speak.

“Yes,” he muttered quietly, then with more volume, added with a tap to the muggle photograph, “It’s just...This photograph could be mistaken for the Dark Lord himself, if not for the complexion and the discrepancies in age.” A beat of hesitation. “It is presumably his muggle father - resemblance is not unexpected - it was just...unnerving.”

Moving closer, Emmeline took a look over the picture. "Not at all what I expected, but I suppose he can't always have looked monstrous,” she said, after a moment. "I suppose that's another Harry echo we can chalk up. Though perhaps not, looking like one’s parents is hardly unusual. I can tell a Weasley at twenty paces.”

Regulus crinkled his nose at the reference to James Potter, but with practiced effort, he held his tongue. “Not unusual, no.” Sirius had said on no few occasions that Regulus struck the image of their own father, though Regulus suspected it was not something his brother would want reported. “But a little unsettling, in this instance,” Regulus admitted, but a few steps of physical distance between himself and the photographs before giving the room a more general scan.

"I would have assumed he'd remain masked,” Emmeline commented, moving away from the pictures and looking around the room with disinterest.

“The Dark Lord didn’t wear a mask,” Regulus said with a shake of the head. Discomfort prickled at
the back of his mind, tempting him to silence, but frustrations (so long unspoken) were bubbling on his tongue. “Everyone else did, at all times, but not him. When your followers have no name, no context, no leverage, I suppose there is no reason to fear them seeing your face. It makes for a bolder display.” As he spoke, his tone tightened and his expression distanced, subtly narrowing around the eyes. (Absolute power- and absolute control-) “He knew each individual Death Eater - their fears, and their ambitions - but each individual Death Eater had - or I suppose has - a limited knowledge of the others, and even less of the Dark Lord himself.”

For a moment, Emmeline looked uncomfortable before fortifying herself. "I don't understand it. Actually, I suppose I do, if you prey on people young enough, they'll give everything they have in the hopes of acceptance, affection, whatever they feel vulnerable about...but willing adults, I don't understand it. I'm sorry."

Regulus frowned, mind reeling with a string of memories and their associations: Acceptance, affection - responsibility, proof of usefulness… His adolescence had been charged with all sorts of reasons why throwing in with the Death Eater lot had seemed like the right thing to do, a foregone conclusion, a solution to what felt like a crumbling situation.

He could not speak for the adults that had been around him, but when he thought of Bella, he didn't really want to try. More likely than not, it had been belief in the method - fear for some, or power - but he'd been so wrapped up in his own experiences…

And even his own experiences felt too raw to expand upon - no matter how reasonable she seemed, no matter how many years had passed.

“It’s difficult to say,” he settled uncomfortably, even as he was filtering his expression to something more neutral.

"If it was easy, it wouldn't mean anything." Emmeline gave a wan smile. "Come on. I think Tonks has found something and may need to be rescued."

When Regulus and Emmeline stepped out into the Riddle gardens, Tonks was peeking into a shed where the gardener must have kept his tools - a disaster waiting to happen, certainly, but Regulus had the sneaking suspicion it had been more of an excuse to move on from the uncomfortable conversation, rather than anything else. For that, he felt a small measure of gratitude.

Peering over toward the trees which supposedly hid the beaten shack Emmeline had mentioned before - the place where ‘Morfin’ had hexed a muggle - Regulus’s eyes narrowed in thought. In such proximity to the Riddles, it had to be connected to the Gaunts. Perhaps there could have been a trophy that the Dark Lord felt was worth taking in the muggle manor, but the photographs featured no notable clues in the way the Founders’ tapestry had hinted at the locket, and the rooms had seemed quite ordinary, if he were to guess at what was ordinary for a family of wealthy muggles.

The Gaunts, however - if the Dark Lord had come to make horcruxes from the three Riddle murders, perhaps he had collected items significant to his mother’s Slytherin bloodline, just down the way.

“You needn’t feel obligated to stay if you have had your fill of investigations, but I would still like to take a look at that shack you were mentioning earlier,” Regulus called back to Emmeline, who was telling Tonks about their (lack of) findings, though he didn’t turn to look at them.

"I should go and relieve Kingsley,” Tonks said, as she stifled a yawn. She was looking around as if she was still a little uncertain about leaving them to it.
"Go," Emmeline encouraged. "I'm curious too. If there's a problem, we can just come back when we're better prepared."

Regulus nodded in support, and within the minute, Tonks was apparating away, leaving himself and Emmeline to wander off for the next leg of their exploration. There was no telling what sort of protections the Gaunts might have placed upon their property - generally, those who were caught for hexing muggles went to other lengths to keep the muggles away, but if no other suspicious reports had registered, either the muggles could no longer perceive the shack, or the wards were not immediately accessible to those passing by, makes as they were by the trees.

They would see, soon enough.

Drawing closer, Regulus gestured at what looked to be the structure she had indicated earlier - and by far the most run down they'd seen. “This one, did you say?”

Emmeline nodded uncertainly. “There's no other places that fit, and it certainly looks as if it could be one thing disguised as another. Or I suppose it could just have gone to rot with no one left to care for it…”

Silently to himself, Regulus thought that it certainly was not the first house to fall to such a fate, though it was still a bit too depressing to voice, even if Number Twelve Grimmauld Place was getting some of its life back with all the cleaning.

“I suppose we will know, soon enough,” Regulus remarked, thumbing his wand in his pocket as they approached the line of the property.

The hype and the anxiety were for naught, in the end, but the efforts were not without trial. After scanning the area for muggles hiding amongst the trees, Regulus cast a probing spell to check for protective enchantments - and when several triggered, he and Emmeline spent several minutes tearing and wading through the wards surrounding the beaten, mossy structure. Upon reaching the door, the giant snake ornament hanging out front was an unnecessary tip-off, but an encouraging one nonetheless. No further protections greeted them at the door, and in truth, it was almost anticlimactic the way the door simply clicked open after their unlocking spell, and when at last they were standing in the middle of the Gaunt shack, Regulus felt a swelling anticipation.

A certain amount of rot and decades-old mold wafted from a corner where pots had been left abandoned, looking as though the inhabitants had never bothered to wash their dishes before passing on. Such squalor was quite unlike what he would have expected from the heirs of Salazar Slytherin, and it showed on his face - but he did not pause long before making an immediate line to a shelf caked thickly with dust. Nothing but plates, and not the decorative sort - nothing out of the ordinary.

The lower half of the shelf had a few drawers, both of which Regulus wasted no time in investigating; inside were a handful of small artifacts - dark, from the look of them - one etched with runes, while others maintained a faint, eerie glow. Based on what he recalled of runes, the etched contained contained some horrible substance or another, but none of them struck Regulus as particularly meaningful, even if they were in the house that the Dark Lord’s mother must have grown up in.

“Should you find any photographs, diaries, or objects of significance, kindly direct me towards them,” he finally said, tentatively opening a cabinet to find potion ingredients. (He checked for basilisk venom, just in case - they seemed the sort - but with no luck. Far too expensive, judging by the shack itself.)
“You're worried about a repeat of the diary?” Emmeline said, still looking around with a measure of distaste.

"Something like that..." Regulus shut the cabinet, trying to stifle a cough as dust puffed out in a cloud. For a moment, he fell silent, feeling the weight of his search, and a small, niggling hope pulling taut at his stomach. With so few clues about the Dark Lord's past, to be standing in a house - dilapidated though it was - where the Dark Lord's wizarding family had lived as pure descendents of Slytherin, felt like a hotbed of potential. The Riddles had been murdered just down the road - the Dark Lord clearly came to this area - and if he knew his magical family was close by...

Glancing over at Emmeline, who had already settled into her own search, he thought that it was much less frustrating (and likewise less anxiety-inducing) than he expected, having someone along for the search. The last time he had followed the Dark Lord's trail on an exacting hunt for a horcrux, it had been Kreacher and himself with the promise of a miserable death, and for over a decade, he had gone at it alone. Though he still felt a measure of isolation padding the space around him at every step, that padding slowly chipped away, and these people were slowly creeping into that space.

With a tiny start, he realised he was staring at Emmeline's search rather than searching, himself, and without further comment began searching in the next drawer.

Suddenly, Emmeline stopped and tapped her heel against the floor. Frowning, she did it again and once again, it sounded out. "I think the house is raised," Emmeline said, crouching down. "That's not very usual for something this ramshackle. Do you think there's a crawl space under it?"

Twisting back around to look, Regulus spotted the floorboard in question, curiosity welling up. It would not be a completely isolated instance for the Gaunt bloodline, were there to be some secret passage hidden away - and he wasted no time in crossing the room to investigate.

“I suppose we shall see,” Regulus said, pulling out his wand and tapping it to the surface, loosening the board to reveal a golden box nestled in the rot.

“What on earth-” Emmeline stuttered to a stop.

Immediately his demeanor shifted to focus, nearly reaching to snatch it from the hole before catching himself, remembering his surroundings. Retracting his hand again, he gave the wand a swish, testing for enchantments and protective wards. When the box gave no reaction, he let out a slow, measured breath. After sparing a quick glance to Emmeline, he carefully pulled the box out and cracked open the lid.

Inside was a single ring, golden cast with a patterned black stone set within. It looked poorly made, if Regulus was honest, but the aesthetic was truthfully not the primary concern, fascinating though an apparent heirloom might be.

Another quick check for curses and enchantments triggered a soft, golden glow - but whether it was telling of the soul within or something else, Regulus could not tell. Steeling himself, he tentatively picked up the ring between his thumb and index finger, heart thundering in his chest as he turned it over. Up close, he could see the stone’s design more clearly: a triangle with a circle inside, and a line cutting down the middle. It wasn't a rune he recognised, but he supposed it must have meant something to the Gaunts.

And if it meant something to the Gaunt’s… perhaps it meant something to the Dark Lord too...

"It almost looks like...but that would make sense, they do seem as if they'd be the type," Emmeline
said, barely above a whisper. "I really think Bill should take a look at this before we muck about with it. It was important enough to stash."

Immediately, Regulus shook his head - slowly, but uncompromising in manner. "I recall that he is a cursebreaker, so I understand why you would account for that, but I came here for a reason, and I intend to examine it first," he responded firmly, closing the ring in his palm as he shut the box and slotted it back in the floorboards. Comforting though the paired search had been, her did not sign up for passing along potential horcruxes, whether or not they liked it.

Emmeline frowned deeply. "You don't think that's a little impulsive? They don't exactly seem like the type that keep normal rings under their floorboards, unless it was some bizarre attempt to deflect true allegiances."

*That is very much the point,* Regulus thought to himself, standing up and nudging the floorboard hideaway closed with the toe of his shoe. After checking his pocket for holes or wear, he dropped the ring inside and temporarily sealed the opening, a sense of finality to the movements.

“Some risks are worth taking. If it requires Bill Weasley’s attention, I'm sure something can be arranged.” He met her eyes then, thinking to himself that this was exactly the reason (or rather, exactly one of the many reasons) he preferred to work alone, but at least she didn't seem intent on making a duel of it. “We entered this investigative arrangement to build upon the tendrils of trust, so I ask that you extend that trust to me now. I would not make a point of this if it was not important.”

"I wasn't suggesting you give up looking at it, merely that a cautious approach might mean you don't lose a finger. Or given where you just shoved it, something else of equal import. If you want to be the one to examine the ring, examine away!” Emmeline rolled her eyes theatrically. "I was right the first time, wasn't I? So dramatic."

With a subtle fluster, Regulus gave the floorboard an unnecessary ‘smoothing press’ with his foot. “My fingers are in fine condition, and they will remain as such. This isn't the first cursed object I've dealt with,” he returned pointedly. Her expression was quirking at the brow, so after steeling his own, he added, “And once again, I'm not being dramatic. I'm merely explaining the situation.”

"Need I remind you who the Unspeakable is? I'm also well versed in cursed objects," Emmeline huffed. "Excuse me for caring about your well-being. If you want to behave like a Gryffindor, by all means, have at it."

Along the line of his brow, Regulus cringed a subtle recoil and tensed against the accusation. (He was not a Gryffindor-)

“I’m not naive - I know how that can go. One does not need to intend for something to explode for that to happen, and I'm not taking my chances with additional variables. I can take care of myself just fine,” he said tightly, and although some part of him felt guilty even as he said it, his mind clamped against the words, a flutter of thinly restrained panic pulling the rug out from under his feet. An acquaintance at best, she couldn't care that much, and if someone decided it was best to keep that ring from him when they were done examining it-

“Thank you for your time,” he added, though the words hung heavy and uncomfortable in the air as he slipped past her toward the door.

“I am not an additional variable. I am the person who asked you here. You do not have the monopoly on intelligence, history and experience with potentially lethal spellwork, and suggestions that you do are condescending at best and outright rude at worst.” Emmeline turned and took
several large steps towards the door. “There is absolutely no reason to behave like you and you alone are allowed to do something dangerous. You may want to consider that cursed objects do not always have an obvious physical effect, so I am well within my boundaries to worry. I brought you along in one piece; I would like to make sure you return in the same condition, and it would make it easier if you weren't being so damn prickly and agreed to be cautious with your well-being.”

Regulus paused in his step but did not turn around, and though her reasoned words rang sharp in his head, he could not soften the hard lines set so long before, a barrier to the horcruxes - his burden and his way to fight back in all of this - but of course she would not understand. She had spoken of everyone's contrition, but what could she have to be that contrite about? What could any of them?

“It's not about capability. It's about responsibility,” he said, voice quieting, but no less set. He thought of his brother, then, telling him that running off and getting himself killed was out of the question - a small measure of guilt pricked, at that - but the other horcruxes were not deadly to the touch, so at least patterns were on his side. “I don't doubt your intelligence or your competence, but this is my responsibility. If the ring is what I think it is, then no one else is laying hands on it until I've taken care of the situation.” Regulus hesitated only a beat before adding: “Pardon me if that's rude, but it isn't negotiable.”

“You could have said that instead of saying 'this is what's going to happen.' I'm not unreasonable,” Emmeline said, her lips pressing into a line. “I suppose asking why it's your responsibility and yours alone is out of the question?”

(Guilt… Leverage…) Regulus nodded. “I’m afraid so - but rest assured it is in line with our collective efforts.”

Emmeline studied him for a long moment. “Alright. But don't talk down to me again. I've had enough pureblood elitist condescension over the years that it'll piss me off. Okay?”

For a moment, Regulus thought about putting forth his argument that he wasn't playing at condescension (this time, at least), merely stating the facts as they were (and his possession of that ring was going to remain fact) - but the ire of their words had cooled again, and the motivation to fight had cooled with them. Phrasing could be a balm or a beast…

“Talking down to you was not my intention,” he settled. “However, I…” (refuse to be used) “…feel very strongly about this. That is all.”

“And I merely wanted an explanation for you jumping about suddenly and being obstinate.” Emmeline sighed, then waved him off. “Just attempt to remember that I'm trying not only to help but to put forward some measure of trust, despite the shifty behaviour? Then speak accordingly? Oh, and some sort of note absolving me in case you do end up dropping dead would also be nice. I don't want to hear the chorus of 'No, he's too sensible for that’ when I voiced a perfectly rational concern and got overruled.”

With a wry huff, Regulus nodded, and like a taut wire severed, the tension in his stance loosened again.

“How prudent of you,” he remarked, the corner of his mouth tugging just slightly before adding, more soberly, “In all seriousness, I would ask that you exercise some discretion in discussing the details of the ring, at least for the moment. I would like to speak to Dumbledore on the matter and would rather avoid uncontrolled, speculative chatter. And before you get defensive, I don't mean your chatter is uncontrolled,” he clarified with a pointed look, “but you cannot tell me that the others hold their tongues quite so well.”
“In the future, that is all you need to say,” Emmeline replied, seemingly satisfied with that. “I will keep my uncontrollable speculation to myself.”

Regulus granted a nod, with satisfaction of his own. “Thank you. It has been a pleasure investigating with you, for the most part.” At the corner of his mouth, a dry sort of amusement flickered subtly. “Shall we head back?”

"Some dramatics must be expected, with it being such a prominent family trait. I blame myself for not being better prepared." Unfortunately, Emmeline was not containing her laughter over the dramatics as well as she'd hoped. "But yes, HQ it is."

Regulus nodded, his smile small and wry as he caught her eyes for a fleeting moment - then with two cracking pops, they vanished.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sirius was not sulking. Just because even the legally dead, ex-Death Eater was doing more with the Order (of which he was not a member) than Sirius himself was and had fucked off to play investigator with Vance did not mean Sirius was at all jealous of this situation. He was allowed to have time to sit and relax if he was by himself. What else was he going to do, talk to Kreacher? There was still plenty of sorting to do, but he wasn't in the mood to do any of it. Besides, he had a book open on his lap. People who were sulking didn't have books open. They festered in their own emotional squalor. Just because he hadn't turned a page in a while and couldn't really remember the plot didn't mean it cancelled out that the book was right there, ready and waiting to be resumed.

Yet again proving he was relaxing instead of sulking, Sirius fell asleep at some point and startled awake an indeterminate time later. It was still dark, so he could assume it was still night, but it was February. It was mostly night. He winced when he managed to pull on his hair (it may be time to cut it if he's going to take out chunks of it on old chairs), but the house seemed quiet when he made it out. Were they not back yet? He doubled back to look at the old grandfather clock, and it was past eleven. Surely it didn't take that long?

Then again, neither were the type to announce a return. Emmeline kept strange hours, and Regulus was more concerned with documenting everything than checking in. Or he may have looked in and decided against attempting interaction, but he was willing to bet his sickles on the former. If that was true, he may well have been asleep already - one of his stranger qualities was his need to impose a schedule when his day did not require one - but he supposed that it wouldn't hurt to crack the bedroom door and see if he'd made it back in one piece.

(Assuming, of course, that he had not hexed the door again.)

Inside, Regulus was seated at his desk with a book, tapping the tip of his quill to a loose piece of parchment - but whatever it was, he subtly shielded with his arm as he turned to the door. “Can I help you?”

"I didn't hear you come in," Sirius said. He cleared his throat to get rid of the sleep-hoarse tone. "No trouble?"

Regulus tipped his mouth down a little in a deciding fashion, then shook his head. “No trouble.”

In a weird way, Sirius wondered if the nervous feeling that accompanied the thought of Regulus out on his own with someone from the Order would subside if - when - Bellatrix was no longer in a position to be a threat or if it was some sort of play date anxiety because his friends and his brother had never mixed well.

"No one ended up hexed?” he clarified.

“No hexes, no curses, no general forms of magical aggression,” Regulus responded - paused a beat - then added, “Well, probably. We detoured to a structure in which the previous inhabitants had a penchant for dark magic, but I’m reasonably confident that nothing we touched is slowly killing us. She - Emmeline, that is - did request I put it in writing that she is absolved of all responsibility, should I - how did she put it - ‘drop dead’ as a result of touching an object she recommended against, but hopefully a verbal report is sufficient.”
Sirius gave him a look of disbelief. "Since when do you go about feeling up foreign dark objects without reading the literal book on it first?"

A thoughtful tip of a head, then a finger pointed in emphasis as Regulus responded: “I did, technically, which is why I am reasonably confident that I’m not dying.”

Sirius rolled his eyes. Of course he had.

"Is there a dark object out there you haven’t read a book on?"

“Probably, but I couldn’t say for sure. I’ve read a lot of books,” Regulus said with a little quirk of the mouth in turn.

Sirius snorted, for truer words had never been spoken. It was possible Emmeline had indeed overreacted. He had long ago realised what tended to freak most people in terms of dark magic and curses were simply everyday magic he’d experienced in his youth and therefore had little to no fear of it.

"What possessed you to go poking about somewhere else?" Sirius asked.

“Curiosity and conjecture,” Regulus answered simply. “As it turns out, the Dark Lord’s mother was raised in relative proximity to his muggle father, which I suppose makes a degree of sense. I must reserve further conclusions and speculations for discussions with Dumbledore, should he ever choose to honour my requests to meet.” Regulus’s expression crinkled just slightly before adding, with more finality, “Regardless, it was unexpectedly productive. Or rather, productive in an unexpected way.”

The mother had been a variable Sirius hadn’t considered. Of course there had to be one, even if perhaps she was as batty as his own, but an old pureblood house right in the middle of muggles was more than enough disturbing relatability for one day.

"He's not usually this bad," Sirius offered, though in all truth, he didn't know that. Though they had exchanged letters, his knowledge of the headmaster’s comings and goings was outdated at best. Sirius was starting to get impatient with him as well, but he also knew how thinly the Order was spread and the dangers the Ministry were imposing upon his students. Dumbledore would go where he was needed most. "But if you didn't end up with a desire to throttle each other, I'll consider the outing a success regardless."

“It all turned out civilly in the end, so I suppose we can count it a success,” Regulus concluded.

“Okay,” Sirius said, eyeing him warily. “What'd you do?”

“Searched the various locations, mostly, looking around for what we could find - as well as what we could not find, but would have expected to,” Regulus began easily, “Engaged in speculation. Partook in general investigatory activities of that nature.”

“You enjoy being a brat, don't you.” Sirius glared at him. “Does it mean you are going to do it again or not?”

The corner of Regulus’s mouth lifted just slightly, and he shifted a small shrug. “I believe I found what I was looking for in the shack, at least, though it’s hard to say if the graveyard or manor will be of continuing significance. If you are referring to investigations in general, however, then I will most likely do so again when I find additional points of interest.”

“You must admit,” Sirius said, with no small amount of satisfaction, “that you don't have the best history of getting on with my friends. You can understand why I asked.”
“Historically, your friends have been completely unbearable to interact with,” Regulus said pointedly, though he was now turning his attention to the parchment, carefully folding it up along its creases. “But she is not. I am appreciative of the invitation she extended to me, and she will be considered for future exploratory outings, should her curiosity align.”

"Historically, you haven't interacted with any of my friends beyond the instant dislike you took to James,” Sirius grumbled. If there was one thing he had never understood, it had been that. If it had been a matter of politics, he would have understood that, but Regulus had been cold from the get go, and James had responded with vigor. The rest was just the usual fare. "And Marlene, but that's beyond my jurisdiction. I'm not surprised you get on, you're both hoarders."

“It is not a matter of hoarding, but rather of collecting and preservation,” Regulus remarked, then in a drier tone, he added: “But on the matter of Potter and McKinnon, interactions with those two were more than enough.”

"It didn't take interacting with James. You hated him the second he walked into this house and fuck it, I don't get why.” If they were going to try and do actual communication, Sirius supposed he had to make an effort and actually ask it without trying to explain that if Regulus hadn't been such a twat, James wouldn't have have been one back. "Marlene, that was typical Gryffindor and Slytherin hexing, it was normal. But you have to admit it, you and James, it wasn't. You genuinely seem to hate him."

With discomfort tensing his demeanor, Regulus eyed the grains of his desk, and though the folded parchment had been slipped neatly into his pocket, he did not lift his gaze for the response. “That's very observant of you.”

Sirius huffed. "If I can manage to deal with your best friend raising up a Dark Lord and screwing the entire wizarding world without flinching, then I don't know what the hell James did that was so awful that you can't."

Regulus's expression chilled, this time leveling a sharp look. “Do you expect me to suddenly remember him fondly? He was a source of regular torment. I'm making an effort; I hold my tongue; I judged Harry based on his own merits rather than my preconceived notions... There are more important things for me to do than dwell on how much I disliked him, but I don't know what else you want me to do.”

Torment was a little dramatic, Sirius thought. They wound each other up, of course, but it wasn't as if he was specifically being targeted. "I know you're making an effort," because Sirius could see that, despite the flinches and shifting around any time he came up. "I'm not expecting you to like him, but neither of us are children anymore. The longer I'm here, the more I keep replaying the same memories over and over, and I -- fuck it, I don't want you to hold your tongue! It was a terrible fight, but at least you told me the truth, no matter how much it hurt to hear.”

Thinning his lips to a line, Regulus glanced over at Sirius with a look that suggested he was not entirely convinced, then responded, “You really want to ruin this relaxing night with honesty?”

"No," Sirius said, with the barest twitch of a smile. He didn't. He just also knew how many other questions he still had and dreaded the answer to, and how much he knew that Regulus - in return - would not want to give those answers because they were uncomfortable and guaranteed to piss him off. “But I don't want you to be afraid to tell me something because you're worried about how I might react either.”

With a centering huff, Regulus’s expression pinched a little, and an uncomfortable silence settled for a moment before again he spoke, his tone measured. “I hated him because I didn't want you to
be a Gryffindor when everyone was so upset about it. Because every time you wrote, he was invariably featured, while I was stuck in the house by myself. Because when I got there, he felt it necessary to refer to me by derogatory nicknames for the entirety of our school career.” The muscles in his face strained subtly around his eyes and mouth, voice pulling taut as he continued, “Because when you ran out on our family, you flounced off to his, and people called you his brother when you’re my brother, and his ego about it exceeded the perimeter of the castle. That’s not even getting into the unprovoked harassment - and now I’m just putting myself in a foul mood.” Regulus turned his head toward the window, where the curtain was only halfway pulled to the side. The night sky had a cloudy smear over most of the stars, though Regulus didn’t seem to be looking at anything in particular. “Which is why there is no point in talking about it now.”

Sirius clenched his hands, taking a couple of deep breaths through his own annoyance. Despite the frequency with which he accredited James with his choice of house, he doubted it changed that much. That stupid hat probably knew how miserable and lonely he would have felt, and he had the sneaking suspicion that he simply would not have had the friends - the ones worth something - if he had been sorted away from the norm. He wanted to argue the points, that the nicknames and mucking about were just that, playing. But he had the sneaking suspicion that perhaps it wasn't completely true, and it wasn't like he could ask. He should have known the answer would make him just miss James and make him feel miserable.

But it wasn't everything. There was a humiliating flutter in his stomach that he immediately tried to squash, but it incited a measure of affection anyway because it made it easier to remember that they were talking about a ten-year-old. An emotionally constipated adult, sure, but mostly kid stuff with kid reasons. It was reassuring.

And - he wasn't immune to the desire to feel wanted. Given the intensity of the wall that had been thrown up abruptly after he'd left - one that was never tackled - it was reassuring to hear the words spoken with such conviction. Childlike, yes, but that was exactly the point. They had been children. There had been nuances to the situation Regulus had no grasp of because he had just been too young. It was enough to make him feel sick to his stomach all over again about bloody Bellatrix sinking her claws into that untapped well and ruining the kid’s life.

"If that's all it takes, you're already pissed. You're just ignoring it." Sirius said, eventually. "I don't know how you keep all of this bottled up and don't explode."

Regulus crinkled his nose, paused for a few seconds, then responded towards the window: “By ignoring it, presumably.”

"At least blame him for the things that are actually his fault. Yeah, he could be a prat sometimes, but most of what you just said wasn't down to him. He didn't sort me, he had nothing to do with me leaving, and it isn't down to him that he had parents who deeply, honestly loved him without strings attached." Even Sirius had wanted to hate him a little for that one, but it was hard to when he'd always felt the same warmth when he'd gone there. He hated Peter for many worse things, but it still made him white-hot with anger that the thought of Godric's Hollow no longer evoked the safe, warm feeling it once did, but cold dread and loss. "You want to blame him for mocking your feet, or being a prick, I can't argue that. We both were pricks, still are. But most of the blame for all that is on me. Clear some room on your internal wall of blame, because if you're going to carry shit from when you were ten, you're going to run out of room and implode and I'd just prefer you didn't on my account."

There still lingered a hint of something like resentment when at last Regulus found his voice again, but the tone had smoothed again to something even and neutral, lighter on his tongue - like a joke that could not quite decide if it was in jest. “It’s a spacious wall,” he said, “You’ve always been
featured quite prominently, in case you’re concerned that the criticism was unfairly isolated. I’m merely less angry with you, as of late.” Half-twisting a brief, sideways look back over his shoulder, Regulus caught Sirius’s eyes for just a passing second before looking to the window again. Once again, his movements had become more charged with awkward discomfort than the sharp edges of anger. “But I will try not to implode.”

"I'd be deeply offended if I didn't. You're my brother, I should really get first dibs on screwing you up after Mum and Dad are done with it." Though his tone was light, Sirius wasn't joking. Of everyone who could drive him crazy, there was still a certain satisfaction to being able to wind his brother up. "I'm plenty angry with you too, but I still want you to be happy. I'm happy you don't hate every aspect of my life, even if it is only not hating my friends-" I don't want you to feel lonely in this house either. I don't want you to miss your friends since they're likely to murder you- "- or Harry, for that matter. It makes it easier."

Regulus nodded, the movement slow and sobered and thoughtful.

"Go to bed," Sirius said, lightly. "You're supposed to be the sensible one, don't let me suck you into my obsessive night wonderings."

“The sensible one, indeed. That, I am…” There was a distance to Regulus’s words as he said them, but he nodded, nonetheless, and when he looked back to Sirius, he brought his expression back to focus. “Goodnight, Sirius,” he said - and for a beat, he looked as though he might say something else, yet instead settled to close up his inkwell and slip both well and quill back in their proper places in his desk.

The joke had fallen flat, but if nothing else, Sirius could try another approach tomorrow. It was the major advantage of his brother not being dead.

As the door shut with a soft thump, Regulus could see the hazy reflection of his brother disappear in the pane of the window, a vague image, subtle as it fell still. He let loose a soft, measured sigh when at last he stood and crossed the room to collapse on the bed, face planting solidly on the pillow.

‘The sensible one,’ Sirius had said - and ever since they were young, Regulus had always sought to embody that very descriptor, but his mind still rang with the conviction wrought by Emmeline’s words some hours before. She had used the same phrasing to imply quite the opposite, and though he still felt justified in his decision, there was a certain dissonance in the realisation that he did not feel particularly sensible in the moment at all. Justified, yes, and correct, and even reasonable by the standards of his own situational awareness, yet there was no good sense in forgoing a curse-inspection. No good sense in ostracizing someone who did seem to be trying to give him a chance to prove his participatory mettle. In that moment, with ring in hand, all he could feel was the threat if it slipping away, but with the ring’s security came reflection, and he knew he had experienced a measure of luck that the Dark Lord had put so much less effort into protecting the ring, compared to the trials he’d faced to secure the locket.

Perhaps it wasn’t even a horcrux, after all of that, yet it was so thematic - placed in such perfect proximity - possessing of that same eerie feeling when he held it; however logic might hold that there was no guarantee, he supposed the ring was no more a guess than the locket had been. It was not as though the Dark Lord had confirmed either way…

Rolling onto his back and reaching into his pocket, Regulus pulled out his notes and gently unfolded them, scanning the scrawl with the freshly added points:
The list grew longer, and though he had little in the way of certainty when it came to the growing list of possible horcruxes, it drew closer and closer to seven, a number with a great deal of power as far as magically-significant numbers went, leading him to wonder if perhaps the unknown resurrection horcrux had been one of the remaining Founder’s relics, while the seventh was the other, though he did not know how to go about confirming that beyond pure speculation. Curiosity regarding Harry’s place in all this horcrux talk still rattled about in his mind, and with that curiosity, he had been unable to help wondering if the Dark Lord’s snake was a horcrux as well, and Harry had been tapping into that portion of Voldemort’s soul, rather than the usual one. It made more and more sense, yet it brought more and more dread to consider. If the snake was a horcrux, the Dark Lord might have done so intentionally - and if he had done so intentionally, he might well realise the possibility that he had done the same with Harry unintentionally.

More problematic still was the inevitably terrible reaction his brother would be likely to spew. The still-cooling discussion about James Potter had not gone as terribly as Regulus might have expected, yet it had been staggeringly embarrassing to admit jealousy; enraged to remember those taunts; devastating to dwell in the sting of that loss. Sirius had accused him of bottling that anger, and Sirius was not wrong about that - but if those feelings did not remain in their bottle, there was nowhere else for them to go.
From the moment Regulus had read James Potter’s name in Sirius’s letters home from Hogwarts, he had been a threat - a threat to brotherly dynamics, to family stability, to even temperaments - but that anger felt hollow now, like punching at air, because even as he thrashed, the threat no longer thrashed back.

Along the neatly-lined creases, Regulus folded his notes again. However he might feel about James Potter, Harry was of more pressing interest, and more pressing still was the ring, now hidden away in his bag. Dumbledore was the next step in this plan: Reaching out to determine if horcruxes were Dumbledore’s mysterious goal as well, or if he was on the hunt for something quite different… and regardless of his goals, perhaps it would be a suitable opportunity to discuss terms of a pardon. An active horcrux - even one he was about to destroy - made for a more potent argument than the locket husk, long-since neutralised.

To share knowledge was a gamble, even with the leader of the Other Side of the war, but it was a gamble he would have to take.

As it turned out, capturing Professor Dumbledore’s attention was quite simple once one had informed Dumbledore’s deputy headmistress (and second-in-command within the Order, from the way the other’s presented it) about arranging a meeting around a certain item of interest. Whether or not they had the same item of interest in mind did not matter, it seemed, because here Dumbledore finally stood, and there had been no clear indication of what exactly it was Regulus would be presenting.

The destroyed locket was nestled in one pocket, Gaunt’s ring in the other. When Regulus gestured to a table, Dumbledore smiled warmly at him and settled in the chair nearest to the fireplace, but Regulus sat only after double-checking that the drawing room was, in fact, secure. He had locked the door and cast a sound-canceling charm, but even after telling his brother to keep out until he said otherwise, there was still a measure of concern anytime he spoke of the horcruxes aloud.

Regulus’s chest was thundering in his chest when at last he had settled across from his old headmaster, but he knew the sound not be nearly as loud in reality as it was in his own ears.

“How very mysterious, all of this is,” Dumbledore said with something of a twinkle in his eye as he looked around, though it did not fully mask the keenness in the elder wizard’s gaze when he looked back to Regulus again.

“As is your own journey. I’ve been trying to contact you for over a month now,” Regulus started pointedly, though he did not pause before adding: “I recently became privy to the knowledge - or perhaps the speculation - that you have been on a quest of sorts, perhaps not so unlike my own. Though many months have passed since we agreed at an arrangement of mutual tolerance and organisational cohabitation, I think it is time to be a little more forthright about the circumstances of my defection.”

Dumbledore’s eyes sharpened with some interest, though his pleasant demeanor did not falter. “What circumstances might those be?”

Regulus paused a beat, feeling a clench in his chest to stop, to keep the locket and the ring safe and tucked away in his pockets and in his mind - but just as soon as that stubborn, anxious wall rose in his mind, he began tearing it down again. Telling Dumbledore was not optional. If he was to get a pardon, it was through Dumbledore. Merlin forbid there was some delayed curse to the ring, someone would need to know of the detailed…

(Emmeline knew, yet…)
“I discovered a secret I was not meant to know,” Regulus began, reaching into the right pocket of his robes and pulling out Slytherin’s locket, damaged but no less distinct. “It is - or rather was - called a horcrux, and prior to its destruction held a fragment of the Dark Lord’s soul, as I understand it.” Turning the locket over between his fingers, he continued, his voice low despite the sound-cancelling charms, “With the use of horcruxes, one can attain a sort of immortality, for even if the body dies, a fractured piece of the soul lives on and can be given new life. I believe this is the method the Dark Lord used to resurrect himself last summer, and I believe he has quite a few more, though I am still investigating those possibilities. I have very little in the way of confirmation, for the most part. With one exception…”

“How did you learn of the horcruxes?” Dumbledore was asking as Regulus reached into his left pocket, this time, fingers searching out the ring. There was a certain surprise to the tone as Dumbledore studied Regulus a little more intently than he had been previously, yet in that tone was also an air of acceptance led Regulus to think Dumbledore had somehow come across the knowledge, at least to some extent, in another fashion. There was still leverage in the ring itself, but Dumbledore seemed more surprised Regulus knew than he did about the revelation itself. Regulus tried not to be offended at the shock that he had been capable of sussing out the truth of it - in defense of that shock, most teenagers would have likely lacked the attention span - and instead, Regulus reminded himself that there was a place for underestimation. (With luck, the Dark Lord was continued to make that very same underestimation...)

“Through a task bestowed upon my elf. That task was intended to be fatal, but when Kreacher survived, he spoke of a locket, and I set to my own investigations. Following a great deal of effortful research, I stumbled upon a text that gave a name to my swelling suspicions.”

Frowning sympathetically, Dumbledore tipped his head in a nod. “The Dark Lord cares little for lives beyond his own.”

“So I have noticed,” Regulus said dryly in return, stifling the twinge in his chest.

“Was this before you ‘died,’ then?” Dumbledore asked without much in the way of delicacy, though his tone was ever-light.

“The spring before, yes.” Regulus was thumbing the ‘s’ of the locket with one hand, the other still holding the ring in his pocket. “I was operating off of my own NEWTs curriculum, I suppose you could say.”

“How ambitious of you,” Dumbledore remarked, and more pointedly, he added, “Your hand has been in your pocket for some time now. Are you planning to show me what is in it?”

It was to Regulus’s credit that he did not flush at the call-out, instead nodding with a sense of confidence (put on though it was), pulling out Gaunt’s ring and holding it firmly between his fingers between them. “I recently found this in the shack where the Dark Lord’s mother must have once lived, not so far from the place where his muggle father and grandparents were murdered. Considering murder is the means to split one’s soul, and the ring was hidden in a box beneath the floorboards, I’m inclined to think it is yet another. They seem to be chosen based on significance.”

“Yes, I’ve come to quite the same conclusion in my own search,” Dumbledore said thoughtfully, steeping his hands on the table as he leaned forward. His eyes were clear and exacting. “Might I take a closer look?”

When Regulus held the ring closer, Dumbledore started to reach for it, and immediately a fist of fingers clasped around the ring, pulling it back again. Dumbledore lifted his brow, then folded his hands on the table again, as if to concede to the unspoken rejection, though his eyes told quite
another story. Regulus supposed he must have been similarly fixated - hunting had a way of doing that - but leader or not, there would be no grabbing. A few seconds later, Regulus again took the ring between his thumb and index finger and held it out.

A look of unveiled, dawning recognition lit the lines of Dumbledore’s face, which in turn sparked an ember of curiosity in Regulus.

“Ah, I know that ring,” Dumbledore commented in a voice rife with vague mysteriousness. “I, too, have been in search of the horcruxes with the intent to destroy them. Might I take the burden of that ring’s destruction off of your hands?”

“I'm handling it just fine,” Regulus said with a flicker of defensiveness as he retracted the ring again. “I have a plan that worked well enough for the first, and I intend to destroy this ring in much the same way. I found it, and I would like to follow through.”

Though the ring was no longer in sight, Dumbledore's eyes flickered between Regulus’s face and his clasped hand. “Once you have followed through, as you say, I would like to examine this ring more closely.”

Furrowing his brow, Regulus could not help but think it was a strange request. The ring was not a particularly spectacular piece of jewelry, even for an heirloom, and if the horcrux within was destroyed, Regulus was not sure what else would need to be examined…

“Why do you want it?” Regulus asked keenly, his eyes, too, flicking between his own hand and Dumbledore’s face.

“You want something too, do you not?” Dumbledore deflected casually, a question that hit Regulus a little too suddenly in the chest. The elder wizard’s face was not unkind, but there was something razor-sharp in his gaze, a keen stare that made Regulus feel a little too exposed, even if he had originally been planning to bring it up himself.

Slowly, Regulus tipped his head. “A legal pardon, for an adolescence spent in the Dark Lord’s service. You granted one to Severus, so I imagine it is within your means.” Crinkling his nose slightly, Regulus added, “I recognise that you are at odds with the Ministry right now, but the Dark Lord will not remain hidden forever, and when at last he makes his visible return, so too should your credibility.”

“A shrewd request,” Dumbledore said, eyes twinkling once again, “and achievable. In exchange for the ring, I will make arrangements to argue your case, once they are at last willing to open their ears once again.”

In Regulus’s shoulders and in his chest, he felt the tumbling release of tension he had scarcely felt building, relief billowing up in puffs, but something in the request still felt strange. Perhaps it was the strange look in Dumbledore’s eyes when he’d looked closer at the ring, or perhaps it was merely paranoia, but Regulus did not like the idea of handing over the ring any more now than he had a few moments before.

“As I said, I intend to destroy the ring myself,” Regulus said, a little more firmly as he slipped the ring back into his pocket.

“Following its destruction is sufficient, if need be,” Dumbledore said, watching the path of the ring with an almost eager gaze.

Regulus supposed there was no strict reason why he could not pass along the ring, once he had
seen to its thorough destruction. There was a certain pride to holding on to the husks of his efforts, but if the question was a pardon or a broken ring…

“It need be,” Regulus said, his voice taking on a firm confidence that he did not entirely possess, knowing that Dumbledore could probably take the ring now with ease and by force, were he to choose to do so.

Now or then, if all went well, it seemed they would both get what they wanted.

“The inimitable Mademoiselle Vance.”

Emmeline started, barely through the door of Headquarters when she realised she’d been seen. She cast a wary eye at the large portrait of Mrs. Black, but the voice was undoubtedly low for a reason. She craned her neck to find Sirius leaning over the banister with the trademark swagger she’d always known him for and the ghost of a smile.

“The indomitable Monsieur Black,” Emmeline replied as she made her way into the house. “Did you know I was coming?”

“Nope.” Sirius shrugged lazily. “Indomitable, huh?”

“Don't play expansive vocabulary chicken with a Ravenclaw,” Emmeline scolded lightly. “I'll even say it in French.”

“It's the same word,” Sirius said.

“It is not!” Emmeline said, before they both winced and turned in wait of a screaming fit that did not occur. “It's 'indomptable.'”

Sirius waved her off. “Close enough.”

She knew several linguists that would have to take to smelling salts at the suggestion, but Emmeline knew to pick her battles. “So you were just hanging around waiting to see if someone was coming?” The moment she said it, she almost bit her tongue. That sounded awful.

“Nah, I saw you through the window.” Sirius said, after an awkward beat. “I thought you were going to wait on Remus getting back to give going over the books another try.”

“I am,” Emmeline said. “We are.”

“He's not coming back for another week,” Sirius said, shrugging a lot harder than looked necessary.

“I know,” Emmeline said, climbing up to the landing with a sparing glance to gross décor. “But I ran into Arthur, and he gave me something you might want.”

“Oh?”

Emmeline took The Quibbler from her bag. Though she and Arthur had very little in common and were not often able to speak at the Ministry, he had jumped into the lift with her this morning to give her a heads up about Harry's article.

"HARRY POTTER SPEAKS OUT AT LAST: THE TRUTH ABOUT HE-WHO-MUST-NOT-BE-NAMED AND THE NIGHT I SAW HIM RETURN." Sirius snorted, then indicated the photograph with no small amount of affection in his tone. "He looks ready to scarp."
"He does look a bit awkward," Emmeline admitted. She had not had much of a chance to speak to the child, but he was only fifteen. Everyone was awkward at fifteen, except perhaps for James and Sirius, who had always seemed relatively at ease with everything. It was one of the reasons those wanted posters from a year ago had been so disturbing to see. "But it's causing quite a stir."

"Of course he is." Sirius smiled. He tucked the paper up and shoved it in his pocket. "Thank you."

"It was on my way." Emmeline smiled back.

Something must have clicked into place for him, because Sirius frowned. "Are you still in SOHO then?"

The reminder of her old home was bittersweet. Emmeline gave a brittle smile. "No, it got blown out in...must have been September 'eighty-one."

"I didn't know that," Sirius said.

"You weren't around much then," Emmeline said. It had been a difficult few months, even before James and Lily: Benjy, Fabian and Gideon, then Marlene, and Caradoc going missing. It had been too much to try and find another home that she may have had to leave again soon, or never return to. "I decided to go back home, and I just...never left. Mum and Dad don't seem to mind, and it's...home."

Sirius nodded, before clearing his throat. "You want tea or something?"

Emmeline shook her head. "No, I just wanted to check with Regulus for a moment."

That seemed to surprise him. "Oh," he said. "Okay."

"I owe him some books," Emmeline said. "On loan, since they're...borrowed without permission."

"You knicked him some forbidden books?" Sirius said. "Shit, no wonder he's alright with you killing him."

"What?" Emmeline squeaked. "That is not what I said! I just recommended using precautions! Dark artifacts can have unforeseen consequences, look at Moody, he's a mess from mucking about. I know he goes on about people losing half a bollock but -" she stopped and squinted at what she was sure was the beginnings of a smirk. "You're winding me up, aren't you?"

Sirius put his fingers together a little bit apart and let the grin happen.

"You're such a child," Emmeline huffed, before giving a small laugh.

"So everyone has been telling me ever since I was one," Sirius snorted. "You missed the excitement anyway. Dumbledore finally put in an appearance last week."

_The ring._ Emmeline had known it was important! At least, despite his resistance, Regulus had done as agreed and taken the ring to Dumbledore. "And?" she prompted.

Sirius shrugged. "No idea, you'd have to ask him."

"Where is he?"
The upstairs was still a bit of a maze, but Emmeline had grown used to it over the half year and a little bit they'd been using it as a safe house. Still, it was somewhat unnerving to look at the sheer amount of portraits and photographs adorning the walls. She supposed this was the problem with ancestral homes. There were a lot of family members immortalised in the halls (and many who were not, due to disownment, according to both Sirius and the large tapestry that spread across the second floor drawing room) and it seemed as if they were all sizing her up. Emmeline pushed her shoulders back and lifted her chin in response. She could out snob people if she so chose, blood be damned.

The door to the main library was partially open. It was a cozier space than the study, but filled with a truly gorgeous amount of old books, overstuffed chairs, and a large table. Also, Regulus.

"May I interrupt?" she asked from the door.

Looking up from his book, he nodded. "You may," he said, setting his hand on the page as a temporary marker and shifting himself, slightly, to face her.

"I hear you lived up to your end of the bargain." Emmeline went in, shutting the door slightly over and walking over to the nearest seat. Gingerly, she removed two of the books from her bag. *Secrets of the Souls by Fulvous Tawny*, which looked at the role of spirit and soul in magic and had been banned after some unfortunate business with a dementor, and *Individual Experiences of Time: Complex Chronology in Modern Magic by Cirrus Prasad*, on the role of perspective in time based magic. They were big and musty, and she did not think she had ever seen anyone remove them in her entire career. "And I too must live up to mine. I don't think they're relevant to the current conundrum, but you may find them interesting."

A flickering smile lit the corner of Regulus’s mouth, and without taking his eyes from the two texts, he nestled his bookmark between the pages of his own book, shut it, then set it aside on the table.

"Relevancy isn’t necessary, in this case," he said, accepting each in turn before cracking open the first - *Secrets of the Souls* - and flipping through the first few pages with a care that bordered on reverence. He gave himself only a few stretching seconds to scan the contents before tearing his eyes away to look back at her. "Thank you for bringing them. I recognise that it was a risk, and I thoroughly appreciate the effort."

"It's perhaps not quite the risk you'd imagine," Emmeline had to admit. "It's a peculiar job, and while I can't legally speak about it to anyone, I also can only be held accountable by someone else in the department. Fudge has no jurisdiction, nor does law enforcement. Of course, many things in the department are warded to remain there or have agendas of their own, but that's neither here nor there."

The smile shifted to a little smirk. "Fair point," Regulus said, "That sounds very convenient."

"Up until you end up with death by brain tendril," Emmeline said, putting a single finger to her lips. "It's not very likely. Not my division. But a worry nonetheless, as it couldn't be investigated."

“A brain *tendril*, you say?” he echoed with amusement, then amended, more conspiratorially: “Or rather, ‘you don’t say.’” In jesting mimicry, he lifted a single finger to his own lips with a nod. “Unlikely though it might be, do try not to get tendriled on my account. That would make it exceptionally difficult to enjoy these texts without a modicum of guilt.”

"A nice gesture, but does illustrate a fundamental misunderstanding," Emmeline grinned. "Even if I were to perish by tendril, you would never know. No one would. They won't let people in to
investigate deaths, and by extension, the books could never be reported missing because that would involve admitting they existed in the first place.” Her parents would be told it was an office accident, and remains would be stripped of any evidence of what may have done the job and returned to them. "It's a very paradoxical form of employment.”

“So what you’re saying,” Regulus began in a slightly flourishing tone as he tapped the top book with his pointer finger, “is that if you meet your end at the...tendrils of a brain, then I get to keep these books?”

"Yes," Emmeline said. "But you will also never see any more than those two when there are many others."

With a soft sound of assent, Regulus nodded, elbow resting on the arm of his chair as he leaned back. “Alive is better. I maintain my initial request, the non-tendriling one.”

"You know, I thought you would." Emmeline laughed. An utterly predictable response, but funny nonetheless. "I think you're just enjoying the concept of brain tendrils. I really shouldn't have put it in your head. It's breach of contract, and I'm going to bet you're wondering what a brain needs a tendril for, let alone two."

“I will not pretend as though I was not wondering just that,” Regulus said, amusement lighting his eyes, “but your breach is safe with me.”

"I think you probably would have enjoyed the secrecy more than I. For someone who is both bound by Fidelius and legally bound by the Ministry, I don't enjoy secrets." Emmeline gave him a sheepish look. It was only partially true: she liked having secrets if it was a group activity, and a trustworthy one at that. Sadly, this was often not the case no matter what."Though with the Death Eater presence in the department, I think it's all a bit moot whether we keep it secret or not."

"Though I have no qualms with secrecy, secrets become infinitely more stressful when you must rely on those who are possessing of...questionable trustworthiness. Any sort of Death Eater presence in the Department of Mysteries would reasonably qualify as such.” Regulus lifted his brow with a sincere curiosity. "I assume Rookwood didn't get his job back; has anyone else caught your suspicions?"

"No," Emmeline shook her head. She remembered Rookwood from before. It seemed like half the people who were broken out were broken out just to get on her nerves specifically, but she knew she wasn't alone in her violent dislike of them. "The problem is not a specific Death Eater, but rather the issue of the imperius. While we're taught more mental stamina than your average employee just due to what we have in the department, that same lure of secrecy catches attention. We lost someone a few months ago, which undoubtedly means a replacement may have been found."

Regulus nodded, expression dimming slightly. “The imperius is definitely a problem. Mental stamina alone isn't necessarily sufficient for resistance, and the lack of physical tells makes it challenging to monitor in others. Which I suppose is the point.”

"We have protocols in place for the Order, of course, but..." Emmeline showed her hands in a surrender to the circumstances of the world’s most aggravatingly vague curse. "Speaking of secrets, Harry decided to give an interview. Tell everyone what actually happened. Half the Ministry is up in arms and the other half is wondering if maybe he's got a point. It's all very exciting."

“That sounds tentatively promising,” Regulus said with a nod, eyes lighting with interest. “Every
person it can at least half-convince is one less surprise attack, and one more step towards credibility."

"That is what I was hoping," Emmeline confirmed. The element of surprise had certainly been their bane lately. "I heard Dumbledore popped in. Everything work out alright?"

Regulus nodded, this time with more certainty. "He has been made aware of the ring, and I am moving forward as planned."

"I think I can spare a little time for another excursion," Emmeline said, nodding along. There were still a couple of places left they could look around, even if she wasn't entirely sure what it was they would be looking for. "Assuming you want to."

"I do," Regulus responded with a decisive tip of his chin. "My schedule is quite flexible, as you might have guessed. Let me know when you are available, and we can see what else we can uncover."

"Do you actually leave?" Emmeline shut her mouth, as she hadn't meant for it to come out quite that bluntly. "Recreationally, leave recreationally."

Wryly, Regulus again tipped his head. "Sparingly, and with appropriate precautions. Being legally dead for over a decade helps, and there's something to be said for hiding in plain sight."

"You don't get stir crazy?" Emmeline asked.

"A little," Regulus granted, "For the most part, I can keep myself busy, but the realisation that I have the freedom to leave if the need - or the mood - strikes me has made a difference."

"I'd have been surprised if you'd said no," Emmeline nodded. After all, as polar opposite as he and his brother's personalities tended to seem, even she thought she would get a little cabin fever if she was confined to one place too long. "I thought some of the wanderlust may have been hereditary."

"Truthfully, I had grown accustomed to the complete lack of expectations or restrictions," he admitted, shaking his head, "so it was a bit jarring to return. I don't know that I would go as far as to say I experience true wanderlust - certainly not to the degree of our Uncle Alphard, who eschewed any semblance of responsibility in favour of world travel - but I value the opportunity for exploration and the satisfaction of curiosities, both of which require a degree of freedom. There are only so many new experiences one can have within the walls of his childhood home."

"I know exactly what you mean," Emmeline smiled warmly. "On both fronts, actually. I think we went through three places, four? So when everything was over - when I thought it was over - I ended up moving home. Not that they knew, of course...With all of it happening again, I've been wondering if I should move. While I certainly don't draw attention to myself, I don't like ruling it out. But it's difficult to think through to fruition without wondering if they'd consider it a commentary on their skills or much worse, a sign of abandonment." She leaned back on the chair, pressing her shoulders against the fabric in a vain attempt to remove some of the tension. "Another reason secrets can be unpleasant. Protecting people from yourself is a difficult task."

"I can agree with that." Pressing his lips to a line, Regulus let out a soft huff of a breath through his nose. For a moment, it seemed he might leave the words hanging vaguely in the air, but with a subtle shift in his seat, he broke the brief silence to speak again. "Secrets often come with negative associations, but sometimes the protection is worth whatever discomfort it brings."

"You are being exceptionally agreeable today," Emmeline said. In truth, she didn't think he was a
particularly agreeable person by nature. Just someone who liked seeming like they were. However, it would probably be rude to point that out.

“That is because you continue to say things I agree with,” he countered simply - and with a playful lilt to his tone, added, “I do, however, have a deep capacity for disagreeableness, so if you would prefer that, I suppose I could oblige.”

Emmeline snorted. "You do realise that you're now being agreeable about being disagreeable?"

“I delight in irony,” he said, his face cracking into a small smile.

"I suppose you'd have to if you always have to make your own fun." Emmeline shook her head at him. Utterly ridiculous, but she supposed that was the point. There was something to be said for frivolity and silliness to lighten things up, and you'd be hard pressed to find light utterly immersed in dark magic. "But I suppose you do have a very ironic existence on the whole, so finding a little humour in it seems like a good idea."

“More and more so, as time passed,” Regulus said, pressing his smile to slanted line and shaking his head. “One has to make the best of it.”

"A study in contrasts and contradictions. Sounds much more artistic if you put it like that." Emmeline pulled her bag up onto her lap once again, as she began to rummage through it. "I have a touch of that too. I used to be quite respectable. Some very questionable life choices and friendships later, vigilantism, cavorting with fututives, theft - er unauthorised borrowing, breaking and entering, trespassing, breach of contract, and I pushed in line this morning. It's all been a terrible influence."

“Tch. You’re right. Pushing in line isn’t respectable at all,” he said with a heavy sigh. “If that’s not an example of the degradation of society, I don’t know what is.”

Emmeline laughed. "I know! I don't know what's come over me. I'll be dog-earing books next. This is how people spiral into world domination."

Lifting his brow, Regulus leveled a pointed finger in some mockery of a warning. “There are points of jest, and then there are atrocities. Dog-earing books is crossing a line.”

Unable to contain it, Emmeline began laughing. "I'm sorry," she said, between the giggles. "It's the meta-drama. A dramatic person who prefers not to be thought of as dramatic pretending to be a comic exaggeration of dramatic. Or the lack of sleep is catching up to me."

“You think I’m pretending...” Regulus started, losing the fight against the flash of a smirk before smothering it again. “Dog-earring books is a very serious offense.”

"You're awful!" Emmeline wiped her hands across her eyes, the burn of tears from the laughter threatening her make-up. He was a ridiculous person. "You're a terrible tease, and I have no idea why I keep inflicting myself like this."

“It’s probably the sleep-deprivation-induced delirium,” he said, though a smile was flickering at the corner of his mouth again. “Late nights?”

"I'm still horrified that you think anything short of imperius would make me dog-ear a book. In fact, that's going to be my sign of being under one from now on, you know." Not really, but Emmeline thought that you could never really be too careful. She had needed a good laugh, and perhaps it was delirium-induced, but it felt less stifling in her chest having done so. "But yes. The Ministry has removed another professor, so trying to split things between Hogwarts and the
Ministry means everyone is bordering on delirium."

At that, Regulus lifted an eyebrow. “Why are they removing professors?”

"Because they're frightened,” Emmeline said. She took a deep breath to calm herself. "They're in too deep now. The moment the truth comes out, everyone in power who denied it will be disgraced and lose their position. Fudge seems to believe that removing those loyal to Dumbledore will stunt it. I saw Professor Flitwick in Hogsmeade a few days ago, and Merlin help me, I have never known him to swear in front of me, but when it came to talking about that woman..."

“Their persistence in delaying the inevitable is really quite remarkable,” Regulus said with a derisive snort, shaking his head. “I used to think our Defense professors were generally unsatisfactory, but descriptions of the past few years have really cast it all in a different light.”

"Yes, an impressive blowhard, two Death Eaters, and - I'm sure he'll excuse me for mentioning, but it must be said - a werewolf. You would think a Ministry appointee wouldn't be so bad after that." Emmeline shook her head. The idea of it was ludicrous, but if all accounts were true and Remus was accurate in his summations of her, then it was just a different kind of evil. "I know what we said of secrets, but if I ask that something goes no further, can I trust you?"

For a moment, Regulus looked back at her, sobering at the shift in tone. Whisking away whatever uncertainties he might have had, he nodded, though his expression was keen. “That sounds ominous, but yes, I will respect your request for secrecy.”

With only a moment’s hesitation and a lowering of her voice, Emmeline spoke. "Are you familiar with the black curses? Not to be confused with your own."

A spark of recognition flickered in his eyes, followed by a snort of dry amusement. “Funny. An easy mistake to make, but we prefer to keep our precious blood inside of us.” Shaking his head, there was a subtle narrowing at the corners of his eyes, expression pinching a little as he continued: “To your point, yes, I’ve heard of them. Nasty spells, as I recall, drawing blood out of various pores and orifices upon contact - binding to skin, binding to the throat, binding to objects… Why do you ask?”

"That's what the professor was swearing about," Emmeline said, without losing the seriousness to her tone. "A second year came back from a detention with signs of it. I would have thought student, but Helena doesn't involve herself in student matters. There's been rumours for months, and then they were all but confirmed."

“Someone is using the black curses on students?” he asked with a flicker of horror, controlled though his expression might be. “I would say that person deserves to be sacked, but between your tone and your assertion that the sacking was connected to Dumbledore associations, rather than actual fault, leads me to believe that this story is not going to have so satisfying an ending.”

"No," Emmeline looked away. It was an embarrassment. A secret organisation, and they couldn't even protect children in their own school. "The professor who was sacked was the Divination one. She's an odd bird, even for a Seer, but she does not inflict dark magic on children. The detentions in question appear to be with the new Ministry-appointed Defense professor, the one Remus has been ranting about for months. The children won't report it, and I fear even if they did, the Ministry would find a way to make this Dumbledore's fault and remove him as they tried to do before. It's horrifying.”

Pressing his fingers to his temple, Regulus let loose a weighty sigh. “Well, I can deduce why the delicacy of the situation would call for silence, especially if it is the Ministry-sanctioned professor
who is torturing students - not even the Death Eater professors did that.” Regulus’s expression tightened slightly, but he continued in stride, “Does Sirius know?”

Emmeline's jaw clenched, and she shook her head. "Harry's had a lot of detentions," she said, by way of answer. "I don't believe the auror contingent know either, but...there is no sense saying anything when there's nothing can be done on our end that won't make things worse. I have to believe the headmaster knows what he's doing, but it's been going over and over in my mind since the article. Not even the most stringently purist headmaster ever condoned torture, and I...I worry what the next step is bound to be. The article has inflamed; escalation should logically occur."

“Standing by while children are cursed, or worsening the situation by acting too brashly...neither option is comfortable in the least.” Regulus grimaced. “With luck, that article will spur the Ministry to come to its senses and remove the appointed Defense professor with their tails tucked between their legs, though relying on luck rarely amounts to much.”

"You're quite the optimist," Emmeline said. "It's surprising, but welcome."

“I don’t know that I would call it optimism, exactly, when I don’t actually expect the Ministry to resolve the matter with any sort of speed or efficiency - but I cannot help but hope for it when the alternative is cursing children within the walls of their school.” He shook his head, a disgusted look twinging around his mouth and nose. “It’s abhorrent.”

"Not all of them. Just the perceived disobedient ones." Emmeline sighed. "I like to think that if something so awful were happening when I was prefect that I would have taken a stand, but I find myself hoping they don't for fear they'll get hurt."

Discomfort flickered at the edges of Regulus’s features, and he hesitated for just a moment before speaking. “At least there are only a few months left, at most.”

"Optimism again," Emmeline smiled. "They have OWLs yet."

Regulus shook his head. “I thought I was done feeling anxious about OWLs.”

Emmeline had to agree. "Who worries about dark lords, torturous Ministry officials, and impending war when there are OWLs to worry about?"

“Why choose just one?” he said dryly, rubbing again at his temple. “All the same, thank you for telling me. In some ways, it helps to know what is going on out there, even if I’m not certain how to tactfully address something of that nature.”

"Me neither," Emmeline said. "I suppose we can just be awkward about it together, which is at least better than being awkward alone.”

For all the wretchedness of the subject matter, the tightened muscles in Regulus’s face loosened, at that, flicking to the shadow of a smile.

“It is,” he agreed, tracing the corner of the book’s cover, worn as it was with age.

“Thank you,” Emmeline stood up with no small amount of effort. She felt worn, but less heavy. “You'll let me know what you think of the books?”

The smile grew a little more, and Regulus nodded as he drummed his fingertips lightly on the open page. “I will. Thank you again for acquiring them, unauthorised though the borrowing might be.”

“I don't think the Ministry has a leg to stand on when it comes to what is authorised,” Emmeline
replied. It was the small acts of rebellion that helped. “Your conscience can remain clear.”

“I won’t be losing any sleep over taking books from the Ministry, I assure you,” he said pointedly, though his mouth was still turned up at the edges. “Just let me know if you need them back at a particular time.”

"Do you lose sleep over it?" As per usual, her curiosity seemed to be running the controls to her mouth with her sense of decorum struggling to keep up. Emmeline winced. "I didn't mean to ask that. It's just difficult to reconcile, that's all."

The words hung heavy, weighting Regulus’s mouth down to a frown, and with his eyes cast to the page, he shifted so as to prop the book up a little more and orchestrated an uncomfortable response: “Do you think I would be here if I didn’t?”

"I know," Emmeline said, foregoing trying to smile to soften it given that she was not be addressed frontally. If nothing else, she supposed she may as well be truthful about it. "But it's a very confusing state of emotions. I'm not very close with Severus, I don't believe anyone ever truly was, after Lily, but the results of which has meant I have yet to feel simultaneously glad that someone I like is hurting - because it's the human reaction to feel guilty when you've done something wrong - and be sad about the exact same thing, because no one wishes hurt on their friends intentionally. Bear with me; it's not easy to navigate, let alone address."

For a moment, Regulus was silent, turning the words over - as if the page before him could somehow be expected to provide insight and was failing its task. His expression was set, yet his eyes could not seem to decide if they were comforted or pained at the commentary.

“"I know," he echoed after a beat longer, tapping absently at the page, “I experience a similar dissonance, myself. There is nothing easy about it in any respect.”

"I think it'll be worth it." Emmeline said. She only hoped she was right.

Chapter End Notes

The 'black curses' are a headcanon Kuchikopi and I developed in relation to Umbridge's invention of the 'black quill' (and JKR did indicate through Pottermore that Umbridge invented it). We reasoned that some form of the spell already existed in the broad array of dark magic that had come into existence over the centuries, and that she took the existing curse and adapted it by specifically binding it to a quill for detention-related torture. We just wanted to specify the distinction between strict canon and our expansion upon canon. ♥
Spring rolled in gently, the weeks unfolding like blossoms as Regulus sifted through plans and devoured the texts Emmeline had left with him (fascinating, without a doubt, and a rarity to be treasured). With another horcrux in his possession, the time for destruction was upon them, and once again, he found himself lacking in the necessary materials. Lingering in the back of his mind was the basilisk so conveniently slain somewhere deep within the school, and though Emmeline’s assessment of the Hogwarts situation sounded problematic, it was - ironically - the most accessible.

It was that very conclusion which led him to where he stood now, eying his surroundings with a bubbling nostalgia. Nearly a week had passed since he had written to Harry, proposing a thus far unspecified visit that would be of Importance to the developing war effort - vague, in defense against interception - and a little less than that since he had received word back that Hermione would escort him from Hogsmeade. It seemed a bit out of the way, going to Hogsmeade first, but if the kids were confident in the discretion of the route, he was in no hurry.

Residents and visitors alike were streaming past, paying little mind as they shopped and enjoyed the comfortably cool evening. A spring breeze tickled the air, and Regulus had nearly given into the temptation to start browsing the book store when he caught sight of the familiar head of bushy brown hair. The owner of said bushy brown hair seemed to also notice him. Hermione was still in her school robes, with her prefect badge pinned upon the black. She also looked quite stern.

"We'll have to move quickly," she said, the moment she deemed him in earshot. "I've got the cloak, but Honeydukes will be shutting soon, and I would prefer not to add breaking and entering to my resume just yet."

Regulus nodded, sweeping out a hand, thinking that Honeydukes was a strange place to start - but hardly the strangest thing he'd heard. "Lead the way."

Without further delay, Hermione slipped into Honeydukes, but instead of going towards either the sweets or the crowded counter, she headed straight for the stairs down into the cellar. Without preamble, she opened it and beckoned him through. "Have you taken this route before?"

Regulus shook his head as they discreetly closed the door behind them. Dim lights cast the cellar in shadows, just bright enough to reveal the crates of extra stock. In truth, he thought it oughtn't be so simple to creep into the storage area of such a popular shop, but with a keen glance around, he saw no resistance - no sign of some candy shop sentry - so he supposed it really was that easy.

“No, but I feel disappointed to have gone all seven years without knowing there was a direct passage from Hogwarts to Hogsmeade,” he admitted, and as they slipped from cellar into passageway, he flicked his wand for additional light.

"Two, if you count the one to the shack." Hermione lit her own wand and hurried along at speed. "We'll come out on the third floor corridor, there shouldn't be another prefect in the area, but we've the cloak if need be. If we get seperated, straight up to the seventh floor on the left. Think hard about wanting to attend the DA - that's Dumbledore's Army - lesson with Harry, and I think you'll be alright."

Curiosity prickled at the back of Regulus's mind, calling back to an adolescence that was now half a lifetime ago. He recalled a hallway that always seemed to suit his needs - same place, every time - and from the sound of it, they had found that spot themselves.
“I think I am familiar with the place you are talking about, though never for anything so organised. I heard your Defense professor teaches little in the way of defense - I assume these lessons are a supplement of sorts?”

"I refuse to fail my fifth year defense when Voldemort is back, and it's OWL year." Hermione said it with such scathing annoyance that she almost sounded winded from not breaking stride. "Umbridge is utterly vile."

“So it seems. Hopefully the Ministry’s incompetence will not negatively affect your preparedness, in the end,” Regulus said with a nod, eyes scanning the tunnel as they walked. It was hard to judge where they were in relation to the wizarding village or the wizarding school, surrounded as they were by the earthy tunnel. There was little in the way of markers, but it was near impossible to get lost when there was only one path moving forward, step after step.

The trek did not last as long as he would have expected, giving way to another set of stairs, before too long - far more familiar, telling of the castle’s architecture. As they neared the top, Regulus looked to Hermione again.

“You mentioned a cloak?” he asked with a touch of curiosity. She already had a Hogwarts cloak on, and such a thing would do him little good at this point-

"Yes," Hermione said, checking to assure the coast was clear before reaching into her enchanted pocket and shaking out the cloak. She handed it over. "Technically, I'm on my rounds, so I have every reason to wander the hallways, but I have no explanation for you, so I think the cloak and walking very quickly will help."

Holding out the shimmering cloak, he flipped it over his arm, watching as it vanished at the elbow.

“An invisibility cloak,” he remarked, a statement rather than a question, and peered from another angle before pulling the cloak over himself. What had looked opaque was transparent from the inside, the sheen cast around him like a glimmer. He’d never experienced one before, though for a time, he had considered investing in a purchase; even the temporary ones could be hard to come by, but this one seemed to be a higher quality then he would have expected in a teenager’s possession.

"Yes, Harry's cloak," Hermione specified, checking around for a certain cat that could cause her trouble. "Don't forget the feet, or they'll hear you. Quickly!"

Of course it was Harry's cloak - somehow, that didn't seem surprising - yet the circumstances surrounding the cloak’s owner hardly seemed an important point to explore at the moment. Shifting to make sure his feet were covered, Regulus shuffled alongside Hermione as they scaled several flights of stairs, landing eventually at the seventh floor corridor.

Once again, nostalgia flooded in full force, the stone walls and the portraits and the tapestries - this strange hallway with the door that always provided what you needed. As recommended, Regulus thought about how what he needed, in that moment, was to attend this ‘Dumbledore’s Army’ meeting Hermione had spoken of - though Regulus had to wonder if Dumbledore himself had been any more present at the school than he had been for the Order. The door formed readily, but he waited until Hermione had slipped inside before he, too, stepped into the expansive room.

Inside, there was a gathering of students, seemingly of different ages, though it was hard to pinpoint the exact range. It took only a few seconds to notice Harry was providing instruction on the patronus charm, not so unlike Lupin’s lesson some time ago.

"I think I've got something!" came a cry from a blonde boy around Harry's age in the corner, as the
wisps of silvery white bounced around him.

"That's great," Harry replied, as he noticed Hermione's entrance. "I think that should be everything today. We'll get the word out when there's another meeting."

There was a variety of groans, but in small clumps, the students began to leave. Some talking excitedly about their wisps and others commiserating over their lack of them. As the stragglers filed out, Harry looked to Hermione, who was giving him an impatient look.

"You have a corporeal patronus," Harry reminded her.

"That doesn't mean I don't need practice!" Hermione huffed, before glancing behind her. "Don't get caught."

Harry nodded. "Can I have my cloak back?"

Regulus nodded, though he knew he could not be seen from under the cloak - and with a sweeping motion, pulled it back over his head again. Shaking the cloak slightly until it draped loose and neat.

"Here it is," he said, holding it out.

Harry took it. "You didn't really say what it was you wanted in the letter."

“I thought it best to exercise discretion, given the circumstances,” Regulus explained. “I've been thinking about that chamber you mentioned some time ago. I have need for basilisk venom for a task I have set to, and if you are amenable, the chamber sounds like the swiftest means.”

"Because it destroyed the memory?" Harry prompted. "In case there's another one."

Regulus nodded. “Something like that. Your assistance would be immensely helpful.”

"Alright," Harry said, taking a look at Hermione who simply shrugged at him. "It's in the girls loo on the first floor."

"Be back in bed before you're missed," Hermione reminded him, with a nod. "I better go catch up with Ron, he's been covering for me tonight."

"Let me check where everyone is first," Harry said as she exited. He pulled out a large folded sheet of aged parchment, tapped it, and opened several flaps. "I think we'll be okay if we stick on this side."

Peering over at the parchment, Regulus saw what looked like dark-inked sketches of the castle and a mass of names, some in clumps and some moving about freely.

"Is that a map?" Regulus asked, though it wasn't so much a question as a curiosity.

Harry startled, but nodded. "It shows where everyone and everything is. See?" He pointed to the map. "There's Hermione on her way down. And that’s the Hufflepuff prefects, they're DA members, the Ravenclaws too." He undid another flap. "There's Parkinson and Malfoy on the first floor near the entrance. They're not big DA fans."

Eyes raking it over from corner to corner, Regulus felt a little twinge of wonder as he realised the sheer number of names stretched over the parchment - tracking every person's every movement…

His eyes settled longer on Draco's name, a twinge of a different kind striking him. His little cousin - the child Narcissa had always said would be his own godson, had he 'lived' to see her pregnancy
- moving about freely in ignorance of the complications lying in wait. Regulus did not much like Harry's tone on the matter of Draco, but he supposed, in that, history was expected to repeat itself without assistance to the contrary.

“It seems quite brilliantly made. Where did you get something like this?” Regulus asked, eyes shifting from Draco and (Pansy) Parkinson to where he would expect the Slytherin dorms to be. Crabbe, Goyle, Greengrass, Nott…

Harry regarded him curiously. “Fred and George. I wasn't allowed to go to Hogsmeade without a signed permission slip, so they wanted to help. They found it in Filch’s office. When he saw it, Lupin told me that he made it with Sirius and my Dad when they were here.” He opened another flap and pointed. “But some of it is out of date. There's tunnels like the Honeydukes one, but they've been blocked off or caved in since then. You can't see the room on here either. Hermione said it's unplottable, and the chamber isn't here either. I think it only has what they found.”

Wrinkling his nose, Regulus felt a flicker of relief that Sirius had not been present to hear his unknowing compliment, if the circumstances of the map's origin were accurate. Lupin didn't seem the sort to lie in a braggart's game, and even before Sirius had run off, the two Black brothers had experimented with enough creative application of magic to suggest Sirius would be motivated by finding a way to make such a thing happen: So more than likely, the information was true...

...Which meant Sirius and Potter and their friends had been spying on him - on everyone, simultaneously - for some unspecified measure of time when they had been in school. All at once, Regulus could not decide if he was more impressed or irritated.

“'I see,'” Regulus said, settling for neutral in light of the conflict. "'You mentioned that the chamber is connected to the girls’ lavatory. This matters little while we are in possession of the map, but hypothetically, do you know if we will disappear entirely from the map when entering an unplotted area, or float in an empty space?’"

"'There's a tunnel under the sink, but it only opens if you ask in Parseltongue,'" Harry explained, flipping the map to the bathroom. "'We should just disappear from it, since the area isn't plotted or recognised as part of the castle, but I haven't been down there since it happened, and I only got the map two years ago.'"

“Interesting.” For a moment longer, Regulus’s eyes lingered on the map - then with finality, he nodded. “Let’s see it, then.”

Harry nodded. He shoved his cloak in his bag and did one last check of the corridor before stuffing the map in as well. He headed back into into the corridor, and after a quick look, hurried over to the left hand stairs. "Watch out for the portraits," Harry whispered as they moved past a set. "We'll have to deal with Moaning Myrtle, which is okay, but some of the portraits think Umbridge has the right idea."

“Thank you. Consider it noted,” Regulus responded - but even as they walked, he eyed the bag with Harry's cloak in it. The map was a small reassurance, but even without others along their path, the cloak seemed a beneficial factor when Regulus was not meant to be there, per se, and certainly not at as the day wound down to night…

“Before we go further, might I have the cloak back?” Regulus asked, turning his eyes from the bag back to Harry himself, “I would rather avoid the possibility of awkward explanations, even if it seems we are unlikely to meet resistance.”

“Yeah, alright.”
Within seconds, Regulus had the cloak in hand once again, and Regulus had pulled it over himself once again, disappearing wholly from view as he followed Harry down the stretch of stairs. The portraits at Hogwarts had never called for much of his attention when he had walked these halls himself - barring a few that were of cultural, historical, or practical interest - but with such a variety of opinions spanning back through the centuries, he was not surprised to learn that there were those who preferred a medieval approach. (Quite literally, in many cases.)

The corridors were dimmed for the evening prefect routine, and for the entirety of their walk, they did not pass a single soul - student, professor, or ghost. The emptiness was eerie, in truth, when students had never been so quick to bed during his own school years, but convenient nonetheless. Upon reaching their destination, Harry and Regulus both slipped inside without ceremony, one after the other, and beyond the door was what seemed to be a very normal-looking bathroom. In truth, for all the pomp inherent in a ‘Chamber of Secrets,’ Regulus could not help but think that the first floor girls’ lavatory was an exceptionally strange place to set up your purist lair and murderous basilisk pit. Undoubtedly, that was the point.

“How exactly did you stumble upon something like this…in a place like this?” Regulus asked, pulling off the cloak again and handing it over to Harry again. Approaching the tap, he ran a curious hand over the serpent ornamentation on the side.

"This is going to sound mental," Harry said, giving him a helpless look. "But from an acromantula in the forest. He said the basilisk killed a girl in the bathroom, and since this was where I found the diary, and the 'enemies of the heir' message was written right outside, I guessed Myrtle had been the dead girl and never left. We’d been using the room to brew a potion since Hermione had said no one came here because of Myrtle, but she’d been petrified by then."

Quirking an eyebrow, Regulus flicked a look over at Harry. “That does sound quite 'mental,' yes... Yet experience has suggested quite consistently that I should expect as much when asking you to clarify anything, really, so I cannot say it is particularly surprising.”

Looking at his own hand on the tap, he made a face, then pulled out his wand to cast a silent scourgify on hand and surface alike, wriggling his fingers as he retracted them. This was not the sort of place to hold a curse when some child would have discovered it by now, ghost or not, but that didn't make it any less unsanitary, in hindsight, not matter how interesting the decorative code might be in the absence of lions, eagles, and badgers in this space shared by girls of any house.

"Can I ask you something?" Harry said, with a distinct aura of discomfort.

“You can,” Regulus responded simply, sticking his wand back in his robes and turning his attention back to Harry.

"Do you know who Avery is?" Harry asked.

Recognition lit Regulus's eyes, and fresh nostalgia - as fond as it was conflicted - trickled in.

“I know several,” he began, “I was friends with Sebastian Avery, who was in the year above me, and he had a brother and a sister, both several years younger than myself. Then of course their parents, the rest of their family…” Presumably the question was not social in nature, as much as Regulus suddenly missed them, but he couldn't quite voice what he suspected the actual context to be. There was no way he could really expect this to lead in a positive direction, even if some part of him hoped for mostly baseless reasons that his friend’s ability to dodge prison could have potentially given him motivation to avoid this new conflict... “I presume that was a preliminary question, so what would you like to know - or express - about the Avery in question?”
"I didn't know the name," Harry admitted, quietly. "I knew Rookwood, from when the Prophet talked about the escapees. I guessed he was a Death Eater since Voldemort said he felt misadvised by him, and he was so angry I felt it for ages when I woke up. The last thing he did before I woke up was send for Avery so...I just wanted to know."

In Regulus's mind, panic and nostalgia collided with a sudden thud. If Avery disappointed the Dark Lord, made him angry, and the Dark Lord called for him by name... "Did you feel anything after that? Is he-"

"I hate to break up your...undoubtedly important chat," came a dry, drawling voice from behind them, "but is there a reason you are in the girls' lavatory after curfew? Brewing up some more potions, Potter?" When Regulus turned around, he saw that Snape was turning a sharp look his way, now, and all at once felt as though he was getting in trouble, despite being very much an adult, himself. When their eyes met, Snape spoke again, his tone slightly less sharp but no less firm. "And you, Regulus - I don't know what could possibly possess you to risk coming here during the school term, but you should leave. Your luck is going to run out if you continue to be careless with it."

Harry's stance switched from the awkward confusion to defensive in a moment. "Lay off, he's just trying to help."

"Undoubtedly," Snape responded flatly. "But when you make an appointment, I expect you to keep it."

Harry looked as if he were fighting the urge to roll his eyes. "I lost track of time."

"Perhaps twenty points from Gryffindor will remind you next time." Snape sneered, before fixing Regulus with a withering look. "I would advise leaving quickly. Whatever it is can wait for a more fortuitous time."

For a moment, Regulus considered arguing that twenty points was probably a bit steep, but knowing Severus, it would only sour his mood more, and there was less delight in Gryffindors losing points when he wasn't in the thick of that house rivalry. Harry was helping him, too - punishing the kid when they were supposed to be on the same side seemed out of place.

After sparing Harry a subtly apologetic look, Regulus nodded, trying not to feel annoyed at the interruption; if the chamber was opened by means of parseltongue, he could not access it without Harry, and even if Severus was an ally (and hopefully still something of a friend, though it was difficult to tell), he was arguably the Order member Regulus was least interested in sharing his horcrux intentions with. The proximity to the Dark Lord - to all of the Death Eaters - was far too close…

"Indeed. I will be on my way, then," Regulus responded stiffly.

Snape opened the door, and Regulus shifted to slip past him - met with a shocking wall of pink and a toadish smile, quite against all expectations.

"Hem hem…”

Behind him, Harry swore under his breath. He wasn't looking at the woman, but just beyond her squat form. "Knew I should've checked he was still at the entrance," he said, under his breath.

"You really do seem incapable of following the most simple instruction," the woman replied sweetly, almost with the addition of a laugh. "All students require permission to be out after hours.
We'll have plenty of time to discuss it in detention."

Mind reeling, Regulus felt a wave a guilt at the mention of detention - a punishment with very
different associations, now - and he wondered with a barely-contained sneer whether this could be
the Ministry-appointed 'Defense professor,' though she was far from the dark and menacing image
he had started forming in his mind, following his conversation with Emmeline.

She was turning her attention to Regulus with an appraising look, then. "All visitors must be
approved ahead of time. Please go to the headmaster’s office while we verify it. Young Malfoy
will see you don't get lost."

Though adrenaline thundered still in his veins, the words stuck in Regulus's mind, pulling his
attention to the pale boy just behind her. Immediately, his expression froze, grey eyes meeting grey
- and whether it was the chaos of his own thoughts or something else entirely, Regulus could not
read his expression.

“Of course,” Regulus said, his voice rife with a chilly, put on sort of cordiality as he looked back to
Umbridge. What he had thought he wanted to do was go back home - but it was a little bit
treacherous, how tempting it was too consider even the shortest stroll with Narcissa’s son. “I seem
to be turned around - a guide would be most helpful.”

The woman gave him a sickly sweet smile.

After sparing another look back to Harry and Snape (the latter of whom was staring back at him
pointedly now), Regulus maneuvered around Umbridge and approached Draco with well-
calculated ease.

Draco looked thrilled with the idea of leaving Harry and Snape alone with Umbridge, and instead
indicated the passage in the right direction.

"It's up here," he said, turning to walk in front but sneaking curious looks behind him.

Even as he walked, Regulus thought that he probably should have escorted himself out, probably
should not have visited at all, probably should have at least accessed the chamber immediately
upon entering the lavatory… though even if they had, Snape or Draco finding an empty lavatory
would be a different problem if its own. Where regret ought to be creeping from some logical
corner of his mind, he instead felt a nagging curiosity. It was a strange experience, seeing the
adolescent version of a child he ought to have known from the start, and it took every ounce of self-
control within him to avoid asking a slew of questions that a stranger had no business asking.

Painful as it was, Regulus knew he was unknown to the boy.

“Slytherin prefect, are you? What year?” he asked, though he knew well how old Draco was. It
was absurd, how badly he wanted to talk about nothing, knew he ought to just keep his mouth
clamped shut until they reached Dumbledore's office, but the words almost seemed to tumble out of
their own accord.

Draco looked back with a calculated appraisal, but never broke stride. "Fifth. Why?"

“No particular reason,” Regulus responded, and a little more honestly, added, “Just making
conversation.”

"How exactly did you manage to get turned around into the bathroom?” Draco asked, with an
obvious tone of disbelief. “Or into the school in the first place - I was at the entrance, I didn't see
anyone enter.”
“I was inquiring about the state of the school,” Regulus said, “I cannot recall the exact time of my arrival, but perhaps it was prior to your rounds. Truthfully, my business here is attended to, but it seemed like rather more trouble than it’s worth, arguing the point, when she seemed quite adamant. Follow up questions with the headmaster are just as well. To that point: How do you feel about the school?” he redirected, allowing a degree of genuine curiosity to creep into the words. (With luck, Draco was as fond of sharing his own opinions as all the other Malfoys Regulus had ever known.)

In that, luck was on his side.

"It's a brilliant school, even if some of the current administration are a bit lacking. Father always said Dumbledore was the worst thing to ever happen to this place. He considered Durmstrang, but my mother wouldn't hear of it, the whole family's gone here." Draco sniffed. He opened the door to the next corridor and held it there. "Not that I mind, of course. We've got better quidditch here, at least now Krum's gone, and I don't think Dumbledore's going to last the year with the way the professors are being dropped."

Regulus nodded and moved through to the next corridor, feeling some of the nerves and adrenaline start to calm to a softer patter. The response was as predicted and not unlike the sentiments he'd heard during his own school years, when he thought back to it. Hogwarts had been more removed from the war, back then… But now, Regulus wondered if they really might be able to remove Dumbledore, with everything that was happening...

“I cannot argue with the redeeming nature of well-played quidditch. How is the season progressing?” Regulus added instead, finding it a more enjoyable subject in any situation, even if he had not been motivated to shift away from his misrepresented ‘investigation’. “Do you play?”

"Seeker, since my second year," Draco stated practically glowing with pride. He turned to head up the stairs. "Gryffindors keeper couldn't catch a cold standing naked in winter, so naturally, Hufflepuff trounced them. We've got them next."

Regulus knew he probably oughtn't smile at the anti-Gryffindor remark when it was Harry he had originally come to see, but coming from Draco, rather than Umbridge - or even Snape - a crushing Gryffindor defeat was not so concerning. A bit of rivalry was not so terrible in that sense, even if it had all felt far too overblown at the time.

“Seeker is the best position,” Regulus agreed, careful to filter out the leap of fond delight from his voice as they scaled another flight of stairs. Regulus had been the Slytherin Seeker from second to the seventh, himself… “Best of luck in your match. Your confidence is telling.”

"Doubt we'll need it, it's Hufflepuff. Last decent player got stupid last year and got himself killed." Arriving at the gargoyle, Draco stopped and waited. "I'll see you in before I return to rounds."

Smothering a wince at the casual reference to a fellow student’s murder, Regulus kept his face carefully casual as he nodded, hating that subtle deflation in his own mood. Even quidditch discussions ended in murder, these days, and the thought that his cousin - nearly the age Regulus himself had been when he joined the Death Eaters, if he wasn't that age already - could speak of another student’s death so casually unsettled him. Their climate of their family had never placed much value on life beyond the few, yet in some strange way, he had hoped the initial fall of the Dark Lord might have shielded Draco from the brunt of those more hostile expressions.

It seemed there was plenty of room for hostility, war or not.

Stepping forward, Regulus started his way up the stairs towards Dumbledore's office, unexpectedly relieved to have the excuse to transition away from the conversation - or at least that leg of it. Part
of him wanted to respond, to react against it, to grasp for some telling proof of whether that statement was sincere or merely something repeated from others… but even if there were time, it was far too risky a subject to engage.

Everything about the evening had gone wrong thus far, but whatever came of this detour was beyond intervention, now. The headmaster’s office was before him, and although Regulus had not planned to speak to Dumbledore today, the ring was secured in his pocket; perhaps he could arrange a more suitable time to access the chamber…

"I don't believe I was expecting anyone," Dumbledore said as they entered. His tone was mild, but he was giving Regulus a particularly curious look.

"A visitor got lost and wound up in the girls’ lavatory with Potter. Professor Umbridge sent me as an escort while she dealt with it," Draco stated.

"Did she now?" Dumbledore said. "How efficient. Perhaps you'd like to return to your prefect duties?"

Draco looked between them, then settled. "Yes, sir."

When the door shut with a thud, Regulus looked back at Dumbledore with an even expression, trying not to look as guilty as he felt, despite standing in the headmaster's office like a misbehaving child.

“Good evening,” Regulus said, and with a preemptive sort of transparency, added: “Harry was going to show me the Chamber of Secrets, but unfortunately we had a number of uninvited guests. It seemed easier to play along with the instruction to come here than to argue an immediate departure.”

"For what reason was Harry intent on showing you the chamber?" Dumbledore asked.

Regulus paused for longer than was strictly necessary, finding that he was not completely certain he even wanted to say - but Dumbledore’s expression was patient, and Regulus reminded himself that they both sought the destruction of the horcruxes, however strange the man had been about obtaining the ring afterwards.

“I was interested in the basilisk,” Regulus admitted, “There are very few methods that can successfully destroy a horcrux, in my experience, but I previously found success with basilisk venom. If there is a better way to arrange access to the chamber, I would be interested in trying again. Otherwise, I will have to seek other means to acquire it.”

The headmaster raised his eyebrows minutely. "There is another method, but it is linked to the venom. You'll recall from Harry's experience in the chamber that he used the sword of Gryffindor to slay the basilisk - and thus infuse it with the venom. I had thought to suggest it, but had pressing matters here to attend to."

Regulus lifted his brow in a subtle mirror of the expression. “Have you tried it before?” he asked, though it was more of an indirect question of whether he had stumbled upon any other horcruxes thus far. When destroying the locket, Regulus, too, had used a blade, though it wasn’t infused - merely enchanted to be exceptionally good at piercing edges, allowing the venom to eat away at the inside. Regulus had not paid much mind to the specifications associated Gryffindor’s sword, but he did know it was goblin-made, which would explain the infusion…

"I have yet to attempt it, as I had not verified it until recently," Dumbledore said, with the ghost of
a smile. "But I do believe I've found the origins of Tom Riddle's knowledge of soul-splitting, and
being a rather clever individual, I have been able to draw my own conclusions from there. It will
obliterate the ring beyond magical repair, which is all that is required."

Fighting a petulant expression, Regulus steadied the urge to point out that he didn’t need to be told
about the creation or destruction of horcruxes when he had uncovered the former before leaving
school and achieved the latter before reaching twenty (a point of pride, for all his other mistakes) -
but with measured control, he bit his tongue.

“I verified the venom over a decade and a half ago,” - it was perhaps a partially-bitten tongue -
more of a nip - “but let us give the sword a try,” he finished, unsealing hems of his pocket and
pulling the ring out, pinched between his thumb and forefinger.

"Perhaps on the table?" Dumbledore indicated one of the end tables to the side of the room. He
went off to the side, rummaging for a moment in search of something, before retrieving the blade.

Gryffindor’s sword glimmered, bedecked with gems and inscriptions, and Regulus thought it
looked more ornamental in its aesthetic than it did practical, but he would not want a cut from its
blade, so he supposed that was the only true requirement.

Approaching the table, Regulus set down the ring on the end table, pressing his lips to a line as
Dumbledore, too, approached with the sword. Meeting the elder wizard’s eyes, they held, for a
moment, in silent exchange.

The silence was broken by a crack; the stone on the ring had split down the middle, and what
looked suspiciously like blood had poured out. The opening syllables of a voice began, only to split
into a long, deep screech which caused the headmaster to look on with utter distaste.

"I'd say that went very well," Dumbledore said, lifting up the still smoking ring and pocketing it.
“Almost anticlimactic.”

Regulus's eyes followed the ring to Dumbledore's pocket, carefully smothering a shudder.
Anticlimactic was a fitting word. The gush of a blood-like substance, the smoke, and its harrowing
screech yanked him back - to a cottage, to a locket, to a cauldron and poisons and a very sharp
dagger. His own experience had involved a great deal more toil and frustration - the mocking
torment of a soul fragment fighting back against his assault - and the way the ring simply gave up
and died was deeply unsettling.

Or rather, he sincerely hoped it had just given up and died. The blood and the screech seemed to
suggest as much - yet it seemed too easy...

Eyes lingering for a moment on the pocketed ring, Regulus wanted to ask for it back, to destroy it a
little more thoroughly, but his jaw was set, fused by the prickling thought of the dementors that
awaited former Death Eaters with no pardon. Somehow, he doubted the Dark Lord would be so
keen to break him out, as he had broken out Bella and the others. Spooking the headmaster into
thinking Regulus was even considering going back on their agreement was not worth continued
control of what at least appeared to be a destroyed horcrux.

(Another soul fragment eliminated- it was meant to be a moment of accomplishment, one of relief-)

“Make certain it is fully dead.” Regulus settled a moment later, once he had found his voice again,
“Though the locket and the ring visibly reacted in the same way upon puncture and destruction, the
locket...fought back, so to say. Perhaps it is nothing to be concerned about, but if you are to take
the ring under your care, I thought it an important contrast to mention.”
"I'm quite sure the husk is now harmless." Dumbledore looked at him with a certain amount of measured amusement. He reached into his pocket to retrieve the ring and placed it upon his finger, turning the stone over gingerly. However, his face fell almost immediately into a look of frustration. "...Ah. Well, I'm sure you'll be quite happy to note that you were correct," he looked down at the ring. "But if you would, please fetch Severus as quickly as possible."

For a moment, Regulus did not notice the change, calm and unflapped as Dumbledore’s demeanor remained - but when his eyes followed Dumbledore's gaze down to the ring to find a deadened black patch starting to spread away from the metal, panic caught fast in his throat, punching his chest with another wave of adrenaline.

'Quite happy,' Dumbledore had blithely remarked - far from it.

"Where is his office?" Regulus managed to force out, moving back a few steps, his hand finding the door. (A curse - surfacing now…)

"Down in the dungeons," Dumbledore said, albeit strained. "Across from what was once Horace Slughorn's."

With haste, Regulus tore out the door, skipping steps and taking strides as quickly as he could without making a racket of it. The halls were empty - one benefit to this apparent curfew, at least - and by the time he reached the dungeons, he was mentally cursing the fact that this school blocked all attempts at apparition. He could not even take the moment to feel nostalgic for the familiar Slytherin hangings as he pounded a fist to Snape’s door three times in quick succession.

The annoyance (and perhaps surprise) on the other man's face was apparent when the door cracked open, and Regulus could have sworn he saw Harry behind him, but whatever was creeping along the headmaster's hand was higher priority than what was likely to be occlumency lessons.

"Dumbledore requires you in his office," Regulus said, leaving no room for delay or argument in his speech. "Immediately."

"Why," said Snape, "why did you put on that ring? It carries a curse, surely you realised that. Why even touch it?"

When they had arrived back at the office in due haste, Dumbledore had been found on the floor. Snape had gone to work without hesitation, first removing the ring to the table, then working quickly to contain the curse.

Thankfully, the headmaster had woken up moments later. "I don't claim to be all-knowing," Dumbledore said, thickly. "I...was a fool, the temptation..."

"Temptation for what?" Snape said, but it was quite clear he was not about to answer. "You're lucky to be alive! I can only contain it. I must run checks and see what else can be done, but that is an extraordinarily powerful curse."

From behind them, Regulus was looking on, nerves still bundling with the settling acknowledgement of how easily that curse could have struck him. Was it putting on the ring that had triggered it? Fiddling with the stone? Why had Dumbledore put it on in the first place? (It was a horcrux - and it wasn't that well-made or aesthetically-pleasing to the eye.) It had seemed to happen so quickly in the moment, scarcely leaving time to process Dumbledore's dismissal of concern before he was instead discussing Regulus to fetch Severus.

Emmeline's warning words crept back into his mind, and with them a mounting guilt. The curse
lying in wait had not triggered for him, but Dumbledore's explorations had passed that curse along, instead. If something had happened to Dumbledore - if Snape hadn't arrived in time to stymie its progression…

“Is there anything more I can do to assist?” Regulus asked, pushing down the temptation to simply slip out the door while they were distracted.

"No," said Snape, clearly still distracted by his work. "You had better leave before you bring anymore attention to yourself."

"Take the bowl of sherbet on the far table in hand, and it will return you home," Dumbledore said, as he stretched out his fingers. "I'd like to keep the limb if at all possible, Severus."

"Then you ought to use common sense when handling dark objects," Snape replied.

Uncomfortably, Regulus shifted over towards the sherbet, feeling no small amount of relief to have an excuse to leave them to it. Within seconds, the dramatic display was replaced with the familiar surroundings of his own home, dim and silent. Tension faded hazily into the quiet stillness, but the image of Dumbledore's char-black hand lingered in the back of his mind, even as he began a show drudging trek up the stairs towards the study.

The day had been successful, in a sense - the sense that he had accomplished the end goal he had set out to accomplish - yet it did little to settle the pricking prongs of concern. Snape had not sounded so convinced about the problem’s resolution, even if Dumbledore was seemingly on the mend in light of the collapse, and if something were to happen to Dumbledore…

… The threat of Azkaban might be his most personal concern, but in the context of the war, it certainly was not the only one.
"Is it true?"

Remus, who was curled up on one of the larger arm chairs in the drawing room, merely nodded. "It is."

As per usual when Remus came to stay during the full moon, his paper followed the next morning. He was still looked tired, but not nearly as worried about the sub-header as Sirius felt. Dolores Jane Umbridge (High Inquisitor) has replaced Albus Dumbledore as Head of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Half the point of Dumbledore not being around when he was actually needed was that he was at the school because they needed him more. Harry needed him more. Now what the hell were they going to do?

"You're being too calm," sulked Sirius. Why in the name of Merlin had he surrounded himself with irritatingly calm people?

Moving with an audible creak, Remus shifted. "I am worried," he confessed. "But I also spoke to Minerva this morning."

"Minerva."

"Yes," his ears coloured with embarrassment, much to Sirius' delight. "She's still quite insistent I call her by her first name."

"Minerva."

"You call her by her first name," Remus said, bordering on the defensive. "And it’s certainly not the worst thing you’ve called her. Besides, that's not the point. The point is that apparently the entire school has exploded with the thrilling tale of Dumbledore facing off that vile woman, two Aurors, the Minister for Magic, and his assistant. The school will also not accept her: The office has sealed itself, much to her irritation."

"I heard as much from Phineas this morning, after you'd already come back with the paper. He took his sweet time about it." That the story had already spread was a small comfort, but a comfort regardless. The truth was hard to stop once it got out. For all that Phineas could be a stubborn Slytherin about things, he did have a good chuckle about Umbridge, and it may be one of the few times Sirius felt any sort of relatability to his ancestor. "I can't believe they tried to arrest Dumbledore."

"I'm sure Kingsley would have intervened if it had come to that," Remus responded.

"He shouldn't have had to," Sirius said, scornfully. "There's not going to be a magical world left to save by the time Fudge lives up to his name and fucks everything up."

"Hmm," Remus assented, sleepily.

"You should go back to bed," Sirius told him.

"I'm fine," Remus said, despite sounding as if he was ready to fall asleep at any moment.
"Go," Sirius said, "I'll wake you if anyone else gets arrested. Or if I do, I'm sure Reg'll let you know in a timely fashion."

Sirius was annoyed - and it was was annoying in more ways than one. Whatever was going on with his brother at the moment clearly involved Dumbledore, and now Dumbledore was taking the fall for Harry's group. At least that gambit had worked. Dumbledore was in a better position to take on the Ministry than a teenager was. Still, despite suggesting that he would be a formidable force outside of the school and would not lie low, that seemed to be exactly what he was up to. No one had spoken to him since he'd left his post. It was disconcerting.

"They tried to arrest Dumbledore last night," Sirius announced without preamble. He was barely through the study door.

Without looking up from his book, Regulus sighed heavily, expression pinching slightly at the mouth and eyes. "That's unfortunate."

"Everyone is having very underwhelming reactions to this news," Sirius complained, flopping himself onto the next chair over. "Or was that squinting thing a 'this is bad' look versus just a 'why does he never think to knock' look?"

"Both. Consider it a multipurpose reaction," Regulus said, propping an elbow and pressing his fingers firmly to his temple.

Sirius watched the reaction with shrewd interest. He had been noticing over the last half a year or so that he tended to do that now when he was stressed out, but that hadn't been his childhood nervous tick. "When did you stop pulling on your sleeves?"

"I'm not sure. I suppose I do - or did - sometimes, but I haven't really thought about it."

Sirius shrugged, a little awkwardly. "I've only seen you do it once in...shit, in nine months?" Had it really been that long? Sometimes, it felt as if they'd been there for years and in other ways, it felt like only weeks. It was a wholly unsettling experience. "Admittedly, I don't watch you every minute of the day, but it doesn't seem to be your upset tell anymore. Unless Bellatrix is involved."

Shifting in his chair, Regulus folded his arms on the table with fingers hooking at the elbows, though his eyes remained fixed on the book in front of him. "I suppose."

"Because I'm trying to figure out some sort of reaction," Sirius chuckled. He was all the more positive that this had been exactly the reason if he was being quite so defensive. In all honesty, it'd been an uneasy joke between himself and his friends years before. The only true way to know if Regulus had been a Death Eater was to look for one about to fray his sleeves. "Kid, I love you but you are the worst person in the world to try to read any sort of reaction from if you don't know what you're looking for. I have no idea if you're truly worried and couldn't resist the chance to show whatever passes for wit in that head of yours, or if you're truly fine, but have a headache."

"I'm not a kid," Regulus corrected as Sirius snorted, though some of the defensiveness was starting to fade from his tone again. For a moment, his expression shifted a little, lightened, but it was
replaced swiftly with a subtle strain when again he spoke: “And of course I am concerned about the Ministry attempting to arrest Dumbledore. We’re on the same side now, remember? I may not be in the Order, but anti-Dumbledore sentiments don’t exactly do me any favours, either.”

"Sometimes I think you believe I'm actually stupid." Sirius rolled his eyes. As if he hadn't lived with enough Slytherins to understand quid pro quo, even if he hadn't had an excellent latin tutor at one point. "I know that, but I also know trust is transactional for you, and there has been a decent reason I haven't been bugging the shit out of you to find out what you were up to. I don't believe this will last. I think it's getting to the point where Fudge is desperate, but it's only going to take one undeniable attack to finish him."

Regulus nodded, though something in his expression did not look entirely comforted. “It just feels like a setback.”

"Think of it as a little time to get ready to go traipsing through your illustrious teenage years with a bunch of strangers," Sirius replied. He forced a shrug he didn't feel; it was still a touchy subject. "Then getting it over with so you can get on with your life.”

“I wish I could just get it over with,” Regulus said, a frown starting to sour his expression, “that's the problem. The situation won't exactly get any better or easier with more passage of time.”

“It hasn't gotten any easier?” Again, it was always an uneasy thing to wonder about, but while Regulus felt the need to take responsibility for everyone's actions, he also tended to completely distance himself from his own.

“To talk about it to a room full of strangers? I haven't attempted it for comparison, but the thought isn't getting any easier, no,” Regulus clarified with a frown, “At least not until I'm certain Dumbledore can, in fact, assist with that particular issue.”

“Dumbledore facing down the Minister for Magic, his assistant, Umbridge, and two Aurors is spreading already. He's many things, but weak is not one of them,” Sirius reassured - or hoped he was reassuring. “As long as Bella keeps her psychotic murder sprees - and assuming you don’t have many of them - to a minimum for a bit, it'll be fine.”

Uncomfortably, Regulus tipped his head in a nod, drumming a single finger on his elbow.

Sirius’ stomach left for less worrisome pastures. “Now would be an excellent time to reassure me on that front.”

“I'm not going on psychotic murder sprees,” Regulus responded in tight, quiet tones, turning the page in his book.

"I think you know that's not what I'm asking," Sirius said, evenly.

“Must we talk about this right now?” Regulus asked in something like a mutter, continuing to look more like he was talking to the new page of his open book than he was to his brother, though his shoulders stiffened slightly at Sirius’s remark.

"I don't like going into this blind," Sirius replied, on the verge of snatching the book to redirect his attention. "I'd like to know what I'm against...and what might get the book thrown at you.”

Regulus sighed heavily, brow furrowing subtly. “Do you want some sort of list?”

"While I'm sure you have a list," - likely not written down anywhere, but Sirius was sure it was bullet pointed and contained footnotes, even in his mind - "the highlights would do. I'd settle for
asking if murder is on it."

Hunching forward a little, Regulus was silent, seeming for a moment as if he was not going to respond at all - when at last he nodded, a slight movement but no less a clear contrast with his still, stiffened posture.

It was both a shock and not; he'd been dreading the answer but expected that it at least had happened once to shake him that deeply. "More than once?" Sirius asked, quietly.

"Once, in a more direct sense..." Regulus responded tensely, fingers pressing into his elbows like an anchor. "A task related to the induction process, I suppose you could say."

Direct sense? "What do you mean, induction process?" asked Sirius.

Regulus shifted again, expression set to stone. "The Mark, specifically."

"Hang on," Sirius raised a finger, combing through his memory of their past instances of skating around these discussions. "Are you talking about when you were fifteen?"

Regulus shook his head, more firmly. "Sixteen. I was only fifteen for a couple of weeks."

"Well, if you were sixteen, that changes everything." Sirius replied sarcastically, with a wave of his hand. Still underage, still too young to be mucking about in the dregs of dark magic, and as per usual, running about with Bellatrix.

Expression furrowing a little, Regulus lifted his shoulder in a tiny shrug. "In truth, I wasn't particularly involved during the first year. Just trainings with Bella, for the most part. The Mark was the following summer..."

"What do you mean, not involved? Was there a waiting list?"

Cringling his nose, Regulus shook his head. "Funny. But no. I was just at school most of the time, and holidays were dedicated to training to reduce the likelihood of getting immediately killed or caught... Initially, involvement was more along the lines of scouting, investigation - indirect things of that nature..."

Sirius gave him a brittle grin. "Ah, I think I'm starting to understand why you were there so long without losing your mind." It made a perverse sense, the more he thought about it. Regulus might have enjoyed investigatory work, he did so like to feel clever, and if there had been a sporadic amount of it over, what, a year? Then getting to the grit he had little stomach for... "Was that your sixth year? That summer?"

"I initially joined the summer before sixth year... The Mark was the summer before seventh," Regulus responded awkwardly with a slight nod.

Although he wracked his brain for the answers, Sirius couldn't think of any deaths around that time he actually knew of. The two possibilities then were that it was a murder (murder was the correct term, he better not shy away from using it, or he'll get eaten alive) was never discovered, or that it was so low key that he has no memory of it. "Papers get hold of it?"

Again, a slight nod.

A sudden thought struck him. "Those clippings," Sirius started. "That's not a souvenir board, is it?"

Regulus winced slightly. "I would not call it that. More of a...means of tracking the war."
"So it's not personal?" Sirius prompted. "There's shit on it that has nothing at all to do with you or Bellatrix?"

With a pinched expression, Regulus shrugged, hesitating a moment before answering. "...Technically, not all of it is us...but the war did...feel very personal."

"That's creepy," Sirius said, as bluntly and honestly as he could. "I expected a little death and plenty of dark magic, I wasn't expecting to find you'd enshrined the experience above your bed. That might be creepier than Snape. That's Mulciber levels of creepy."

More uncomfortable still, Regulus shrugged again.

"I wouldn't mention that part to the Aurors," Sirius said. He made a face of utter distaste, because what else could you do with a revelation like that? "I know everyone in this House is a little barmy and has a tendency to hoard at museum levels, but them thinking you're off your rocker isn't much of a step up from being assumed to be a murderer sadist. Why them? I'm going to assume it's not because they dogeared one of the Lestrange library books and offended your literary sensibilities."

“I’m not off my rocker, and I’m not a sadist,” Regulus countered defensively, eyes flicking up briefly, falling quiet again. “And I suppose I have to assume we aren't still talking about Aurors?"

"No, a little disturbing, maybe, but you're not a headcase, and as long as I've known you, you've never been a fan of pain," Sirius allowed, because it was true. "But no, I'm not talking about Aurors. Though if it was an Auror, you should probably get a free pass, duels do not count."

Regulus shook his head. "It wasn't a duel..." he admitted with a frown, though he looked as if he did not particularly want to.

Sirius asked, "Did you pick them?"

“No,” Regulus responded, a little miserably. “I needed to prove my dedication and value to the Cause, and the Cause needed the task carried out, so I was matched with that assignment because of convenient timing, I suppose. There were several of us at the time, but I don’t know if there was any particular reasoning for one versus another.”

Unsure he wanted the answer, Sirius plowed on. "So it wasn't personal?"

“No...not at all,” Regulus said, a little more easily, though his sigh was no less heavy. “But it was truthfully a horrible experience, and I don’t want to talk about the details, so don’t bother asking.”

"I don't need to," Sirius said, which was the truth. He didn't need to know the minutiae of the experience, only if he had decided to go out and kill someone. Even if he had, maybe that would have been better. Sirius understood the passion and anger of the moment, but cold premeditation based upon a task to prove you were somehow worthy of losing your life for a prick who couldn’t care less made his blood boil. "We can just chalk it up to something else that makes me pissed off at all the adults in your life at the time, and a little bit with you, and move on." He hoped, as the words tumbled out, that it was true, and he could lose the chill in his stomach.

Regulus nodded, looking exceptionally uncomfortable. “I am in favour of moving on.”

"Can you at least try to explain why someone who still needed a permission slip for Hogsmeade had a murder board?" Sirius asked, letting his own discomfort show. "I don't think you'd do it for your own joy."

“I thought we were moving on. I liked the moving on plan,” Regulus muttered, unhooking his
fingers from his elbows to rub at his face.

"We're moving on from murder," Sirius corrected. "Your weird decorating habits are still up for scrutiny, because you're not the type to take glory in the suffering of random strangers."

“Fine,” Regulus said with a weighty huff, propping his chin in his hand. “Initially, I was trying to track Bella’s involvement, out of curiosity. I hadn’t joined yet, and she was not particularly forthcoming with details, at the time... I was comparing absences over the summer holidays that aligned with stories in the newspaper, things of that nature...Then later on, after we had joined, Barty jokingly said I should put his up because my father was less likely to take issue than his was, so I did - and I don't know - it sort of just happened...”

“Even when it comes to murder and maiming, you're a fucking swot,” Sirius informed him in lieu of pointing out that it's really creepy of Crouch as well. (Bartemius, what the hell did you do to that kid? At least with Mulciber, he knew it was just hereditary.) “I don't know that I'm impressed or irritated that you managed to keep all this double-life crap such a secret. Especially when you look like you want to jump out of your skin.”

“You weren’t around for the parts that made me feel nervous, or overwhelmed, or that I found upsetting,” Regulus countered pointedly, despite his carefully neutral expression. “I suppose most people just assumed I was experiencing stress about NEWTs, quidditch, prefectly duties, responsibilities of that nature...” He paused only for a beat before adding: “Dad’s death, at the end of it...though I was experiencing stress over that...”

“Yeah, that was fun for everyone,” Sirius replied shortly with a barely concealed wince to try and push past the sudden feeling of guilt.

“And I did see you at couple of times, just in passing. Guess I forgot you're the master of seeming fine when you're not.”

“I suppose so,” Regulus said vaguely, folding his arms on the table again.

Sirius shifted under the weight of his own discomfort. “I’m here now.”

Visibly relaxing, if only a little, Regulus nodded, glancing up at Sirius more directly. “You are... and I do appreciate that,” he said, despite the awkward air. “The things I did were- beyond terrible and stupid, and I know that, but-” He lowered his eyes back down to the table with a shrug. “Thank you for not hating me, I suppose.” Again, he flipped a (probably unread) page. “At least not completely.”

Sirius reached over and tugged at the book, fingers splayed across the page. "I don't even hate you a little bit, alright? I'm a little pissed off, and I think you should have known better, but if I had a sickle for every decision I made that I should have known better about, then I'd be richer than the Malfoys." He might be. Interest was an amazing thing, and the only great expense he'd used was to buy Harry his Firebolt. But all the more seriously, it was true - he didn't hate him, and maybe that would be different if he'd hurt someone he'd known, but he wasn't about to go searching his psyche for that. "I can't blame you for getting lost, or scared, or angry and lashing it out in all the wrong places. Fuck it, I've done that enough that the pathway to it might as well be named after me. You're here, you're making a difference, and you're not being a pillock. I can't ask for more than that."

(Even if he still felt uneasy about the prospect of him literally being a mass murderer as a teenager.)

“Thank you,” Regulus said with a certain weight to the tone, hesitating for a moment in the absence of his attention-occupying book before turning his attention to Sirius once again. “I wasn’t
certain what to expect - or I suppose just as importantly, what I should not expect - but I won't pretend as if I'm not grateful.” With a little shift, he added, “And I don't hate you either. For the record.”

"Of course you don't, I'm a very lovable person. I'm literally man's best friend, thanks." Sirius nodded. It was nice to hear, even if he'd begun to suspect as much, but it was bordering on a little too emotional for his tastes. They weren't an emotional lot; he'd managed to say he loved him, and that really was enough for one day, or there would be all hell to pay. "Besides, speaking of Luscious Malfoy, if he can blag his way out of ever serving a day in prison, I think you'll be fine."

“Assuming he doesn't try to make things difficult. I imagine he is still prominent in the Ministry.” Regulus shook his head. “And as fond as I was of Cissa, I never did become particularly close with Lucius… From a positive perspective, perhaps he still has a shred of family loyalty, or perhaps he will be nervous enough that I don't… But I really don't know what to expect from them.” A crinkle of the nose.

"He's prominent in the Ministry because he gives them a lot of gold. That's always been his issue, he never solves anything, he just throws money at it 'til it goes away. No wonder that kid has an attitude problem." Sirius made a face at the fact he had basically bribed his way out of trouble and continued to be a pain in all of their necks. "And I don't think you have much to worry about with Malfoy. Regardless of how she feels, I don't believe she would ever allow him to hurt you that badly without cursing him six ways 'til Sunday. Or did you mean the Ministry?"

Regulus shook his head. “I meant family. Not that the Ministry isn't a concern in itself, but they are at least marginally more predictable, assuming we can prepare the circumstances and arguments appropriately. Ironically, the Ministry has a better record of forgiving Death Eaters than our family does of forgiving fellow members of the family,” he said wryly. “I want to think those ties will mean something, but there are so many other factors to take into account...I don't like the uncertainty.”

"Narcissa is not Bellatrix," Sirius promised. "Much as I think she's ridiculous, she is capable of love, and it's her greatest strength. She can and does love her family. You know she wanted a bunch of kids, and it's probably the usual issues as to why she's only got the one. She doesn't have enough family left to go tossing them to one side for what I’m sure she’d find to be fairly trivial infractions without her sister’s presence, and I think she knows that. I think she also knows she'd have been willing to let you go if she knew you were safe, which'll be what pisses her off."

With a frown, Regulus nodded. "I feel terrible for leaving… And I wanted to believe she would help - yet even turning a blind eye puts her in a dangerous position if anyone discovers as much… It feels as though there is no way to win."

"Because there wasn't and there isn’t," Sirius told him. "The only way to win is to end the war permanently. But even now, things have changed. No one is a child anymore, and there isn't anyone left to answer to, save ourselves and our own decisions. Well, the Order for me, but it's a little less intense than the great House."

“Things have changed, yes…in a great many ways,” Regulus agreed; wryly, he continued, “and devoted though I might feel - speaking honestly, I think most circumstances are destined to be less intense than our family.”

Sirius chuckled to himself. "Yeah, can you imagine being related to that prick? I know we probably are somewhere along the line but if I can't trace it, I'm not counting it."

“Lucius, do you mean?” Regulus clarified, lifting a brow.
"Nah, Voldemort." Sirius barely suppressed a shudder. "Though now I'm imagining Lucius bald and noseless, and I may never be able to take him seriously ever again." Not that he ever really had.

With a soft snort (and a cringe of his own), Regulus shook his head. “I did hear about the changes in appearance for the Dark Lord, strange though it is to try and picture it...but no, I don't think they would suit Lucius at all.”

"Creating a new body is bound to have a few fuck ups," Sirius admitted, enjoying the face - he actually got an amused reaction. "Malfoy's a fop, I'm not too concerned about him. Haven't fought Bella in a while, though. Only done it a couple of times, and I lost the first time, got my backside handed to me. Might need to brush up my own dueling so I don't do that again. It would be a bit embarrassing to be done in after all this because Bella's got her drawers in a twist."

“Yes, I’d rather you made it out of any scuffles alive, Bella or not,” Regulus remarked pointedly. “Can't have any more embarrassments.”

"Aw, you don't want me to die." Sirius feigned his breath catching in his throat and pressed a hand to his chest. "You've become gross and sentimental with old age."

“Don't think I didn't hear you use the L-word earlier - on the spectrum of gross sentimentalism, I think that still qualifies as worse." Regulus quipped dryly, mouth flicking at the corner.

Sirius snickered, "Did you really just call it the L-word?"

“If I say it, then I lose,” Regulus responded in a tone that could almost be mistaken for sincere.

"I'm not convinced you have the capability to verbalise it," Sirius sniffed at him. "I'd rather lose than be emotionally constipated, thanks."

“I prefer the phrasing of dignified, self-regulated, collected…”

"I think you missed the part where you don't have to worry about any of that if you love someone - yes, I said the word, let's pretend to be well adjusted adults who can cope with it instead of maladjusted culminations of near a thousand years of dysfunctional relations." As much as he was screwing around, it was also a little bit true: it was far too loaded. Devotion, loyalty, care, they all feel safer topics. "There's something to be said for not having to worry about appearances."

“I suppose so,” Regulus remarked lightly, despite those loaded undertones, “I will make an effort to cope.”

Unfortunately, Sirius had the sneaking suspicion that this was not a joke. Was everything always linked to fulfilling another person's expectations with him? Even something as messy, abstract, and self-absorbing as love? Wasn't that a cheery thought. This is why you don't raise children based on biological compatibility and blood. Especially if it's the same blood. "If that takes an effort, thank Merlin you didn't procreate. It's the most undignified thing on the planet, and that's just the end result."

“This conversation has truly devolved,” Regulus said with a roll of his eyes, reaching towards his book to pull it back in front of him. “I don't want to talk about procreation with you."

"You made it competitive, you have only yourself to blame," Sirius pointed out happily. He did, however, release the book.

“I claim self-defense,” Regulus objected, settling his book in place and folding his hands neatly on
"Yeah, yeah," Sirius said. "That innocent routine does not fool me for a second."

Regulus smiled a slight, flickering smile before lifting his brow. "I intend to hold to my story."

"Regulus Black being rigid," Sirius rolled his eyes. "I'll call the Prophet, no one will believe it."

"There you go again with your charged words again. Rigidity sounds negative," Regulus countered with a shake of the head, "I am devoted to my perspective."

"You can't rightly deny it," Sirius scoffed. "You're just a rules and rigidity person."

Regulus tipped his head to the side in mild assent. "When the rules feel worth the rigidity. The restricted section, for example, always seemed more like a suggestion for the less motivated, or perhaps a challenge, but not a particularly important rule. However, for the most part, yes, I suppose it is fair enough to say as much."

"Your rebellions always involve books." Sirius rolled his eyes at him.

Regulus's mouth twitched up a little. "They do."

"What is he thinking?" Sirius snapped.

Remus had his fingers across his eyes and his breathing was laboured, which gave a pleasant sense of vindication, because if even Remus was really angry with Snape, then Sirius was utterly correct in being so. "That he's embarrassed?"

"His embarrassment doesn't come before Harry's safety!" Sirius replied.

"Of course it doesn't!" Remus snapped. "I'm going to talk to him now, and regardless of whether or not he is at that school, we all know Dumbledore wants Harry to keep learning."

Pressing his lips into a line, Sirius gave a curt nod. "If he doesn't."

"Then feel free to explode at him the next time you see him," Remus replied, as he headed back up the stairs with Sirius close on his heels. "But that won't help Harry."

"Nothing's going to help Harry," Sirius replied, standing at the open staircase door. "He looks too much like James and is more like Lily than he realises. The combination is pissing off Snape, and he’s acting like he’s the fifteen-year-old."

"Harry has her wit," Remus said, as he retrieved his coat. Perhaps he was trying to lighten the mood.

"Something to be grateful for," Sirius replied. He was starting to calm down a little more, with a solution on the horizon and Snape about to get bollocked in a very Lupin manner. "Just because we were idiots when we were teenagers doesn’t give him an excuse to doom the magical world or leave a teenager at the mercy of bloody Voldemort. Tell Snape not to be such a pillock, will you?"

"I will. Be safe, and don't go anywhere," Remus reminded him, as if he'd forgotten.

Sirius shrugged. "Fine."

Remus gave him a shrewd look, but left nonetheless. The house was too still, and Sirius was still
too irate, but he didn’t feel at all in the mood to deal with his mother or Phineas, so he merely stomped up the stairs to stew in his own bad mood.

When Regulus opened the door to the study to find Sirius brooding in one of the overstuffed chairs, he thought about backing out of the room to give his brother the opportunity to experience his grumpy mood in solitude - and he was just shifting to step backwards when Sirius’s eyes flicked up to catch his own. Though nothing was said at first, Regulus thought perhaps it wasn't worth trying to slip away, instead opting to continue his stride to the nearest bookcase.

“Everything alright?” Regulus asked, raising his brow as he scanned the line of books.

"Fucking Snape," Sirius said, with scathing heat behind the words. For a moment, it seemed like he was going to leave it there and return to his own bad mood but he seemed to decide against it. "You do like him, right? Not Snape, Harry."

Following his brother's initial remark, Regulus was glad that the follow up question had not, in fact, been a question about his opinions on Snape, especially in the absence of context - or rather, considering the suggestion that it was not going to be positive.

“I do,” Regulus said, twisting around slightly to look over his shoulder. “Why?”

"Snape!" Sirius threw his hands up off of the sides of the chair in a dramatic fashion. "He's had a bloody fit and told Harry he won't help him keep his head clear. If he doesn't learn Occlumency, then he isn't safe, and Snape knows that, and he's still screamed at him over something he hasn't done."

Furrowing his brow, Regulus's eyes remained on Sirius, turning his body the rest of the way to face him. “I know Snape doesn't like Harry, but as far as I knew, he was still teaching him. What changed?”

"Remember what I said about Harry being a bit overly curious, and that's how he stumbled on the memory of Bellatrix's trial?" Sirius waved it off. "Apparently the memory he fell into was Snape's. Our OWLs, to be exact. Snape flipped out and told him he wouldn't teach him anymore."

Their OWLs had been fourth year, for Regulus, but as seemingly vague as the description might have been, it did not take long for him to land on a confident guess of the memory in question. He recalled Snape hanging upside down, drawers on display for the school to see - and immediately Regulus’s expression soured.

“I cannot blame Severus for being angry about that particular memory, if it's the one I think it is,” Regulus began with a crinkled nose, “but that does not excuse a discontinuation of Harry's lessons, especially with all that is at stake.”

"Then why did he decide to use the pensieve for that memory right before he was going to teach Harry? I swear he just enjoys stewing in his own misdirected hatred." Sirius huffed and pressed himself back against the chair. "It wasn't our proudest moment either."

“Most likely he intended to eliminate its availability during the lesson itself, even if he is an experienced occlumens himself. A vial would have been the most effective protection, but assuming the memory to be safe in the pensieve is not so unreasonable an expectation,” Regulus responded evenly, though he could guess even before he said it that Sirius had not been looking for that as an answer. “But the point still stands that it is not reason to deny Harry those essential lessons.”
"It's not like he knows the etiquette involved in pensieves, he's only seen one once before," Sirius replied, but it sounded only like a mild annoyance. "And Molly thinks it's me that can't tell James and Harry apart. He got the good parts from them both, aside from that hair, he still looks like he's a got a woodland creature atop his head." His eyes flicked to his brother. "Remus has gone to yell at him, or talk some sense into him. I could strangle him."

“Something tells me that strangling Snape would do little to convince him that he ought to keep teaching Harry. Lupin was the wiser choice, with certainty,” Regulus remarked with a shake of the head. “As for etiquette, I would consider it a bit obvious that snooping in someone's memories without permission is considered invasive and impolite.”

"I'm sure when you see Harry next, you can explain people don't generally go poking about in each other’s memories and recommend him a good guide to politeness in wizarding Britain," Sirius said, with a smidge of amusement starting to come into his tone.

“I will start preparing my recommendations,” Regulus said pointedly, with no small amount of sincerity to his tone, though he could tell Sirius’s tone was starting to lighten. “I don't know what those muggles were teaching him about manners, but we'll clear it up."

Sirius only snorted. "I only met her a couple of times, Lily's sister. Dead proper. But I won't deny that it does feel like two different worlds sometimes, with two different sets of rules. I do wish you weren't right about the strangling, though. It would certainly have made me feel better. I suppose I'll just have to keep picturing the vulture hat and dress to help. Thank you, Moony."

Plucking a book from the shelf, Regulus crossed the room to sit in the chair just across from his brother. “What is this about vulture hats and dresses?”

The snort gave way to a bark of laughter as Sirius smiled. "Oh, you didn't get this story out of the kids? You know Frank and Alice, they've a son in Harry's dorm, Neville. Anyway, apparently Snape's got this kid terrorised to the point he's his boggart. Imagine that, with what happened to his parents, and it's bloody Snape that terrifies him. Anyway, when Remus was doing the boggart lesson, well, how do you make Snape funny? Apparently, you put him in Augusta Longbottom's clothes. It made him laugh."

Regulus shook his head, not sure where to even start picking apart that thought. It felt disloyal to laugh - or even snigger - but he had to wonder what Snape had done to the boy to become his boggart in the first place. Though he had not known Frank or Alice Longbottom well at all, they had not struck him as being particularly faint of heart. “Surprisingly enough, that one has not come up."

"Harry's is a dementor," Sirius' smile faded and became tight. "It's a terrible thing. He was in the crib when it happened, he couldn't see any of it, but he heard it all. Just old enough to remember their last moments. So every time he sees a dementor..." He shrugged, if only to unsuccessfully hide the shudder. "Snape's a step up. At least he's easy to deal with."

With a cringe of his own at the turn in mood, Regulus nodded, face pinching as he made a concentrated effort not to allow his mind to drift to his own experiences - perhaps not dementors, but dark beings he would far prefer to maintain a mental ban on. “Boggarts are nasty creatures. As are dementors."

"And inferi," Sirius added, needlessly. "I'm glad they're learning some decent Defense work in Harry's group."

“Yes, it seems they are well on their way,” Regulus agreed, smothering the images of sopping,
creeping inferi in favour of the silvery smattering of wisps and a few animals flicking about that room at Hogwarts. Children, all of them, and already casting such a challenging spell with skill. He could not help but envy the instruction; at their age, he would have liked to understand the spell better, Death Eater or not... “Patronuses, last I heard, which seems appropriate.”

As if reading his mind, Sirius nodded. "I'd have liked to have done something like that when we were at school. Had Dueling Club, but learning more practically would have helped when we got thrown in at the deep end."

“I was not particularly interested in the prospect of Dueling Club, but more consistent and competent Defense classes would have been nice, even if ours were always still better than their current situation,” Regulus said with a huff. “All the same, the end was immensely deep.”

"Pity, it might've been good for all that pent up anger," Sirius pointed out with a knowing look. "Had you actually been to that many battles? When we fought?"

“No many, no,” Regulus responded, feeling a fresh wave of discomfort, “Just a few, later in the summer. After my birthday."

"Not Godric's Hollow," Sirius stated, more than questioned.

“Not Godric’s Hollow,” Regulus echoed, then shook his head. “That was a bit earlier in the summer, as I recall. People were still talking about it on my birthday, but I wasn’t involved, nor was I privy to much in the way of details.”

"I'm not surprised, it was a bloody mess," Sirius admitted. "I wasn't there anymore, we'd already got the flat by then, but everyone was still talking about it. Probably not in the same way they were talking to you."

Crinkling his nose, Regulus let out a huff and thought of the party chatterings - Bella, Rabastan, and Travers relaying it to Barty and himself in a manner that was just vague enough to avoid admittance but with a clear air of pride and accomplishment. Without a doubt, those were not the tones Sirius would have been hearing on his side of the war. “I imagine not, no.”

“You're not cruel,” Sirius stated, with a mild tone of pride. “Vengeful, when you're pissed off, but you're not cruel for the sake of it. Suppose even I can't claim that.” He snorted, and followed up with, “You would think a professor would know better, no matter how much of a weirdo they were at school or mistakes made along the way. Maybe, when it's over, you ought to try your hand at teaching. Someone should show Snape how it’s done. I'm still angry about Remus.”

With warmth swelling in his chest, Regulus permitted a little smile to light his face, casting away the creeping shadows. So often, those shadows rose in tandem with memories, spread with thoughts of the violent circumstances of their youth, both personal and tangential - yet for all the anxieties of the present, it was the present that gave him comfort in that moment. The present, and the future.

To imagine what could come after their uphill fight against the Dark Lord was not unlike grasping a cloud - as intangible as it was far away - but Sirius was present - ‘I’m here now,’ he had pointed out just recently - and that reassurance was no small thing.

“I haven't thought about it much,” Regulus admitted after a thoughtful moment - neither teaching, nor the details of what he would do when it was over - “but I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

“Do you mean to tell me that there are details that you haven't obsessed over to a meticulous
degree?” Sirius sounded exceptionally skeptical.

Wryly, Regulus responded, “Meticulous obsessions have to follow their proper course, too. I will dedicate more attention to my future contributions to society when the current ones are more established - or at least when it has been wholly confirmed that I will be be **continuing** to contribute to society, rather than occupying space in Azkaban.” Light though his tone was, the thought was enough to trigger a small, undetectable chill. It had been a month already, since Dumbledore vanished, and they had reached the end of April. Surely the Ministry could not maintain its ignorance forever, yet timing could be so delicate… “There is quite a lot to think about.”

“It'll be Azkaban over my dead body,” Sirius responded fiercely. “No matter what happens.”

Regulus could feel the corners of his mouth start to lift again. He didn’t much like the implication of Sirius dying, certainly not on his account, but phrasing aside, the sentiment was no less reassuring. “Considering you are under strict orders to remain alive, I suppose that settles it.”

Regulus and Sirius had been in the park for no more than 15 minutes (reading books and chasing birds, respectively) when the former felt a telltale buzz on his finger, signaling someone's arrival back at the house. Though it was not the first outing with his dog-formed brother, it was the first in which the alarm-warded rings had actually triggered, and he almost hadn't noticed it, brief as it was. As far as he (and presumably Sirius) knew, there was no Order meeting specially planned for that afternoon, so more than likely, it was only the one visitor to worry about - but there was no way to be certain who it was.

"Back to the house!” he called over to the bounding Newfoundland, black fur once again splattered with white. Regulus’s own hair was coloured, today, with a lighter, blondish brown - a charm he hadn't felt need to attempt on himself since he had been a teenager dodging the attention of probably-angry Death Eaters. He was not particularly fond of cosmetic glamour charms, but he had to admit Hogwarts had been a bit of a spook, and although recognition in itself had not been the problem (so much as being visibly seen at all), the extra precaution was worth the effort - even if Sirius’s comparisons to Aunt Druella had been wholly unwelcome.

For a moment, it was looking as if there would be no response - but after a few stretching seconds had passed in pursuit of a particularly twitchy squirrel, Sirius was bounding over to the bench, instead. “We must cut out walk short today,” Regulus said once his brother, the dog, had reached him. “I believe we have company, so let's see if we can go inside through the garden.”

He was met with a whuffing sound that could probably be interpreted as some mixture of disappointment and puzzlement, but the good thing about dog-brothers was that they could not ask you questions at times when you could not answer them anyway.

Approaching Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, man and animagus made every effort to look as if they were on a casual stroll, ducking into the charmed property just before passing the entrance - and once they were masked from the prying eyes of surrounding muggle neighbors, he buried a hand in fur and side-alonged the two of them to the garden, which was more likely to be considered an acceptable space for escaped convicts and dead people who wished to enjoy the budding days of May.

Regulus was stepping into the kitchen, wand in hand to tap his hair back to black when a short series of footsteps revealed Lupin coming down the stairs. Though he could feel his ring cooling, it was too late to salvage the moment, and upon seeing them, Lupin’s face seemed to transform into one that was halfway between amused and exasperated.
"Playing fetch?" Lupin asked, eyeing the white blotched canine form of his oldest friend more so than Regulus.

“Something of that nature - yes,” Regulus responded picturing the back and forth game of the squirrels in particular; the birds often just flew away. “There was a great deal of chasing involved.”

Remus looked back at him. "Was it very distressing?"

“For who?"

"Both of you," Remus said, before nodding his head towards Sirius. "He seems to have developed white spots from the fright and even your colouring appears to have gone several shades lighter."

“Ah-” Regulus looked up at a lock of dark blonde hair swept along his forehead, then down at Sirius’s white-splotched colouring, though doing so was entirely unnecessary. “Clearly our hair - and fur, of course - have forgotten how to react to sunlight, following all these months spent compliantly within the walls of the house. In fact, I think might be - very specifically - the May sunlight. What a strange phenomenon.”

"Yes, it is." Remus responded flatly. "Compliant is most definitely a descriptor I would apply to Sirius."

“It is - most definitely a descriptor, yes,” Regulus responded with a punctuating nod, patting Sirius’s still-furry head, “On that, we can agree.”

There was the biting sounds of a growl, but they quickly devolved into a large (still partially white and) black dog sitting chin first on the floor and looking up in a way that can only be described as pitiful.

"That does not work on me," Remus said, though he seemed to be having trouble staying firm.

Sirius punctuated the look with a whine.

"....Fine," Remus said, looking them both over with a critical eye. "On both your fool heads be it."

“We’re taking the necessary precautions,” Regulus responded, resuming the appropriate swishes and taps required to turn his hair black again, then did the same to return the black and white dog to an inky, uniform black again.

"That doesn't reassure me," Remus said, with a heavy sigh. "There is no good reason to be reckless. Kingsley is doing his best, but if you get caught, you'll put him in a terrible position."

With a pop, the dog exchanged itself for Sirius looking none too pleased. "No one's supposed to be here," He mumbled, the distinct sounds of someone feeling a little told off and threatening a sulk.

"Kingsley is coming over before - he has to go," Remus said, eyes flicking to Regulus. "And since I'm about to become a liability for a few days, Emmeline suggested another dig through of the archives she - borrowed - for potential abnormalities."

Regulus’s put upon frown lightened and lifted in interest at the mention of Emmeline, unable to help a spark of curiosity at what the theme of this set of ‘borrowed’ tomes would be. “Lovely. I have two books I’ve been needing to return to her, so that is convenient.”

“I'll let you know when the lending library arrives then," Remus replied, shooting another look at Sirius before heading to the stairs.
"When'd you get books from Vance?" Sirius asked.

"Last time she was here," Regulus responded simply as he, too, started towards the stairs.

"Okay, better question," Sirius sighed. "Why?"

"Why not?" Regulus countered in what could almost be considered a challenging tone, brow lifting as he glanced back. Seeming to realise the abruptness in speech, he added more mildly, "It is well within my rights to accept book recommendations, so to say."

"Just not used to you being social without threat to mind or body. No need to get defensive, I'm fully capable of sharing my Ravenclaws," Sirius said, which was certainly stretching the truth a little; at that, Regulus rolled his eyes. "Speaking of, how did you know we had company?"

Turning the rest of the way back, Regulus loosely folded his arms across his chest, entertaining a brief internal debate. There was merit to complete secrecy, particularly on the subject of monitoring, but minimal need for the rings and a long-time awareness of those who walked the halls of his home meant this particular secret did not seem a priority to keep silent, especially when he and Sirius were jointly reacting against the instructions to keep his brother locked away inside. Generally speaking, he was no longer all that concerned about the people inside his home, comparative to those outside.

After a perhaps awkwardly long pause, Regulus lifted his hand, where the two rings were still on his fingers. "This one," he pointed to the twisting serpent ring, "is anchored to the front door and vibrates if anyone crosses the threshold in either direction." He pointed then to the simple silver band on the next finger over. "This one is anchored throughout the house, warming and cooling as specified by myself, though the quality of information is greatly reduced if there is more than one person." He shrugged a shoulder, looking mildly unhappy about this fact before continuing. "The plain one used to indicate meddling by the particularly sticky-fingered, but I adjusted them quite a long time ago... They are essentially a silent alarm system of sorts, though I admittedly have done little to refine that system, as of late."

"Impressive." Sirius gave a bark of laughter. "You want to track the comings and goings so badly you got fancy with your spellwork?"

"Well..." A smile slanted its way onto Regulus’s face, catching a brush of the infectious amusement, himself. "The motivation is not consistently high right now, hence the lack of refinement... But tracking the comings and goings is at least some small comfort when you can't see anyone. My original modifications were actually from school, monitoring the paths to the restricted section," he added with a tip of the head, "but I had only attempted one temperature at the time."

"You apparently not only see them now but get books off them," Sirius pointed out. "And did I detect a note of excitement about doing Orderly research?"

"Excitement is a strong word," Regulus began mildly, though privately he could admit it wasn't inaccurate in the least, and the hints of a smile had yet to dim. "This collaborative research does, however, continue to be a positive experience."

"I'm surrounded by swots," Sirius bemoaned. "Creative ones at that - why rings?"

"Because they are inconspicuous," Regulus responded with a subtle shrug. "With the added benefit of multiple pieces accomplishing multiple functions."
“But you only have so many fingers and distinguishing between multiple sets on each finger would be hard,” Sirius replied, before looking down at his feet. “Unless you’ve got toe rings and all.”

With a soft snort, Regulus shook his head. “No toe rings. In most cases, if I need to continually track more than ten locational states at once, I probably have greater concerns than running out of fingers,” he said wryly, “But technically, it would work with anything that is easy to interpret by touch. My initial attempt in school was far more crude and rushed, but in that case, cloth worked just as well. If you reach a number of rings that becomes conspicuous or cumbersome, it works just as well with other accessories, fitted articles of clothing - or I suppose it could work with an object in the pocket, especially if you only needed to check occasionally.” Again, Regulus shrugged. “It's adaptable, as needed.”

"Is it only here you have one anymore?" Sirius asked.

Regulus nodded. “There are places I have utilized it with over the years, usually wherever I was living, though I'm not actively monitoring them now. I no longer have the anchors I used at Hogwarts, either.” For a beat, Regulus paused thoughtfully, then added, “Well, I suppose that may not be entirely true. I never did bother unpacking my luggage, and the trunk is still in my room, so assuming no one took them out, I suppose they might still be inside…” He shook his head. “All the same, I don't know how well the connection would have held up, and I don't exactly spend much time there anymore.”

"You didn't unpack the moment you came back?" Sirius gave him a shrewd look. "And they didn't realise you thought you were headed for your own doom?"

“The graduation celebrations began shortly after our arrival home that evening,” Regulus responded dryly in return; for all the happy implications of a celebration, it had been far from pleasant. “Unpacking hardly seemed worth the effort, but in light of that, yes - I suppose that ought to have been an indication.”

"Where was the party?" Sirius asked. "I only heard about it third-hand."

“It was at Bella's,” Regulus answered simply.

"Bella's?" Sirius gave a double-take. "Why? She has no interest in school, and like she'd ever pop out a kid."

Regulus shrugged. “Cissa was facilitating the party itself, and I didn't actually speak to Bella that night, so I can't say for sure. Perhaps something else was happening at the Malfoy Manor, or maybe Cissa just wanted different scenery to work with. Bella might have even intended to sneak in a training session, afterwards, to keep us on our toes, though most likely not.” Thoughtfully, he slanted his mouth downward. “I did not stick around to ask, I'm afraid.”

"Nothing came up for that night, believe me, I looked." Sirius gave his head a shake. "I'm going to get the idea of a Lestrange demon spawn out of my head, enjoy your playdate."

For a brief moment, Regulus thought about objecting that it was not a 'play date,' but it did not take long to accept that there was little point in pressing the semantics, in this instance. “And you enjoy your mind-cleansing.”

In the main dining room of Number Twelve, the so referred to Ravenclaw rebellion - with little in the way of Ravenclaws - had set out another set of books on the table. The problem arose in that most of the books were on particularly obscure subjects - people who have broken into the
Department of Mysteries and lived to tell the tale, the importance of context in prophecy, and communicating with animals through unauthorised spellwork - the prophecy one in particular was not leaving her sight as it would be particularly difficult to explain without discussing a taboo subject in front of someone...well, not new, but not in the Order. Hestia had shown up with her usual baked goods, now half-demolished in the middle of the table with Remus' tea cozy, but Bill was working, and Sturgis was still talking a little time to himself. It left three books and three people, a large but not unattainable task.

There were the mild sounds of murmuring, followed by the sound of the door, a loud thump, and the emergence of Mrs. Black's shrieking from only outside the door. Emmeline winced. "I believe that's Tonks in from her night watch." She turned towards the door. "I have to ask - was that portrait badly performed magic, perhaps something we could work on correcting, or is it just a, erm, intense personality coming through?"

Crinkling his nose, Regulus let out a soft huff. "She was...intense, but I suspect the answer to that question depends on who you ask. Even at the worst, I don't recall the outbursts being so consistently volatile. Not to say her terminology is inaccurate...and she could be very quick to anger, sometimes, but it wasn't all the time."

"It is possible it was designed as an alarm system," Emmeline pondered. She tapped the quill against her paper. "Not a true frame of reference at all, but rather, one to alert to others presences, and it's simply gotten stuck in that loop."

"Or it could be that it's Sirius and Tonks most of the time," Remus said quietly, as he turned a page with care. "Perhaps not the best judge of whether or not a portrait functions normally."

"No," Emmeline agreed. "But would a portrait, not one like Nigellus but a regular one, even understand who Tonks is?"

"She definitely has a grasp on who we all are," Regulus agreed, mouth thinning a little in thought, "Though I think I would phrase it more as a deterrent to the unwelcome, rather than a true alarm. They mightn’t manifest any differently, but with the exception of Kreacher, I don’t know who would live here to be alerted, based on the knowledge available to them when she passed. It’s a bit of a depressing thought...” Slanting his mouth down, he turned a page in the book open in front of him. “…But Narcissa was never particularly fond of the architecture, and I would not expect her to encourage Draco in that direction when there are plenty of other properties owned by our family alone, not even including the Malfoys. Lucius certainly wouldn’t encourage it.” Shaking his head, he added, “But I digress.”

"But presumably there was someone still here when the portrait was hung," Emmeline reasoned. "Didn't Sirius say it had a permanent sticking charm on it?"

“If there wasn’t, it could easily be put in place by someone else in the family, regardless of whether they were living here or not,” Regulus speculated with a shrug and a pondering sort of frown. “Everyone had spread to where they wanted to be at the time, at least as far as I was aware. With that said, it’s certainly not outside the rest of possibility: between our two grandfathers, it was our mother’s father who was always very attached to the house, so I suppose he might've moved back for a few more years...but Kreacher hasn't mentioned anything of it.”

"You don't believe it was commissioned before she passed on?" Emmeline asked, book left lying open. “I have to admit, it’s not particularly complimentary."

“It likely was commissioned - but whether it was placed before or after is unclear.” Expression pinching a little. “I haven't much perspective on that, unfortunately.”
"Good thing too," Emmeline replied. She gave a knowing look. "I doubt very much you'd be here to discuss it otherwise, and ill health is not something even the most brilliant wizard can stave off forever."

The door opened and shut again, but there was no explosion of noise from the hall this time. Emmeline relaxed into her chair. "Still, fascinating spellwork is fascinating spellwork. Old houses all have their quirks."

Regulus's frame seemed to shed some of its bundling tension, then, nodding again as he latched onto the shift in focus. "They do. Less flashy, compared with the new, but I prefer them."

"At least it's not Knockturn." Hestia smiled. "We looked at flats there last year. I think the window was literally to a brick wall!"

"Oh, don't remind me," Emmeline began laughing, thinking of the flat she used to have there when they were all young, and this all still seemed a lot more about having fun than the desperate search for even a smidge of information to help. "I used to rent a flat in Knockturn, right after I left school, which made for interesting neighbours, but was a little too noisy after dark, and the running water was never the right temperature without wand work every time." She lifted her hands in a surrender motion. "My rebellious period."

Lifting his brow, Regulus’s mouth turned up a little. “Apparently. I would not have guessed as much.”

Emmeline pointed her quill at him. "Cheeky."

Flopping (and it could only be described as flopping) through the door came Nymphadora Tonks, dramatically draping herself across three dining chairs without comment beyond, "Wake me when Kingsley's here."

"Perhaps the portrait has a sensitivity to dramatics," Emmeline shook her head at Tonks's knees, as it was all she could get a good look at. "There's no shortage of it in your family tree."

“We are dedicated to leaving our mark on the world in a variety of creative ways,” Regulus said pointedly in return, mirroring with a slight quill jab of his own before turning it to the parchment again. “Some more literally than others.”

"How goes the escapee search?" Hestia asked, kindly.

"Nada, nope, and nothing." Tonks' voice came from under the table. "It's like they came out and decided to go to the Bahamas."

"The Bahamas can have them," Hestia sighed, about the same time as Remus said, "Sirius actually did do that." before trying to convince Tonks to go upstairs and lay down on something a bit more comfortable.

It was not a surprise for a wanted person to flee, but given what they were broken out for, a beach retirement seemed a little much to hope for. Still, the waiting was awful, and it had to be a little awkward for Regulus. Sirius had plainly said that the Lestranges, regardless of blood, were not his family, but she had never heard such a thing stated by Regulus. It could all be a bit sticky.

"Is Kingsley coming from work?" Emmeline said, changing the subject.

"Dunno," came Tonks' reply. "His mum set him up on some blind date, but I don't know if it was last night or tonight. He complained three times, which for Kingsley is like ranting for three
"I suppose life must go on for people who don't realise there's a shadow looming," Emmeline offered.

"Maybe it's all the more reason," Tonks said, finally moving up onto her elbows.

"Why does this always devolve into a gossip group rather than a research group?" Emmeline sighed, putting her forehead to the table.

"Cause this divination stuff goes right over my head," Tonks said, lifting one of the books roughly enough Emmeline winced. "Any luck figuring out how to break Harry's link? Or what's going on with that giant snake?"

Regulus got a strange look on his face before flickering it away and shaking his head. "The best solution to that still seems to be Harry mastering Occlumency. It may not solve the root of the problem, but it treats the symptoms, at least." He turned a significant look to Remus then. "Any developments on that front?"

Remus leaned to check the door, before he shook his head. "Severus is being even more difficult than usual."

Hestia ruffled. "Surely he can't want to put a child in danger over pride."

Remus winced. "I think that depends on the child."

Emmeline huffed, as the sound of the front door closing echoed in the hallway.

Within the moment, Kingsley - also looking rather tired - stepped into the dining room. "I see the cleaning has gone well," he smiled, looking at each of them in turn. He settled on Regulus with an appraising look, before extending a hand and a neutral-toned greeting. "I don't believe we've met yet. Kingsley Shacklebolt."

Looking between the hand and its associated face, Regulus extended his own hand with a nod. "Regulus Black - but I presume you were able to figure that out."

"The resemblance is a give away," Kingsley agreed, shaking his hand before withdrawing it. "Is there a puffskein on the chair, or is Tonks under the table?"

"Cheers," The young girl sat up with a groan. "You going to talk to Sirius?"

Kingley nodded. "If we can't dissuade them from London, we may as well have a little fun with it. I'm thinking drag in the West End would be an appropriate disguise, since the Quibbler has decided he's a retired rockstar."

Remus snorted hard, "I think he'll agree to that. I'll go track him down." He swung off the seat and promptly disappeared out the door.

"It's only one house," Kingsley called after him with obvious amusement. "There aren't that many places he could be."

"You'd be surprised," Emmeline said, with a shrug. "I tripped over him in the kitchen last time I was here. I've never liked those basement kitchens; quite surprised this place has one, I think it's a muggle design to keep food cool underground."
"Before fridges," Hestia amended.

"The coolboxes?" Emmeline asked, and she nodded. "Yes, I've seen that before. It's just the same as putting cooling charms and preservative charms on, by the looks of it."

"You did," Kingsley nodded, "The kitchen at Privet Drive."

"Oh yes!" Emmeline agreed, "Very organised, though everything seemed rather wet. I don't think I'd like that."

Regulus looked up from his book, eyebrows lifting. "Wet?"

"On the inside!" Emmeline said, leaning forward quite conspiratorially. "It was very damp. I don't think that's good for the vegetables."

"No - that seems like a terrible idea. Won't the food get mouldy?" Regulus asked, puzzled.

"It's not meant to be wet," Remus, reappearing in the doorway, was struggling not to laugh at something he clearly thought was very funny. "Mad-Eye was suspicious of the milk and prodded it, so it was leaking. That's all."

"Oh," Emmeline said, crossly. "I think I'll stick to cooling charms."

"As will I," Regulus said, shaking his head.

Sirius appeared behind him, clearly wondering what exactly he'd walked in on. "What?"

"Remus was trying to extol the virtues of fridges," Emmeline said, "With a little help from Hestia."

"With you lot?" Sirius scoffed. "Try the telly, they'll like being able to watch the boring junk, what is it called?"

"- documentaries-" Remus supplied, strangely still laughing.

"- yeah, them. You can treat it as an anthropological experiment, seeing how they do things." Sirius looked at down at Tonks. "What are you doing down there?"

"Waiting on Kingsley to finish talking to you about doing the West End in drag," Tonks bobbed, and presumably shrugged given the way her head moved.

"Got the legs for it," Sirius replied, without missing a beat. He gestured towards Regulus, "You'd be better off asking him, though. He's the musically-inclined one."

"Oh really?" Hestia bubbled. "What do you play?"

"Piano," Regulus responded, and with a wry slant of the mouth, added, "I'm not familiar with the term 'West End drag,' but based on the context, it doesn't sound like the same thing."

"Dressing as a girl to sing in the theatre," Emmeline supplied. "Or if I were to do it as a boy. Think-"

"Suddenly, her mind came to a screeching stop. "I don't imagine you've ever read Shakespeare, let alone seen it, have you?"

Regulus quirked a brow and shot Sirius a sideways glance before turning back to Emmeline. "No, can't say I have."

"I've been to quite a few now, they're always on. A bit slapstick, perhaps but cleverly written,
interesting characters and good insight." Though not one to immerse herself in muggle culture, Emmeline could appreciate an interesting outside perspective. "But more to the point, he likes to use women dressed as men in his plays for plot purposes."

"With less singing," Hestia added.

"I think my jokes gotten out of hand," Kingsley sighed.

"Baffling," Regulus breathed out, shaking his head.

“At least it'll confuse people if you put that,” Sirius shrugged.

“True,” Kingsley admitted. “I imagine most at the Ministry are as familiar with drag or Shakespeare as I am.”

“How did Dumbledore nab you for the Order?” Sirius asked. “Aren't you notoriously neutral?”

“True, my family prefers not to involve itself,” Kingsley gave a small nod. “It's a very good thing not everyone maintains their family's stance on everything.”

“Good point,” Emmeline agreed. She didn't think her parents knew about the Order, and she didn't relish the thought of their reactions. They undoubtedly had their suspicions about Marlene, and perhaps, Benjy.

“I believe in upholding that all life - magical or otherwise - ought to be sacred,” Kingsley replied. “After that business with Fudge bringing a Dementor along, and worse, brushing off the unauthorised removal of a soul, how could I turn down the offer?”

Sirius eyes flicked to her side of the table briefly. “My soul says thank you. It has much better manners than I.”

Emmeline watched as Regulus had met Sirius’s eyes only briefly before dropping again to his open book, and though he nodded his agreement, his shoulders and expression had each pulled taut.

“I think Kreacher has burrowed himself into Mum's dresses in the attic,” Sirius declared suddenly. “Reg, you want to go see if you can get him out so I can talk through my impending stage career with Kingsley?”

With a brisk nod, Regulus marked his place in the book before him - seemingly with the intention of returning, regardless of the company - and excused himself to the stairs.

Emmeline turned to Sirius and opened her mouth to ask about it, when Sirius made the cutting sign at his neck and shook his head. Curiouser and curiouser.

“Well then,” Emmeline said, still a little disturbed by the sudden change in mood. “I think we better get back to work. The Death Eaters will not stop themselves.”

Kreacher was not in the attic, buried in their mother’s old clothes, and Regulus did not need to scale the stairs to determine as much. Or rather, if Kreacher was doing that, Sirius had more than likely just landed upon a lucky guess. Even so, taking a moment to collect himself was no less welcome, and the further he moved from the study party the softer the thrumming in his mind.

That rush of startled anger had come as a surprise, though perhaps it shouldn’t have. In his mind’s eye, he could see the ever-incompetent Minister Fudge bumbling in with a Dementor in tow like
some wildly unsafe and dangerously untrained guard dog, and though Barty had to look older by now, it was a teenage boy with straw-blonde hair that he pictured at that Dementor’s mercy - or rather, its lack of mercy. What his friend had done was undeniably wrong: Bringing the Dark Lord back was wrong, no matter who did it, and if he really had helped the Lestranges torture the Longbottoms into insanity…

A cold shiver crept down his spine, and he shook his head, as if to knock the thought out through his ears.

Yet Sirius’s words echoed just as loudly in his mind: ‘My soul says thank you. It has much better manners than I.’

Though the tone had been coloured in jest, Regulus felt a harrowing blend of nervous relief. His brother had dodged the Dementors, and within these walls, they could not get him - outside these walls, they could not get him when he was padding about as a dog - but had they succeeded when first the authorization for the Kiss had been passed…Regulus might not have reunited with his brother at all, and that thought only made his blood boil hotter.

Dumbledore was meant to be their ticket to freedom, their well-respected voucher of remorse and character (or in his brother’s case, legitimate innocence), but this war had even Albus Dumbledore tucked away to avoid arrest himself…tucked away and suffering a curse that was desperately trying to kill him, all because of that stupid ring and its stupid stone.

Time was limited, and the Dark Lord’s horcruxes were still out there, threatening to prolong this war for more generations to come if they were not destroyed before he realised they were being whittled away. With Dumbledore gone from the school, there was little hope of accessing either the sword or the Chamber of Secrets. Harry had put himself at enough risk the first time, and he would not ask it of the boy again, willing as he might have been to help. Guilt weighed ever-heavy on his shoulders, though some time had passed - the instigation of one literally torturous detention was more than enough.

Regulus was passing the study, then, first slowing to a stop, then ducking in with a straight line to the desk. There was another source he’d experienced, and though he had done little in the way of maintaining contact with his French branch of friends, the list of secure, safe, and discreet methods ended with Julien.

Settling in his father’s chair, he pulled out parchment and quill, dipping the latter in an inkwell as he set to writing, falling back into French for the first time in nearly a year:

‘To Julien,

I have offered little in the way of update, but I am alive and well. England has yet to fall, which - given the circumstances - is arguably quite lucky. A long time ago, you acquired a certain venom for me for my birthday, and as it turns out, I find I have need of it again. Should you require a reminder, I will oblige, but if you can recall it on your own, I would appreciate a measure of discretion. I hope you are well.

Rian’

Regulus felt a different sort of guilt, preparing to send it off. Perhaps it was not particularly fair on his part, but maintaining regular communications was too big of a risk, just for the sake of conversation, and he could not easily say as much when there was next to nothing in his life that he could be honest about. With the mounting slew of other concerns, he did not have the emotional
energy to make up a story on Rian’s behalf.

Preparing the letter to be sent across the Channel, Regulus’s mind drifted to a different set of...people associated with positive experiences. Downstairs, Emmeline and the others were most likely still digging deep into the restricted texts she had brought along, and he found his mood lightening a little bit more. Soon, the basilisk request would be soaring over the horizon - and perhaps when he settled downstairs again, his mind could settle with him.

Chapter End Notes

The one-shot detailing Regulus's experience joining the Death Eaters (and the circumstances of his Marking) was just put up, for those interested in that, uh...fun...story... → there's no smoke without reasons (it's a sign there's something wrong) :(
I know it has been less than 48 hours since we posted the last chapter, but we're broken on the inside, so here, have another. :)

The heat became pervasive in June. Even within the cooling charms that kept Grimmauld Place at a comfortable temperature, it instigated a further round of trapped-with-the-jitters behaviour. Sirius had not considered he was getting on that badly with it until Regulus had decided they were going to go out for a bit and get some fresh air. Either Regulus was fed up with him or fed up with being stuck inside as well, but regardless, he was glad of the time outside to run and get out some of his nervous energy. It was almost a relief to return to the house and his own skin, as it felt cool and quiet inside the hallway.

Then, without warning, one of the obscured patronuses bounded up into the hallway, stopped, then promptly pissed off without a word. There were absolutely no guesses as to whose it was; only one person consistently obscured and would have no interest in explaining what the hell he was doing in the first place. Especially as he was bound to know Sirius was in a foul mood with him over Harry's Occlumency.

"I think that's Snape about to drop in," Sirius said, by way of explanation.

Regulus lifted his brow. "That's unusual. He doesn't normally pop in for anything but designated meetings."

"I doubt he's popping in for that," Sirius replied, his face grim. "Hopefully the pillock hasn't gotten himself into trouble, that'd be just what we need." Still, there were the practical matters to attend to if he was going to show up and throw his weight about. By now, it would difficult to tell they'd gone anywhere. Clothes changed, and he'd probably jump in the bath, though it might be worth waiting for Snape to come and go before that. It always left him with the urge for a good scrub.

"Hopefully no one in is trouble," Regulus amended.

"No," Sirius agreed, settling on going for that bath after all. "I imagine we'll find out soon enough."

He was barely dressed again, when the door of Number Twelve slammed so thoroughly that his mother piped up. With wet hair and stocking feet, Sirius half-charged down to give Snape a piece of his mind for not only going against Dumbledore's wishes and forgoing Harry's lesson, but for coming into the house like a madman.

Except it wasn't Snape at all. It was Remus.

Sirius took a few steps down to meet him, but the moment Remus locked eyes with him, he half-ran up the stairs and pulled him into a rough hug. After a moment of confusion, Sirius's stomach rolled, and he realised something must have happened. Not Snape, Remus wouldn't be upset over that, but something. With a surprising struggle, he pulled himself away from him and stared. "WHAT'S THE MATTER?" he roared to be heard over his mother.
He couldn't hear what was being said over the din, however.

Regulus arrived behind, face crinkled and his eyes searching between the two of them, but it wasn't until they had quieted the raging portrait that any communication was possible.

The first words that Sirius managed to process were 'Harry' and 'missing'.

"What the hell do you mean, missing?" Sirius demanded; what the hell was going on at Hogwarts if they now couldn't even tell where Harry was?

"He had a run in with that vile woman, and now by the looks of it, he - along with Hermione, Ron and Ginny - have all disappeared from the grounds." Remus looked extremely perturbed by it, at least. That was good. It would be terrible if he was being calm about it. "The last person to see him was Severus Snape, who he apparently told that you had been picked up by the Death Eaters!"

The patronus. That explained one unusual thing, but nothing else. Clearly, Harry was struggling to tell the difference between a bad dream and what was going on in Voldemort's mind. Not a difficult distinction to make.

Sirius stole a look back at Regulus, in case he had seen something when they were out that he had not. "I'm fine," He said, with a shrugging confusion. "Do you think they'll come here then?"

Remus shook his head. "They were caught at the fire in Umbridge's office. Presumably, they already called the house." His tone changed, laced with no small amount of anger. "Any idea why he wouldn't have just been able to speak to you?"

Sirius felt himself wince. Shit. "Yeah," he replied, shortly. "I might have an idea."

Steeling himself, Regulus's eyes flicked over to Sirius before responding in a carefully measured tone: "Did Harry say where these Death Eaters supposedly were?"

"Yes," Remus glanced at him, but settled himself looking right at Sirius in a way that made him sure this was not going to be the end of that. "More specifically, he said where you were. But you clearly aren't, and I don't believe even you would walk into the Ministry without a better cause than idle boredom."

Sirius's temper flared, "No."

Remus merely nodded. "Tonks and Kingsley have gone ahead, but given what happened to Arthur, it was important to verify if Harry wasn't correct."

"Alright," Sirius said. So they'd gone off to the wrong location and needed rounding up before the school got wind of it. "There's no law against them going to the Ministry."

"That's not the problem," Remus replied, as his voice switched to bracing. "There is another possibility." Sirius waited, as Remus apparently required a dramatic pause. "That Voldemort is now aware of their connection, and it's a trap."

Inside his chest, Sirius felt his heart begin to hammer, and he squeezed his hands with tension. "Alright," he pushed out, trying to sound level. "So they just need to intercept him."

"I think it may be too late for that," Remus replied.

"They can't apparate, and they don't have a portkey; the floos are being watched, you have plenty of-"
"The visitor badges were generated ten minutes ago," Remus cut him off. "I don't know how they got there, but they got there, and if it's the Ministry that they want Harry at, I think we both know why."

The prophecy. It had to be. Then he would go to the Department of Mysteries. "Emmeline?"

Remus shook his head frustratedly. "She isn't answering."

*Shit, shit, and more shit.* He opened his mouth to ask who could get there, what Death Eater would be in there, but it could be Rookwood, it could Malfoy given the way he swans about, it could even be Crabbe, or with the help of them, anyone. It could be Voldemort himself.

Regulus was quiet, a thin frown tightening his face, lost to his own thoughts until a lull in the discussion spurred him to speak. "If they are already there, the trap could be set off at any moment. We can't very well leave them to it."

"We're not," Remus assured.

"I'm going," Sirius said, firmly. He saw Remus about to answer and shook his head, "It's not up for discussion! At best, he's going to have to go deal with Death Eaters, probably Bellatrix given her grand escape, and he's fifteen! No kid should be left at the mercy of bloody Bellatrix."

Remus was shaking his head. "Moody answered-"

"I don't care!" Sirius said, crossing his arms. "Dumbledore isn't here, and the worst case is it's Voldemort himself, and you are not cruel enough to make me sit here and wait for it all to happen again! Don't you dare."

Remus looked - angry, upset, something, but he couldn't worry about that now. He had to go. Whatever happened now, he had to go and make sure Harry was safe.

"I'm portkeying in," Remus said, eventually. "The second those children are safe, you're taking my portkey and getting out."

"Fine," Sirius said.

"Fine," Remus echoed.

---

Lupin was pulling out his portkey as the conversation lulled, but Regulus's mind was crowding loudly with his own thoughts. Though he did not much want to dwell on Lupin's accusatory look, Regulus could not help but feel a twinge of guilt that they had missed Harry’s call, even if they could have missed it in their rooms, just as easily. It was surprisingly simple, in some moments, to get wrapped up in what felt like a childhood revival - a sense of cohesion they had not experienced since they were perhaps ten years old - but he knew the war was a very real threat beyond their walls. Though his interactions with the boy had been limited, he could not help but feel bad that it was the second time he had inadvertently made things difficult for Harry (even if he hasn't quite found it necessary to mention the former to Sirius).

Sirius cared deeply for Harry, was clearly running into an inevitable pit of Death Eaters for him - and no matter how much he looked like James Potter, Regulus knew that Harry didn't deserve whatever fate the Dark Lord had in mind, and neither did Sirius. The walls of this house might be safe, but they meant little if he had to be alone within them now.

“I want to help,” Regulus said suddenly as they turned to look at him in unison.
Sirius gave him a considering glance. "You know as I do who it's likely we're about to bust in on," he said. "You're sure it's a fight you're ready to get into?"

Steeling his expression, Regulus tipped a firm nod, ignoring the way his stomach lurched. Bella - perhaps even the Dark Lord himself. "I'll be careful."

Remus gave an unreadable look, but Sirius shrugged forcefully. He seemed to realise that the longer they stood around debating it, the more likely the trouble. Sighing, it seemed Lupin also came to this conclusion.

"It's a long, dark corridor. The walls will move if you shut the door, and it's almost impossible to navigate." Remus said, through it was unclear if it was to Regulus or both of them. "Don't try and get out through the doors; if you get lost, find Tonks, Kingsley, myself, and in a pinch, if you don't mind the strip search, Moody. If Harry's already taken - the object - then it's incredibly important it never reaches Voldemort."

Sirius shifted, "I know that."

'The object-' Regulus leveled a searching look as curiosity rose. If Lupin was continuing to be deliberately vague, it must be something related to the Order, though Regulus had been under the impression that Harry was not included in Order business either.

"Is there any chance of telling me what exactly we're trying to keep away from them?" Regulus ventured, lifting his brow.

Remus shifted in his obvious discomfort at being caught between the need to both tell and not. "A small, glass ball with a dull light. Don't touch it. It killed the last person."

Perhaps less information than his curiosity would have preferred, but Regulus's recognised that it was information enough to serve their purposes, and they longer they talked, the more likely a bunch of teenagers were going to walk headfirst into any number of Death Eaters with an Azkaban-shaped grudge.

"Thank you," Regulus said, approaching them with nerves bundling taut in his chest.

Bella was likely to be in the other side of this portkey - Rodolphus, Rabastan, Lucius, Avery, Mulciber, perhaps the Dark Lord himself… To throw himself into a fray with the very people he had spent the first half of his life with was unnecessarily risky, he knew, but as he flicked another glance at his brother, he steeled himself with the resolve that it was a risk worth taking if the alternative was letting Sirius run into Bella's crossfire without monitoring.

Reaching out to grasp the portkey in sync with Sirius and Lupin alone, he felt the dizzying tug as the object tore them from the dim light of his house to the even dimmer halls of what must the Ministry. Gathering his bearings, Regulus retracted his hand again, first looking expectantly to Lupin, then turning his gaze down the hall.

Sirius, too, was looking around the lit blue flames and the doors that utterly covered the walls. The hallway was dark despite the lights, all the doors were identical and without handles or indication of what might be the one they were looking for. The floor below looked like dark water, shimmering reflections and silence. Hesitantly, he pushed a door open only a crack, but decided to back out of it immediately with a shudder. "I thought the brains were a joke," he muttered, and Regulus leaned forward over his shoulder with interest for a peek. "Which way?"

"Straight ahead," Remus said, before adding, "I believe."
"Oh, this is gonna be fun," Sirius whispered in a tone that indicated the total opposite.

Though Regulus knew the mounting anxiety ought to take precedence, he felt a swell of wonder as the door shut between them and the room of (dual-tentacled) brains. In his mind, he heard Emmeline's warning banter and fought the strange rush of a situationally-inappropriate smile, mouth pressing instead to a steadying line. Part of him wanted to peek into the other doors, to dispel, in part, the mysteries surrounding them, but to wander off would be as much a betrayal of their trust as it was - apparently - a danger if it was truly that difficult to get back out again.

Reluctantly he tore his eyes from the doors - and just a beat later, whipped his gaze to the door right beside them as a harrowing scream pierced through, washing over him like an icy gust. Barrelling just a few frantic steps toward the door, it was hard to distinguish their footsteps from each other's, and tension seemed to be tugging at every muscle in his body as they swung open the door.

Curled in a sobbing lump on the floor was a blonde boy Regulus didn't recognise by name - one of the students from Harry's lessons, maybe - but it was the familiar shadow looming over the boy that caught Regulus's breath thickly in his throat. Immediately, spells were flying, chaos escalating to a roar, but again his insides gave a stunning lurch as he connected his eldest cousin's proximity to the sobbing boy...

Harry suddenly hit the floor, moving the boy out of the way only seconds before a blasting curse would have hit him. However, in a flash, one of the others - face obscured by a mask - grabbed Harry by the throat. The boy, in lieu of dueling, instead slammed his wand through the masks eye to a howling reaction. It had the desired effect, as a coughing Harry fell to the ground.

"I'm going after Harry and Neville!" Sirius half-yelled above the noise, making a skidding run down in between the now maskless Death Eaters.

With a steadying nod, Regulus shook off his stare and moved to the side, pulling out his wand. (Neville- Sirius had said the other day that the Longbottoms’ boy was called Neville-) Bella's mask was off, boldly exposing her own identity, and he could see Lucius's telltale flash of blonde, but several of the Death Eater’s were still obscured behind their masks and hoods. It was unsettling, not knowing who all surrounded them - not knowing whether there were old friends, or even extended family, on the other side of his wand - and privately he admitted it had been much more comfortable to be the one with his identity shrouded.

Ducking his head down, he caught a flash of pink across the room, taking notice of Tonks shooting a spell at one of the Death Eaters on the other side of a stone arch, half-concealed by its lightly-swaying veil.

Catching a wand raising in his direction from the corner of his eye, adrenaline yanked Regulus back to action, and he scarcely pulled up a shielding charm in time to block a bright orange blast. Raging in his mind was the temptation to scan each mask for the hint of someone familiar - to look for Avery, for Mulciber, to know if they were steeped in this mess (or even still alive, despite disappointments…)

Another spell shot his way, met with another shield in turn, and Regulus shifted diagonal from his assailant just as a stray slicing curse struck his left shoulder from behind. Curling back in a wince, he turned an irritated glance back to what turned out to be Lucius, wand still held at the ready. For a moment, their eyes met, and though it was hard to say with all the distraction of spells crashing around, Regulus thought he saw the other man's eyes narrow, wand slowing to a pause.

The first Death Eater was moving toward him, wand rearing for another attack, and Regulus
stepped back to shoot a blasting curse at the pillar between them, disintegrating the stone to a blinding, hazy dust that gave the Death Eater pause with a startled cough.

Through the dust, he could see Bellatrix and Tonks fighting on the stairs, and Sirius still with the kids, though they seemed to be turning their attentions to the fight again.

A quick glance behind revealed that Lucius had moved on to a fight with Kingsley, despite Regulus's (now throbbing) back being turned, and though he thought that maybe Lucius pulling back ought to be a reassuring sign, he could not decide in the moment whether it was something to trust or a false comfort before Bella's inevitable fit.

When he turned back to the dusted Death Eater, Regulus saw the masked face glancing between Lucius and himself, wand still held but no longer attacking so aggressively.

“Regulus?”

The intricate designs of the mask were harder to see in the dim and the dust, but there was something familiar in the shape of the molded features and in the startled, almost tentative tone.

Avery-

For the second time since arriving, Regulus wished he had his own mask to block what he really hoped was a stone-neutral expression - or even for the poor coverage that the pillar might have offered, if it weren’t a piling cloud of debris now. He could neither nod nor shake his head, instead lowering his wand subtly with a tightened grip, trying to read the other’s movements - but a third attack didn't come.

Seeming to capitalize on presumably-Avery’s stillness, Lupin engaged him in a fight that broke the stillness, and with a shake of his own head, Regulus moved sideways more to make himself a challenging target than anything else, and with a thundering chest, searched the room for Sirius once again.

Across the room, the duels were no less raging. As Dolohov went down (an excellent petrify from Harry), Sirius caught glance of a flash of pink hair as Tonks fell from half way up the steps onto the ground. Behind her, Bellatrix was swanning her way down and looking far too pleased with herself. Sirius could absolutely fix that and ruin her day, but not without making sure everyone was safe first.

A quick glance to Tonks showed her stomach still moving; she was still alive. He moved onto the more pressing concern of Harry and Neville. He forced Harry to the ground out of the way of the familiar green light and stunning spells, but the longer he was here, the longer the danger persisted. He could see the prophecy in Harry's hand, and if they were going to remove it, now was going to be the best chance.

“Harry, take the prophecy, grab Neville, and run!” Sirius yelled, dashing to meet Bellatrix. Harry took it to heart and launched himself at Neville just in time to knock him out of the way of what Sirius thought was the killing curse. He had to stop Bellatrix before she got anywhere near them again.

(Where were the other children? Why was it just those two? Were they hurt somewhere?)

Wordlessly, he and Bellatrix fell into a barrage not unlike the play fighting of childhood; it was almost funny, how familiar it felt. Behind him, he heard Neville yell (why were they still here?) and out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a very welcome addition to the foray:
Dumbledore, locked in and ready to fight. His adrenaline surged, and he noticed with great amusement that a few still masked Death Eaters were beginning to scramble and run at the sight of him.

*Brilliant.*

Not Bellatrix, though. She would never run from anything.

Ducking a blasting curse that would have ended him up like Benjy, he laughed. She wasn't even trying. “Come on, you can do better than that!” He ducked out another spell, but he wasn't paying attention; there were too many spells going back and forth, and he was too caught up in the fight and the moment. He hadn’t seen where the spells were coming from, or anticipated that she would cast in quick succession.

Another spell came close, too close, and he felt something burn on left side and a surge of pain.

The last thing he saw before everything went black was Bellatrix crumple to the ground.

With his wand shaking in his hand, Regulus stared numbly at the collapsed forms of his brother and cousin. Whatever scurrying was livening the room around him, Regulus could not shake his mind from its frantic reeling, turning over on itself in a series of fresh collisions.

Regulus had raised a wand against his cousin - a stun, a temporary annoyance at best - but an attack, nonetheless. The stun had not been enough to fully stifle the shot she'd fired: Sirius had still knocked his head against the veiled arch, but it seemed like the blast, at least, had skewed enough to fail its strike in full force. Unconscious was not an ideal state for a battle, and he felt a little stab of guilt that he had not been faster; yet he tarried no longer before cutting across the room to his brother's side.

Crouching to slip his head under Sirius’s arm, he winced against the tug on his bleeding shoulder. A twitch on the ground then caught his attention, and before he realised it was happening, his eyes caught the hazy rise of Bellatrix's volcanic glare, the fury behind her eyes looking ready to burst the moment her stun fully wore off. Regulus felt his knees weaken beneath him, and though he covered the fumble with a grip to 'steady' Sirius's deadweight frame, he felt his face go ashen in a heady wash of every childhood anxiety.

“I'm sorry,” Regulus muttered, almost inaudibly over the continued fighting, though as he dragged Sirius's away from the dais, he could see that in the middle of the room, Dumbledore seemed to be confining most of the remaining Death Eaters with some invisible bind.

Kingsley was swooping in just as Bella regained full control of her faculties again, but despite the Auror’s proximity, it was Regulus and Sirius who first drew her gaze.

“TRAITOR!” she shrieked with such vitriol that Regulus thought his ears might never stop ringing, heart thudding aggressively as his hand twisted securely into the side of Sirius's robes, propping up his brother as much as he was propping up himself, in a sense.

Even as Kingsley engaged Bellatrix, Regulus could not tear his gaze away, hating the way she wouldn't stop looking furiously in his direction, but there was no way to even approach the idea of resolving this particular conflict in a reasonable manner at the moment, and seeing his brother to safety was his first priority. Moody was tending to an unconscious Tonks, Remus and Kingsley still stood - Regulus had no idea where the kids had wandered off to, but Sirius had sent them off with the intention of safety. Hopefully that was enough-
if they could get that portkey- Lupin had not handed it over, now that Regulus thought of it-

His cousin aside, the majority of the chaos was starting to settle with so many of the Death Eaters strung by some invisible rope. With the decision that it would be easier for Lupin to come to them rather than dragging Sirius across the room, Regulus again settled his attention on Moody and Tonks, uncomfortable though that proximity felt in two different ways… Two Aurors, one who detested him, and one who probably ought to have, yet even as the thought crossed his mind, he found himself hoping that the latter's fall hadn't been too serious. For all the family tensions, her cheerful attitude was infectious, and their family had suffered enough losses…

Regulus soon reached the wall near Moody and Tonks, settling to a kneel as he let his brother's frame slip carefully from his shoulders. Without looking, he could feel Moody’s swiveling eye staring at the back of his head, or perhaps both eyes, and though Regulus’s heart still hammered relentlessly, he held his chin a little more stubbornly as he turned over his shoulder to look at the scene. He realised with a cold drop that Bella was nowhere to be seen, but a movement from above caught his gaze, drawing his eyes upward.

The other children - Ron, Ginny, Hermione, and a dazed-looking blonde girl - appeared on the stairs. The girl and Ron were half carrying what looked like an unconscious Hermione, and Ginny was hobbling along, wincing but refusing to break her speed. There were no sign of Harry and Neville with them.

This must have caught Lupin's attention too. "Where's Harry?" he called over, as they managed to make it to the bottom of the stairs.

"He and Neville ran past us," Ginny replied, "Along with Bellatrix Lestrange."

Ron let loose an unnerving high-pitched giggle.

"Ignore him, something's messed with him." Ginny lowered Hermione onto the ground gently, before flopping onto it herself. She eyed the Death Eater group in the middle of the room, but made a gesture towards Tonks and Sirius. "Are they alright?"

Regulus nodded, his mouth thinning to a line. “Tonks fell from the stairs-”

“-She was knocked from the stairs,” Moody corrected gruffly, “by that bloody cousin of yours.”

In his shoulders and in his face, Regulus felt tension knotting again, and again, he nodded. “She was knocked from the stairs,” - a glance to Moody - “by Bellatrix, and Sirius was knocked into that arch over there.”

“Also by that bloody cousin of yours,” Moody added in his gravelly tone - unhelpfully, as far as Regulus was concerned.

“He hit his head, and seems to have suffered some other injuries from the fight itself, but I believe he is otherwise fine,” Regulus continued a little tightly, and as the adrenaline faded, he started to feel the gash on his own shoulder throbbing again. Ironic, that the main offenders amongst all those Death Eaters were the ones related to them, but perhaps it wasn't that surprising at all.

"Alastor," came Dumbledore's voice, harder than usual. "Keep the situation contained. I will return."

It was Ginny that prompted. "Professor?"

Dumbledore came towards them at a surprisingly spry pace, but he didn't look particularly pleased.
"The injured will be quite safe here. I believe that Neville and Harry are in need of assistance in the Atrium," he assured quietly. He looked back towards the door at the top of the stairs, and his mouth thinned into a line. "It appears he has grown tired of waiting. I will engage Voldemort myself. Remus, Regulus, come with me - I believe Bellatrix will attempt to make things difficult - so I ask you to each grab one of the boys, and the prophecy as well, and get them back here out of his grasp. I cannot overstate the importance of this. Harry's life may depend upon it."

Lowering his attention down to Sirius - still unconscious - Regulus felt a fresh wave of discomfort. He did not much like the idea of leaving his brother, even in the care of Auror Moody, and was even less fond of the prospect of waltzing into any space with the Dark Lord or Bellatrix, much less both...but again he felt a little prickle of guilt that Harry was here at all, and another that it was Bella who had reduced that boy Neville to a crumbling sob. Getting them to safety was more his responsibility than it was Moody’s, and to suggest otherwise felt like a deflection, especially with such expectant looks. (Getting all of the kids to safety was important too - and Sirius would still be here when he returned.)

He just had to run in, apparate the boys back here - situation resolved…

With a bracing nod, Regulus stood, looking first to Lupin, then to Dumbledore, adrenaline pulsing fresh. (In, then out-)

With a sweep, Dumbledore pulled a few paces from the group, and as Regulus and Lupin approached him, he placed a hand on each of their shoulders. Regulus was still shooting a final look to Sirius when he felt the jolting tug of apparation yanking them from the Department of Mysteries to the Atrium-

-and upon their arrival, Regulus felt for a moment as if all the air had been kicked from his lungs.

Bellatrix was curled on the floor, her screaming sobs echoing off the Atrium walls, and though the Dark Lord stood before him, it was only his cousin that he saw.

“MASTER, I TRIED, I TRIED - DO NOT PUNISH ME-” she wailed, the brokenness in her voice sending a chilling ripple down Regulus's spine. “Master, I am sorry, I knew not, I was fighting the animagus Black!”

The Dark Lord merely ordered her silence as she flung herself at his feet - like some cruel master dismissing his house-elf with a kick, though he never lifted a foot. Though Bella's words were stifled, her weeping continued, twisting some familiar - if complicated - anger in Regulus's chest. (The Dark Lord cared nothing for them, saw them as nothing more than disposable, mindless servants...how could she not see that?)

From the corner of his eye, Regulus saw Lupin looking over at him, and with a flash of eye contact, Regulus remembered what it was they had come here for. In unison, Lupin moved towards Harry as Regulus, too, shot towards Neville - grasping him by the shoulders and focusing hard on the room with the arch, with Sirius and the rest of their comrades, then disappeared with a crack.

Sirius was still unconscious when he and Neville arrived with a mirrored crack. Releasing his grasp on the boy’s shoulders, Regulus stepped towards his brother again and lowered to a knee, more to steady himself than to see anything he could not see while standing. Even in the quiet of this arch room, his head still echoed with his cousin’s wailing, unable to banish the image of her crumpled form.

'DO NOT PUNISH ME-’ she had sobbed.  
'The animagus Black,’ she had called his brother…
Time passed at an achingly slow pace, but eventually, Lupin appeared with a violently trembling Harry in tow. He looked around the room, before apparently deeming himself satisfied. "Voldemort and Bellatrix are gone, but they were seen. Dumbledore is remaining with Fudge to make sure no funny business happens now, but there are Aurors on their way down here." He patted Harry's pocket. "Neville, do you have it?" Neville nodded emphatically, patting his own pocket. Regulus eyes followed the movement, supposing the clear ball Remus had mentioned and the prophecy Dumbledore had mentioned were one and the same, though he said nothing as Remus nodded in return. "Alright, Harry has Dumbledore's portkey, it'll take you back to Hogwarts. From there, Madame Pomfrey can call St. Mungo's."

"What about Sirius?" Harry said, as the trembling began to subside.

"Sirius and Tonks will both need to go to St. Mungo's," Remus said, taking a nervous glance towards the door.

"Then that's where I'm going too!" Harry said, fiercely.

"Den we're goin' where Harry goed," Neville added, still struggling with his own curse.

Remus looked ready to argue the point, before he sighed in a way that was equal parts resigned and irritated. "Then it's a two-pronged trip. Take the portkey, Madame Pomfrey will get you to St. Mungo's, or you can argue it out with her. I'll see Tonks gets there."

Regulus tipped his own nod, shifting on steadier feet and reaching for the portkey as the teenagers gathered around the far less conscious passenger. With the scuffle resolved, Regulus knew he ought to cut his losses and head back to the house - but if his secret was essentially blown to those he was specifically trying to avoid, then there was little point in leaving his brother to the mercy of a hospital that was bound to figure out he was 'mass murderer Sirius Black' soon enough - and meeting Lupin's eyes, his expression said as much.

Perhaps they were walking into (yet another) disaster, but as least they could weather this one together.
The situation at Hogwarts only became marginally easier. Madame Pomfrey had put her foot down on calling anyone from St. Mungo's until they had all been first checked over by her, so by the time Remus had looped back from the hospital, all of the children save for Harry and Luna had been put to their beds ("I'm fine," Harry said, as if he hadn't been cradled in his own arms only a couple of hours ago and unable to keep his own head up from the shaking.) Hermione seemed to have caught the worst of it, judging by the sheer amount of potions bottles on her bedside and the fact she was still unconscious. Both of the Black brothers had been looked over and one given his marching orders about taking it easy for a few days, and the other, Remus noted with concern, was also still out cold.

"Are you injured?" The Healer asked shrewdly, but thankfully, Remus was nothing but cuts and scrapes. He'd gotten off easily.

"St. Mungo's?" Remus asked.

"That'll be Granger, they'll keep her overnight to check her over, right in the ribs for her. I've got Longbottom's nose back to normal, and Ginny Weasley only required her ankle healing, but since she blacked out, we'll be careful about it." Pomfrey took a glancing look at Ron. "Weasley, I don't know what to tell you, he's developed welts on his arms, and thought attacks can leave nasty side-effects. He'll have to go too."

If there were any thoughts of Harry remaining at the school, they just flew right out the window. Harry himself had parked himself on a chair to watch them, along with Luna. Neither were really speaking.

"Is Regulus here?" Remus asked, sweeping over the room. He was surprised to see the stout form of what he was quite sure was Umbridge in one of the far beds, but he supposed stranger things had happened.

"In the side room. I thought it might be more prudent in case there’s trouble," Pomfrey replied, calling after Remus as he ducked into it. "Remind him not to go doing anything strenuous and to salve, three times a day!"

There was a grim amusement to watching someone else get told to take care of themselves, but it was short-lived.

"Hello," Remus said, looking over Sirius and back again. "Dumbledore’s put something in writing, and Kingsley’s making sure Fudge sticks to it," he said, without preamble. "Pomfrey’s about to organise the St. Mungo’s transfer. He’ll meet us there."

Regulus turned his attention from the window, though a copy of The Quibbler was still open to an article about crumpled snorcacks, clearly discarded sometime before in favour of muted staring.

"Thank you for the update," Regulus began, shifting his weight to face Remus head on. "Do we know what exactly Dumbledore put in writing?"

"Other than not getting him arrested before he's through the door, no. Dumbledore has agreed to go in and make a more formal statement tomorrow - likely so the papers can run with it. Are you staying with Sirius, or going home?" Remus prompted. They would need to know the next of kin, so he was trying to think if Regulus would even count given his officially deceased status or if he'd
have to ask if Tonks's mother would mind letting them that sort of thing. Awkward, to say the least. "Hermione and Ron are coming, so there is no way that Harry will be dissuaded from coming."

"I plan to stay," Regulus said with conviction. "At this point, I'm quite certain the people I was trying to keep my living status from are now very much aware - at least as much as they can be without me saying so directly to them. As things are, I would much rather keep track of what's happening."

Remus gave him a slight nod. "Are you planning on telling the hospital?"

With a heavy sigh, Regulus leaned back in his chair. "I haven't yet decided what the best course of action is. Kin are less likely to get kicked out at a Healer's whim, but the situation remains complicated. Perhaps they are not concerned to check such things in the moment - I can't say for certain - but legally, I'm dead, and it does not seem the optimum time to pop over and fix that."

"With Tonks there, it wouldn't be difficult to get hold of her mother," Remus responded thoughtfully. He understood the desire to stay hidden in obscurity while it was available, but they were running low on time. "But that arises another set of issues, as I understand it."

Wryly, Regulus pressed his mouth to a slanted line. "At least it probably can't go worse than reuniting with Bella," he remarked with a subtle crinkle of the nose, shaking his head as he turned a thoughtful expression back to the window.

"Let's not tempt fate," Remus warned. He caught a brief flash of lime green out the door, which must be the orderlies coming to retrieve people. "I'll take Harry through the floo now, and see you in spell damage. Let me know what you decide in terms of identity disclosure."

Eyes flicking back over to Remus, Regulus nodded, closing the long-abandoned Quibbler and slotting it back where he had found it earlier that night. "I will see you there," he responded, the thoughtful look lingering on his face even as they readied to leave. (Perhaps he would stop by the house, first, if briefly…)

This ordeal was in full-swing now - it was time to heal some wounds and stave off some politicians.

Regulus had been arguing with (no - informing) the St. Mungo's security for nearly ten minutes, hands folded stonily and mouth pulling taut with a very measured calm. The witch in front of him was portly with a kind, (increasingly less) patient face, framed with silver curls; and Regulus supposed she might be a very nice person, in other circumstances, perhaps even good at her job, but her bespeckled eyes continued to flick back to the patient informational chart in her hand, and each time they did, he felt a fresh stab of stifled annoyance. He understood how the St. Mungo's charts worked - far more thoroughly now than he ever had before - and perhaps it was his own fault for not prioritising his legal recognition of existence, but no amount of reasonable explanation was quite enough to dispel its resulting frustration.

“'I realise I am not on the list of kin,'” he said once again, his voice discreet in level, “‘but as I said, he is my brother, and I would like to see him.’”

“And as I said, I’m afraid that just isn’t possible, sir,” the witch said, the subtle strain in her smile suggesting she was well past her own enjoyment of the debate. “Perhaps an exception could be made, under different circumstances, but given the...complications of his situation…”

“He’s innocent,” Regulus countered defensively, but no less quietly.
“That may well be…” she said, a little less certainly, “but without verification from someone who is on the list, I’m afraid it’s out of the question…”

Regulus’s nose crinkled, and in his mind, he was rearing for a fresh presentation of his argument - but pushing the witch past her good will would not help when it came time to ask again, so instead he let out a steadying sigh and nodded, turning on his heels to walk towards the big double doors leading back to the main area of the spell damage ward. Before coming to the hospital - in fact, up to the point he was actually speaking to the security guard in question - he had not explicitly intended to pull the family card, as he had hoped on some level that he could at least gain access to the room, if not priority… The more logical set of reasoning had known better, even before Remus raised the issue back at Hogwarts, but that made it no less irritating.

His hand was just touching the rightmost door when he heard a jarring voice from behind him, yanking his mind back through the years and his eyes back around to the space outside his brother’s room.

"I'm sorry, but as I said, you need to be on the-"

The sounds of the security guard trailed off as she blinked uneasily at Andromeda, who was standing straight as a rod and considering the woman with a displeased expression.

"We're family," Andromeda informed her with a crisp tone. "Andromeda Tonks, née Black. I ought to be listed." The elder witch regarded her for several moments longer than necessary, but Andromedia did not move. "I don't think you'll find the answers staring at me, check the information!" Almost as an afterthought she added in a less confrontational tone, "Please."

For a still beat, Regulus had forgotten how to breathe, frozen still by the double doors. From the time he was twelve, he had known how to play the disownment game, how to sling the blame, how to turn a stumble-footed interaction into a fight without even trying, but in that moment, he could only stare at a cousin he had not seen for nearly two-thirds of his life. The anger had been a feeling so carefully memorised that it felt real, most of the time, but the truth of it was something a little bit different - a little softer, sadder, more uncertain - and this time, he was standing on the wrong side of the family-drawn line.

Or perhaps, the right one. (In his mind, there was a shrieking echo - TRAITOR! - and he smothered a shudder.)

Andromeda still struck an unsettling resemblance to her elder sister, yet for all the pride he saw in Andromeda’s profile, the line of her face was not cruel or frantic, but rather possessing of a dignity he truthfully hadn't seen in any of his family, since his return. The sudden rush of nostalgia was as painful as it was familiar, followed by a knotted tug of staggering loneliness.

She had left him, left all of them, long before Sirius had, left them for a muggleborn - had given birth to Tonks, who now laid in a hospital bed because of Bella. Sirius now laid in a hospital bed because of Bella. (TRAITOR!)

Regulus nearly missed the click of his brother’s door opening, and for a moment, he wasn’t sure if he would be able to wrestle his voice back into submission, but his cousin had not yet stepped inside when he spoke:

Andie. "Andromeda.” His voice was quieter than he’d intended it to be, though the freeze in her step suggested she must have heard him.

She spun upon her heel, turning to face his direction with a scrutinising look. She took the several
steps forward with purpose, but refused to look away. "If this is a joke, then it's unspeakably cruel."

Pressing his mouth to a steadying line, Regulus simply shook his head, not yet certain he trusted himself to speak again.

Andromeda reached out her hand, and pressed it lightly to his forehead for a moment. "Surprisingly warm," she declared. "I suppose that means the dead have not risen. Did you come here with Narcissa?"

Again, he shook his head with a smothered wince, though it still flickered sharp in his eyes.

"I don't understand," Andromeda admitted. "Then why are you loitering? Unless..." She turned her attention back towards the locked door, before returning her gaze to Regulus with raised eyebrows.

Mouth thinning to a line, Regulus nodded, this time mustering a spoken response as his eyes shifted over to the door, as much to acknowledge the suggestion as it was to avoid eye contact. "They won't let me in. Apparently there is some policy against presumed dead people visiting presumed convicts without a permission slip," he managed with some mild measure of annoyance to mask his discomfort, though he was relieved to hear his voice holding steadier.

"Really?" Andromeda rolled her eyes in an exaggerated fashion, before waving him forward. "Come with me then." She marched back up, barely acknowledging the guard. "If you'll open the door-"

The guard indicated Regulus, "Are you willing to take responsibility for him?"

Andromeda looked at him with a somewhat amused expression, "Yes, I think I can manage that." She reached over and tapped the chart. "You may want to update the records, Black, comma, Regulus A, like many others I'm sure, declared dead in absentia during the last war."

For a moment, the guard hesitated. "You'll have to leave your wands."

"Fine," Andromeda drew her own, handing it over.

With a frown and a beat of hesitation, Regulus sighed - then moved to hand over his own, disliking the protocol immediately and immensely. His tongue itched to argue that Sirius wouldn't take their wands and leg it even if he wasn't laid up in a hospital bed, just as it itched to point out that he had said exactly what Andromeda had said, not five minutes before, but he bit back both with great effort.

When both wands were secured in the guard’s care, the door was opened for them, once again, and Regulus kept his gaze set uncomfortably forward as they slipped inside.

Andromeda breathed a heavy sigh as the door clicked, and locked, behind them. She walked the few steps over to the bed, presumably to get a closer look. "Not too terrible," she concluded. "I think Nymphadora looks worse, and she's already awake and complaining."

Regulus lingered by the wall, studying the back of her head as she studied Sirius. "It could have been worse, certainly."

"Do you know," Andromeda said, smoothing her skirt under herself as she sat down, "You have the distinct aura of someone who thinks they're about to be told off."

"I'm not completely certain what to think about all of this," Regulus admitted, lamenting the lack of a window to look out of, but he supposed that was another precaution in light of the accusations..."
against Sirius. Instead, he looked around the room, noticing there was scarcely anything to speak of from wall to wall, save for the bed. No paintings, no plants, nothing. Regulus thought his brother would not like the room much at all, once he awoke.

"Then perhaps you should focus on what you do think rather than preoccupy yourself with what you ought to think," Andromeda offered. "Are you well?"

A sentiment much easier said than done, Regulus thought to point out, and an oversimplification, when he was thinking quite a lot of things he oughtn't think, these days - but the words died in his throat. Instead, he nodded with a small shrug in spite of the lingering pain in his shoulder, though he could not quite pin down the interaction of emotions that, upon looking at her, felt stunningly quiet.

"Regardless of all else, it is lovely to see you," Andromeda said, even though she was frowning deeply. "Even if the familial tendency towards loquaciousness has skipped you. Or do you, as the rest of the magical world seems to, also have trouble meeting my eye simply due to an unfortunate resemblance?"

"It's..." Regulus paused, and with a subtle wince thought that the resemblance ( - TRAITOR - ) certainly was not helping an already uncomfortable situation. "...It has been a difficult night," he said to a tile on the far end of the floor, just visible over Sirius's bed.

"So I hear," Andromeda huffed. "Would you like to tell me about it?"

Regulus frowned, eyes flicking over to her, then back down to the tile. However natural it might be, Andromeda's question almost felt like a test - though Tonks did not seem the type to contrive one, nor did the Order itself seem like they would much like to risk the divulgence of information. Perhaps Tonks had been granted permission, given the circumstances, and they were using that opportunity to see if he would-

-or perhaps she was a mother and cousin, wondering why her family was at St. Mungo's.

"Simple question, complicated answer," he settled with a heavy sigh, finding a chair - one of two in the otherwise stale hospital room - and set his bag in the other.

“Oh, dear,” Andromeda sighed heavily. “You’ve come over feathery as well? It's a step up from your previous work, certainly, but it is bordering on ridiculous now.”

Again, Regulus flicked his eyes over to her, taking that to mean she was aware of either Tonks or Sirius, though presumably both of them, considering they had both landed themselves in the hospital in the same chaotic night. That, at least, saved him a measure of trouble on the subject of discretion.

(The reference to his time as a Death Eater was more than a little bit obvious as well, but that was a subject he did not much want to encourage.)

"Strictly speaking, it's a little unclear,” he responded, turning his attention to Sirius's unconscious - or perhaps now-sleeping - form.

“I suppose following on into trouble is a difficult habit to break when you care for someone,” Andromeda gave him a bit of a wobbly smile. “I thought perhaps you'd grow out of the tendency to show up in the middle of a familial mess since you were assumed passed, but I also suppose no one else has either, so I can't expect common sense to suddenly appear. After all, here I am. I'm only grateful the damage isn't worse. Lucius and Bellatrix, of all people, why does no one ever pick an
easier target? Rowle has rocks for brains, and Travers has no damned concentration for anything that doesn't come from a wand. But no, it must be family, it seems.”

“It’s a recurring problem… All of it, in truth,” he granted wryly with a huff. He had thought much the same, in the heat of the fight, a notation of the way they were inevitably drawn into each other's conflicts, sometimes without even trying. To leave it at that would be simple enough, vague and vaguely agreeable, but as his eyes flicked to Andromeda (then shortly back to Sirius again), he was struck with a subtle sense of reassurance, prodding warmly in his chest. Unsettling though her features were, her expression was comforting enough, and though he could drum up plenty of grievances his disowned cousin could have despite their prolonged lack of interaction, she was not slinging them yet, at the very least.

A small thing, perhaps, but at least a little bit less lonely.

After a slightly awkward pause, he added carefully, “In Lucius's defense - if you can call it that - I don't think he realised who I was, at first. Bella, however, was predictably...upset.”

"As I understand it, if it does not involve tortured screams of others, it upsets Bellatrix," Andromeda dismissed with the wave of a hand. She shifted in her chair, leaning forward to give him a sweeping look. "Yes, I can see why he didn't immediately jump to that conclusion. It's not exactly what I imagined, when I thought of it. A little taller than I thought you'd be, and I suppose I thought you'd favour your father more and grow out some sort of facial hair.. I think that's why your father grew out his whiskers, take away the baby face a little. We should all be so lucky as to keep looking a decade younger than we are."

Mouth flickering, Regulus sighed, wishing he could, in good conscience, deny the accusation against his eldest cousin, but in his mind's eye, he could still see the Longbottom boy crumpled on the dim-lit floor, and he couldn't help but blanch, fleetingly, at the thought.

"It did not feel so lucky when last I was here,” he said instead, mouth slanting a little, though his tone couldn't quite decide on an emotion, “but it is not the first difference, not do I expect it to be the last.” He tipped his head thoughtfully before adding, “Or I suppose that would be categorised as a non-change...a change in the unchanged…”

"I suppose if I ask what happened, and how you are here, that will be another simple question with complicated answer?” Andromeda asked.

“To say the least,” he responded with a thin smile.

"Then I'll only ask if you plan to go down to the hall," Andromeda said, looking briefly back to the door. "Narcissa is quite unmistakable. I know that I saw her, and whatever I may think of her choice in husband or what she undoubtedly thinks of mine, it's wretched to watch her dragged into this again. I believe Lucius already used up his privilege to get off without consequence last time.”

With a heavy sigh, Regulus felt a fresh wave of discomfort. However deeply he had wanted to see Narcissa - and still did, if he was completely honest - this was even further from the time or the place to do so, and he realised with some measure of dread that someone was bound to tell her about him before he had anything approaching a chance to defend the choice.

A little miserably, he nodded. “Thank you. Consider it noted.”

Andromeda stood with a heavy sigh, looking around the little room. "This is awful," she murmured to herself. "To not even have the facility for tea and biscuits when stuck in a hospital is completely uncivilised, but I suppose they think that's too much of a flight risk. Never mind that last time he
got out of a locked room in a high tower, all without wands, on a hippogriff, if Dora is to be believed. I don't think the facilities would really matter much. Sometimes, I think the entire system really does need an overhaul - just not one with a mass-murdering sadist in charge of it."

Pausing a beat, Regulus nodded, settling back into the lighter line of conversation. “If he was planning to make some grand hospital escape, tea and biscuits would not be the limiting factor in stopping him. The Ministry truly has been quite useless, lately, from what I've gathered. With luck, Dumbledore’s official statement will make some difference in that.”

"Yes, did you see there was no evening Prophet?" Andromeda snorted in an undignified way. "They don't know what to say yet. Everyone is waiting on official statements, but the rumour mill is going wild. Were you aware that Minerva McGonagall is in the ward?"

Regulus lifted his brow, though there were only so many wards she could be referring to…His mind flicked back to the house. “The ward?”

Andromeda indicated outside of the door. "Out there, the same as Nymphadora. In her tartans."

Realisation subtly dawned on his face - ward as in location, not protective charm - and he smothered the thought from his features immediately. “Ah, no, I had not seen her. Must have walked right past.”

"Oh, I think she was giving the person from the Ministry an earful when I went past. She may even have chased them right down to the entrance to continue, something about them attempting to arrest the Hogwarts staff." Andromeda smiled ruefully. "She took three stunners to the chest from an Auror."

“Well,” Regulus began, eyebrows lifting a little higher, “isn't that exciting.”

"Exceptionally," Andromeda said, before putting her shoulders back and seemingly making a decision. "That settles it, they're ridiculous. I'm going to go and have words with hospital security, the Ministry, and scare up something to make this a little more bearable before he wakes up and lives up to his current reputation from boredom and frustration alone.”

“I trust you will,” Regulus responded, tipping his head to a nod. “And I expect he will appreciate it.”

"Are you staying in here?" she asked.

“Most likely, yes,” he answered, “For now, at least.”

"I shall be back then," Andromeda gave him a curt nod and walked the few steps to the door. "Oh, did you remember to bring something? Waiting in hospitals is dreadfully boring unless you have something to read, or do."

“I went by the house to get a few books on my way here,” he said, patting the bag he'd brought along. “I should have enough to entertain myself for awhile.”

"I don't know why I bothered asking," Andromeda admitted, rapping on the door impatiently. "Always prepared for any contingency, even now." She flashed him something close to a genuine grin, and slipped out the door. Out in the corridor, she could be heard asking who decided on the security and where the most senior Ministry official that was not about to be sacked could be found.
There was a sudden, slow movement as Sirius did not so much open his eyes as attempt to push himself upon his elbows. "Shit," he swore as he gave up and lay back down, in a still sleep-addled voice.

Glancing up from his book, Regulus quirked a small smile, feeling a measure of relief, even if the damage had not been so serious that he was worried about anything terribly permanent. On some level, he wasn’t quite ready to trust it until Sirius awoke.

“Welcome back,” Regulus said as he marked his page, closing the book on his lap.

Sirius squinted at him with a pronounced frown. "You look terrible," he said.

“That's awfully rude, even if you did hit your head,” Regulus said pointedly, setting the book on top of his bag in the chair next to him.

"That explains the blotches," Sirius admitted, before hissing at himself when he tried to nod. "What happened? Why do I feel like Hagrid sat on my head, while you look normal as you ever look?"

“Bellatrix knocked you back into that big arch on the dais,” Regulus explained, tone a little more uncomfortable.

"That's embarrassing," Sirius admitted, blinking owlishly at him. "Harry and Neville get out okay?"

Permitting a little smile, Regulus nodded with another gentle trickle of relief. “All of the kids did. The prophecy, too, from the sound of it, which apparently was important.”

With a sigh of relief, Sirius resettled himself back against the pillow. "Wait, what happened to Bellatrix?"

Regulus crinkled his expression a little, that stream of relief drying to a still-lingering dread, once again. “I...sort of...stunned her,” he admitted uncomfortably. “Which I have gathered she is very upset about. Kingsley stepped in when she came to, but she managed to give him the slip, I suppose.”

"You stunned Bella," repeated Sirius. "On purpose?"

Regulus nodded, still a little awkwardly. “She was throwing killing curses everywhere, and her fight with you was making me uncomfortable, especially so close to that strange arch. It couldn’t have been in the Department of Mysteries because it does nothing.”

Again, Sirius repeated, "It was making you uncomfortable?"

Regulus was beginning to wonder if his brother was being deliberately obtuse or if that strike to the head was still frazzling his brain. “When I said I did not want you to die, I wasn’t joking,” he said with a shrug, wincing a little at the mending gash he’d forgotten about and lamenting again the lack of a window to stare at. Or plants. Or anything.

"You stunned Bella because you were...trying to help me?" Sirius said, more to himself than Regulus. "And I got my backside handed to me, and you're fine and she’s fine? That's so embarrassing I want to hide under the covers, never to emerge."

“Lucius got my shoulder, if that makes you feel any better,” Regulus responded, perhaps unhelpfully, but even if some of the elements in his brother’s humiliation were actually somewhat complementary, he couldn’t find amusement in it when the reality still felt so raw.
“It doesn’t,” Sirius replied, sullenly. He shifted a little, and made a face. “I see my soul is more or less intact and attached to me. You don’t know if that’s permanent, do you?”

“Dumbledore will apparently be making a statement in the morning,” Regulus responded, tipping his head. “Though the room aesthetic suggests otherwise, from what I understand, the path to your freedom is underway.”

"Then can you go grab me some water, because I'm going to throw up. A lot." Sirius swallowed audibly. "Narcissa's wedding, a lot."

“Well, I certainly don’t want the stench of vomit filling the room,” Regulus quipped lightly, but he was studying his brother’s face even as he shifted to stand. He did not much like the idea of leaving Sirius alone, but to say so aloud seemed like it might just make his brother feel more uncomfortable about the stark white walls and the locked door. If that guard had not taken his wand, he could simply transfigure the second chair into a cup and fill it with water. Regulus had never put as much effort into wandless magic, but in that moment, it seemed quite clear that he should have. “Try to resist. I can’t have a wand in here, and I refuse to clean it up with my hands.”

“I don't think I'm going to have a choice,” Sirius winced and visibly bit back a heave. “So go on, would you? It's humiliating enough, go see if you can get your wand back or something.”

Regulus tipped his head to a nod, and when he reached the door, he rapped lightly on the surface until it opened for him; the same elderly witch was standing watch, he supposed. Before stepping out, he twisted back for just a moment and said with slightly strained sincerity, “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Without waiting for a response, Regulus stepped back out into the hallway and wordlessly accepted his wand back, sweeping past towards the main ward in search of assistance (he doubted the guard would be of much help). Only a few stray visitors were roaming around him, peppering the hallway with the soft chitter of background conversation - so indistinctive that he half-heard, until-

“There are so many Death Eaters in this hallway,” one Healer was saying as he crossed his arms, looking even more like an overgrown stalk in his lime green Healer robes than he had before. The young man looked to be relatively new to the job, given his youthful, blonde-framed face, and his put upon tone made him sound more childish still. “We ought to get medals of bravery for that.”

“Rumour has it that Black isn’t actually a Death Eater,” said the man next to him, of similar age but with an auburn mop atop his head, though the shrug of his shoulder suggested he was not committed to the objection. “At least we’re not in Creatures. They’ve got one in there all the time.”

“Yes, but he doesn’t do anything. Kirke says he just stares and sleeps,” the first countered. “Not particularly scary.”

“These ones are behind locked doors with no wands or way out. What are they going to do?” the auburn wizard asked, seeming to be fiddling with something that certainly must be for a patient, though Regulus could not see what it was.

The first snorted. “Black escaped Azkaban. Do you really think our security-”

The large double doors swung behind Regulus as he stepped from the hallway back into the main area of the spell damage ward. Perhaps on different day, Regulus might have engaged the ignorance about his brother’s allegiances (or perhaps he wouldn’t have), but instead his mind buzzed with a different tune. (A Death Eater in the creature-induced injuries ward- staring and sleeping- a Dementor was presumably categorised as a creature…)
In Regulus’s chest, he could feel his heart start to hammer a steady beat, thrumming the whole way down to the first floor (and the cup of water wholly forgotten). The atmosphere was lighter than the tension stringing up the top floor where his brother was still contained - a tension perhaps born from the witches and wizards guarding the private doors. In light of that, he wondered if the elderly witch was in truth more formidable than she seemed.

There was no one standing watch when he slipped into the hallway lined with private rooms. Though Regulus supposed living Death Eaters (or those who were wrongfully accused of such) were a greater threat than anyone without a soul, Death Eater or not, he couldn’t quite feel grateful for that fact.

At the very end of the hallway, left-hand side, Regulus’s eyes flicked to a plaque - Crouch - and he spared his brain no moment to hesitate before pushing into the room, heartbeat thudding so loudly in his ears that he scarcely even heard the door shut behind him again.

The room was bathed in nighttime shadows and as stark as his brother’s, free of all decorations and furniture with the exception of the bed and a single chair. Barty’s room had a window, he noticed.

(Barty’s room-)

Regulus felt a knot of emotion bundling up in his throat as he looked down at the bed where a man with straw-colored hair was lying still under a white sheet pulled up to the shoulders - pale enough that he could be near-mistaken for dead, if not for the gentle rise and fall of his chest. Regulus felt his knees shake a little under him as he pulled the chair up to the side of the bed and settled down in it, as much for stability as anything else.

The face looked wrong, obscured as it was beneath a layer of whiskers that covered the line of his chin and jaw and snaked up over his lip with blonde hair that looked recently trimmed. Perhaps the Healers kept it cut for ease of care, but it looked wrong when in his mind he still saw an eighteen-year-old boy with a glinting smile that burned with all the brightness of the sun. Logic demanded that Barty, too, must fall prey to the strains of time, but somehow he still hadn’t fully expected it, as if time should have known that Barty hated facial hair because it reminded him of his father. They should have known- (couldn’t have known-)

Fingers brushed featherlight over Barty's knuckles, exposed to the side of his bedsheet, then in a smooth clasp, his own hand eclipsed the other in a sudden squeeze. The skin felt warmer than he thought it would be, but of course it was. Barty was not dead. Not in body, at least. He had always been too thin, but he looked thinner still, wasting away in this prison of a room. Tracing a thumb along the back of Barty's hand, Regulus imagined the crooked smile that might have played on his lips - or perhaps one of surprise, rare as it was that Regulus extended the touch first. Most of the time, Regulus did not think to reach out, peppered as the days had been with Barty’s attentions, but his friend's face was always lit with a particular brilliance when he did.

Barty's face did not light up now.

Loosing his grip, Regulus lifted tentative fingers to Barty’s face, brushing the fringe from his eyes.

“I'm sorry,“ Regulus whispered, though his throat was tightened, and he mightn't have heard himself if he did not already know what he said. “I'm sorry I left you to this. I'm sorry I didn't trust you enough, and I'm sorry for the part of me that thinks I was probably right not to.” Again, he clasped the nearest hand in his own, this time lifting it up to his face; on the edge of the bed, he propped his elbows, resting his chin against Barty's fingers as he continued.

“I found a remarkably relaxing pond, in the place where I settled. I think you would have liked it
Regulus closed his eyes, then, focusing on little else but his own breathing and the bony hand in his own. The stretch of time felt too long and not long enough at all, and he could not say how much time had passed when again he opened his eyes to the same dimly lit room he had shut his eyes to. Barty was still in this dreadful room. Barty was still without a soul, trapped in an existence that had left him behind.

“I’m…” he started as the words died in his throat, not quite sure where he'd intended go with it, but whatever path it was meant to be was clamped in his throat as Barty's face opened up, revealing a pair of staggeringly blue eyes that looked at nothing in particular.

For a beat, he stared as the man before him gazed blankly at the ceiling, and when at last Barty's eyes shifted to look at him, Regulus could feel a tight clamp in his throat, a sting of emotion at the complete lack of recognition as Barty's looked into his with a stare.

All at once, the room felt too stuffy, too crowded as the memories of youth rammed against the back of his eyes with unrelenting pressure. With stumbling legs, he stood and stepped back from the chair, forgetting for a moment to let go of his hand. He dragged Barty several inches toward the edge before noticing, letting go as if he'd been burned, but Barty did not move from his new spot, arm still dangling loosely over the side of the bed.

No sound, no eye contact, no reaction - as if Barty was still sleeping heavily, but with his eyes open.

_He’s gone_, Regulus thought with a choking breath - a truth his mind had not wanted to prepare itself for, no matter how thoroughly he’d known. A hollow ache settled in his chest, expanding tightly as he stepped backwards towards the door, eyes still fixed on the blonde man lying still as death on the bed - yet it was a fate worse than death.

“I…” Again, his throat clamped, at first not certain of what he wanted to say, but even as he forced himself to continue, his voice shook brittlely. “I'm sorry I left you. Left you to this - left you...” Barty's eyes were clouded with a distant stare, and the air around seemed to balloon with a thickening silence.

Regulus crashed solidly into something - or rather someone - blocking the doorway as he swept out, still half looking back into the room. With a muttered apology (to Healer Gibbon, apparently, according to the name shoved in his face upon contact) Regulus ducked around the older man and started back towards the spell damage ward several floors up.

With any luck, Sirius had fallen asleep again. A little guiltily, he realised he'd forgotten to get the cup of water.

Despite logically knowing he was in a bit of a sticky situation, Sirius felt pretty great upon his brother’s eventual return.

The thudding headache had dulled to ignorable levels, and the bruising on his chest, he couldn't even feel that so long as he didn't move. Of course, all of that might have to do with the group of potions he'd taken a few minutes before. Andromeda had come back in to find him sick as a dog - (he giggled at the thought, as a dog) - and insisted he stopped trying to martyr himself and ask for help. She had even badgered a Healer herself, affixing them with the most intense stare of distaste
is they hesitated, but it had resulted in a plastic jug of water with a sippy cup, a vanishing basin he was extremely pleased about, and a couple of potions that were supposedly to dull the pain but he was pretty sure had sedatives in them as well, from how relaxed he was feeling. It should probably bother him, and he knew on some level in a few hours it’d bother him a lot, so he was going to lean into it for now.

Regulus, on the other hand, looked very worse for wear. Andromeda mentioned the appearance of Narcissa, and when he hadn't come back quickly, Sirius assumed he'd gone to try talk some sense into her. It didn't look like it'd gone very well.

"She'll come around," Sirius said, in what he hoped was a reassuring tone.

Regulus lifted a frown to look at his brother. “Who will?”

"Cissa," Sirius said, moving carefully to sit back up. "Didn't you go and see her?"

Realisation flickered subtly on Regulus’s face, but he shook his head with a lingering frown. “No, not yet. But to your point, I hope she will…”

That didn't make sense, he was gone a long time. Long enough for a Narcissa conversation, which tended to involve pretentious phrasing and big words. "You were gone ages," Sirius frowned. "Where'd you go?"

Regulus looked for a moment as if he might not answer, eyes ducking and his mouth turning down deeper at the corners. He shifted again before speaking, seeming at last to form his thoughts, but he did not yet lift his eyes. “I overheard something and felt compelled to investigate.”

Sirius tried to shake himself, but it was considerably harder on two legs - thighs, with a side of backside, at the minute - than it was on four to recentre himself. "What's something?"

Another pause, and then: “Barty is on the first floor,” he near-mumbled, “I just… wanted to see, I suppose…”

"Ohhh," Sirius let out an elongated aitch. The intense relationship between Regulus and his best friend was a sore subject, not the least because Sirius had apparently never noticed it while it was happening. Still, that had to be painful. It wasn't a wonder he looked like someone had punched him in the gut. "I'd offer to hug you, because you look like you need it, but I probably shouldn't."

Regulus shook his head. “I'm fine…” he trailed in a carefully measured tone.

"You're full of shit, it's what you are," Sirius scoffed at him. While he had enough trouble stomaching the memory of a vacated body left in a broken home - (no, not right now, he didn't feel like being sick again) - the idea of the blinking, soulless remains felt somehow like it would be worse. There would be no afterlife, there would be nothing at all. He didn't think he'd handle that well, and if it were even possible, it felt like Regulus clung onto the memory of that boy more than anything else. "It's obvious you L-word him, so no, you're not fine."

Shifting uncomfortably, Regulus released a heavy sigh. “I don't want to talk about it.”

“Why?"


"Love is always complicated," Sirius allowed, recognising through the haze that he was pushing,
and he'd been trying not to so much. But what else was he going to do with his busy schedule? "You worried I'm going to be judgemental? I mean I'm always judgemental, but..." The kid had been a Death Eater, orchestrated Voldemort's return, and probably tortured the Longbottoms. It was hard to be compassionate in the face of that. On the other hand, his father was Crouch, he'd lived through a year of Azkaban, a decade under the imperius, and had been Regulus' age when he’d joined. Younger than Ginny, now. “I’m not going to ride you for grieving.”

“I don't know, I just…” Regulus paused a moment with a frown. “I feel strange about it. It's not that I didn't know what happened, but…” He shook his head. “He was my friend, and… I suppose I just miss him.”

"That's not so strange, you were friends," Sirius pointed out, because he had an authority on missing friends like they were parts of you that somehow got ripped out and left behind. He understood that. Though now he thought of it..."Or friends, maybe?"

Looking up with a mildly puzzled expression, Regulus tipped his head a little. “Friends, yes.”

Sirius huffed in annoyance. "I can't tell which one that was."

“You just said ‘friends’ twice,” Regulus countered, shaking his head.

"No, I know, but there's being friends," Sirius lifted one hand to illustrate, before lifting the other and emphasizing. "Or there's being friends."

Flicking his eyes between the hands, Regulus took a thoughtful pause - which soon turned into something a little more embarrassed. “We were friends,” he repeated.

“I still can't tell,” Sirius bemoaned. Why was this so difficult? Other than he couldn't exactly chase him down if he decided to go red and melt through the floor. "I've just never really known what your...thing was, if you have a thing at all, it's not as if I've ever known you to be any more or less disinterested in girls or boys or whatever else, so I don't know what that means. Was it a thing or not a thing?"

“I don't know,” Regulus said again, face heating. Awkwardly, he shifted, looking for a moment as if he might quash the line of conversation - yet his expression carefully settled into something a little uncertain. “It just - was? How are you categorising what qualifies as a ‘thing’?”

“I'm not an expert on it,” Sirius admitted. He'd had a few flings, but romantic love wasn't an easy thing to categorise. It required a certain amount of trust, an openness he didn't find easy, and the right person. “I think if you're attracted to them, and you don't like to be without them for long, and your heart kicks up a little when you think about them, or it just feels like you're coming home to see them, and it doesn't feel like that with other people, it's probably a thing.”

A thoughtful, or perhaps awkward, silence pulled tight in Regulus’s chest, then spread out to swallow the room from corner to corner as he traced the line of a floor tile with his eyes. Sirius responded with a huff of frustration, as he could not think of another way of putting it that might be understandable. They had a very dysfunctional upbringing with no strong romantic role models - if the universe could give him a break, that would be great. He racked his brains through his now-returning headache to try and think of a relatable, observable way to compare a romantic relationship with another one, because both were intense, important, and didn't always include getting naked.

Finally, an example came to mind. "Okay, think of Uncle Ignatius and his Quidditch obsession." No, that wasn't right. "But not that, just compare that to-" Putting up with the whole freakshow of
the Blacks? It had to have been love. "- he always just seemed happy if Lucretia walked in a room, he didn't need to talk to her, he just seemed to smile. I think that's what it feels like, when you don't have to say anything to each other but it still makes you just feel happy like you haven't seen them in a long time."

Another beat of silence, then Regulus tipped his chin in a subtle nod, expression flickering with something sharp and bittersweet. "Maybe it was a little bit like that...I don't know...not that it matters much what was or wasn't, I suppose..."

An answer with words, instead of eye movements on the floor, though for all the impossibility of it, Regulus still seemed to be trying to stare straight through. "Doesn't it matter to you?"

"It...yes," Regulus admitted a little awkwardly after a pause, "but life is more complicated than that. It always has been, and it certainly is now, in case you haven't noticed."

"Nah, it's simple," Sirius disagreed. As per usual, Regulus seemed to forget what he was actually capable of and the power he held. It was occasionally helpful that he preferred to defer to other people in most things, but not with this. "A lot more so now than it was. You don't have to justify anything you're feeling to anyone anymore, you just, you forget that your choices are mostly your own these days, and that includes love and family and all that junk. We're not, the Order, or me, or And and her adult-sized baby, going to be assholes if you want to grieve over someone you love, no matter what kind of love it is."

Regulus's gaze flicked up, then down again with a heavy sigh; yet the subtle tension around his eyes loosened as he nodded. "I know - I know that, in my head, it just...feels like there's something wrong with me," he admitted uncomfortably, rubbing at some of the exhaustion in his face. With a twinge of hesitation, he added, "Did you ever feel that way?"

Unable to help himself, Sirius laughed. He hurriedly replied, "I'm not laughing at you." He wasn't, not really - but rather that, of his many complaints about his brother over the years, this was paramount. Regulus always seemed to know the exact right thing to say, do, doubtless in conviction, stalwart in his path, and to his own teenage confusion and struggles with what he believed and felt in comparison to everyone he had been related to, watching Regulus not struggle at all had been infuriating. It was also, he was slowly learning, nothing but smoke and mirrors. His brother was just good at seeming to be exactly what he was supposed to be. The parrot, Sirius had called him more than once, because he said exactly as he was meant to regardless of a curious look or him seeming to bite back an independent thought at least once a day. Damn, but if he had known that then...

"I-" Trying to vocalise it, it came out only as a wheeze. "Alright, I'm really just laughing at myself. To, uh, answer your question, yes, still do, cheers, Mum, being told it constantly really-" he made a shoving motion with his hand, "-wedged it in there. But feeling like there's something wrong with you doesn't mean there actually is. Don't get me wrong, there's plenty wrong with you: your supposed sense of humour, your lack of musical taste, that you'd rather have your head in a book than be out in the world, but the way you love, and fuck it this is going to bite me in the nethers for saying it when it comes to bloody Bella, but who you love is not, has not been, something that's wrong with you. It might even be the best thing about you."

Regulus’s face softened behind his hands as they lowered again to the arms of his chair, the words seeming to visibly settle in his expression. "It doesn’t feel like it...but thank you," he said, his voice quiet but sincere, for all its discomfort. "And...I apologise for the way I must have contributed to that. I probably sound really stupid, saying all of this now..."

"Nah, you were a just a kid, you just wanted everyone to stop screaming and throwing things at
each other and thought if I stopped, the fighting would. It wouldn't have, of course, but never blamed you, not for that." Sirius winked at him, acting as though it's a joke despite the truth of it. "I only got pissed off with you when you couldn't get why I had to go in the first place, or that I did it for fun. I don't like being thought of as that callous, I don't think I am."

Mulling it over for a moment, Regulus let the words hang for almost too long, but when he spoke again, the tone was noticeably warmer. "I don’t think you’re that callous, either," he admitted with the smallest smile flickering at the corner of his mouth as he echoed, “at least not in that.”

Sirius nodded, but something had settled quite happily in his stomach. "Remember what I said about our grandfather," he said, quietly. "That he should have worried less about what people thought of him, remembered the power he had as the head of an old family, and protected it instead of bowing to the societal expectation. Don't make his mistakes; fuck expectation. Fuck feeling like you're wrong on the inside." With a strange, striking moment of memory, he said something he would never utter in front of anyone but his younger brother. From one old heir to another. "You're a Black, aren't you? You don't cow to society's demands, you set the demands and it falls to everyone else to keep the hell up."

For a beat, Regulus’s expression seemed to freeze in some unspoken thought - but just as soon as the shift had come, the frost melted to a steam that warmed his eyes and tugged a smile onto his lips once again. Though a brief silence followed Sirius’s words, there was a buzz of solidarity in place of the straining discomfort.

Steel lined Regulus’s resolve as he nodded, firmed his tone as he responded: “I won’t forget.”

There was comfort to be found in the quiet, in the shift of sheets and the rustle of pages, and though Regulus’s mind was still reeling, he welcomed the opportunity to think. Sirius had passed out some time before, and Regulus had felt his own eyes burning with the tired pull of a long and hectic day, but even when he tried to calm his mind (or lean back, much to the objection of his still-wounded shoulder) his thoughts bounded relentlessly. Thoughts of how his stomach had once flipped at the mere sight of his closest friend, and the hollow pain of seeing that same friend staring back with empty eyes - and whether, despite Sirius’s childish phrasing, perhaps those complicated feelings had been weighted by something heavier (not heavier - different) than he had wanted to attribute. For months, nearly a year, grief (and the guilt that so sharply accompanied it) had underpinned his thoughts: Yearning to go back to the year before and yank Barty out of that situation before the Dark Lord could rise again - to go back even further and yank Barty out of the Death Eaters before he could fall into the Longbottom’s fateful torture - the despair of knowing he couldn’t, and even if he could, that if may well not even matter.

Loneliness had settled in his bones, unfairness inciting his guiltier thoughts, but however devastating and unsettling the reality might be, he started to feel some tension loosening in his mind like a severed rope, releasing some measure of despair in favour of a quieter sadness.

Looking again at his brother stretched out on the hospital bed, he thought about how different things were now, from the moment he’d learned about Barty’s fate, so many months ago. However supportive Sirius had become in the past year, Regulus had somehow not expected the outpouring of acceptance, the reassurance, the centering reminders.

'You’re a Black, aren’t you?’ Words that had so often coated his heart with ice, or lit a roaring fire that scorched at the touch, instead steadied the ground beneath him and channeled their intensity. Their grandfather Arcturus’s words, similar as they had been so many years ago, had pressed him forward - but from his brother, of all people, he felt a greater sense of cohesion than that charged phrase had ever represented, even in the more grand deliverances.
Regulus could not say what time it was when again the door to the hospital room was disturbed, though he imagined it must be quite late. The wizard who was now guarding his brother’s room had peeked in to tell him he ought to be on his way but was welcome to return the next day. Regulus lacked the energy to argue the point, especially when he supposed it was a reasonable expectation, as far as policies went…

Sluggishly, Regulus grabbed his bag of books, retrieved his wand from the guard, and began his slow and steady trek. As he was reaching the waiting area out in the main corridor, he nearly swept past a familiar face, and it was only on the second glance that he saw Emmeline was sitting in one of the chairs, now looking up from the open book on her lap.

She pressed the open book up against her stomach, and giving a wide-eyed scan over him, she sighed deeply. "You're alright," she said, with a tired smile.

Regulus returned a tired smile of his own and tipped his head in a nod. Unexpected though her presence was - especially as visiting hours came to a close - he felt a small wave of comfort at what he interpreted to be some degree of concern. Perhaps information was still fractured across the Order as a whole, with how messy the evening’s clashes had been… Yet whatever the circumstances, he found he was glad to see her, emotionally draining as it all was. Spare though the thoughts had been in the heat of the chaos, he had wondered after her - and in the wake of the chaos, found he was glad it had not been with them.

“I am. This turned it to be a far more eventful day than I anticipated, yet it seems we all survived it,” he responded lightly, crushing though it had all felt.

"I apologise wholeheartedly," Emmeline said, indicating the desire to walk on so as they were unlikely to be overheard as easily. "I got stuck dealing with a time pocket, and by the time the call got to me, it was all over. I'm sure you got a bit of a shock! I checked, and when you weren't at HQ, and I went to find Remus, he said you were here, but didn't specify if patient or visitor. I think he was in a hurry to make sure Harry got home alright."

“Shock is one way of describing it,” he said a little wryly as they continued through the corridor towards the nearest apparition point, their pace brisk but not rushed. “I, too, apologise for the uncertainty. I was with Sirius.” He tilted his head back in the other direction. “My trust in the - albeit supervised - word and competence of the Ministry leadership remains tentative until their approval of his absolution, but thus far, the worst offense is a sparse and windowless room and the removal of wands upon entry. Not as terrible as it could be.”

"That's not why I was apologising." Emmeline hushed her voice down, though in all truth, she made herself look more conspicuous with her eyes darting about like that. "Not that I'm not happy about that, but a familiar tabby had parked outside the door, under the side table, when I last looked, so I think he should be alright. I was apologising because you had indicated a desire to see my place of occupation, and ended up getting into a fight in it rather than actually seeing it. I'm sure you're gutted."

Unbidden, a little wry grin turned up at the corner of Regulus’s mouth, as much at her conspicuousness as her remark. “In all honesty, I really, truly am,” he admitted, leaning in slightly with a lowered voice of his own. “We did get a glimpse of that room you mentioned.” Meeting her eyes briefly, his expression was as vague as it was meaningful. “My interest was very situationally-inappropriate, as it was. Unfortunate, really, that it was necessary to quash such interest with so many doors right there. I would have far preferred a proper tour.”

"I'm still not sure I understand how Ron ended up mucking about in the Brain Room. The Halls of Prophecy aren't even in that sub-division," Emmeline admitted. It was a lot more frank than she
had been about her work in the past. "What did you do, request the wrong room?"

“I can’t say for sure,” Regulus said with a subtle shrug, voice still low as they neared the end of the corridor, “but Harry and his friends already had the prophecy, by the time we arrived. The fight was happening in some large room with nothing but a veiled arch in it, so I’m afraid that was the majority of my experience. It was actually quite a let down, in hindsight.”

Emmeline nodded, "Yes, I heard Dumbledore rounded them up in Death Studies. I find it a bit disturbing, to be honest with you. It's not my favourite chamber."

“Death Studies?” Regulus echoed, shifting another glance, though his tone had sobered, stomach dropping a little as he suddenly pictured his brother’s head striking so close to that eerie veil. “So the arch…?"

Emmeline took a deep breath and wrapped her arms around the book still held close. "Death is a very big mystery. We don't know what comes next, each ghost tells a different story, but we know that beyond the frequency of which we can see and interact with, and beyond that of the has-beings, is something else. The veil - the archway - contains a puncture, if you like. You can hear it, but not interact. I heard they sent a few people tethered through in the ‘fifties, but no one ever came back."

Smothering a shiver, Regulus nodded and tried to avoid following that trail of thought much further. “Unfortunate location for a fight, yet fortunate we all made it back, in light of that.”

"You can understand why I was worried,” Emmeline agreed. The apparition point was dead ahead. "Will you think I’m ridiculous if I ask to see you back home? I'd just feel better knowing everyone is somewhere safe."

“I suppose I will not deny you your reassurance,” Regulus responded, and though it felt a little bit childish to accept the idea of being ‘seen home,’ in truth, he could not guarantee that his home would remain free of Death Eater attention, now that they knew he was alive. The charm had hidden him from Andromeda when they had tested it some time ago, but his stomach twisted with uncertainty of whether that charm would hold for those who might suspect him returning home…

Firmly, he re-centered himself, pulling his thoughts back to the present. “You are welcome to tea when we get there, should you like any, though I expect it is quite late.”

"A little late for tea," Emmeline admitted, twisting to check upon her watch. "It's after one. Tomorrow, perhaps? I definitely want to see the morning Prophet."

“One…” he muttered, shaking his head and rubbing at his face as they slowed to a stop, wincing again the movement in his shoulder but too tired to particularly care. He could salve it in the morning - or rather, later in the morning. “That is late… Tomorrow, it is. Hopefully, the Prophet will paint the proper picture,” he added, dropping his hands and glancing over at her. “Shall we?”

At her confirmation, they disappeared with a crack.
The dread was palpable, closing its clawed grip with a firmness that shattered the glass bubble surrounding Narcissa Malfoy’s life. Dread was no stranger, nor were the peppering stings of anguished fear, but rather they crept and struck like thieves from the shadows, taking with them the precious security she felt in this manicured life she and her husband had built around them.

For hours, Narcissa had argued with St. Mungo’s staff, but every word exchanged had only crumbled her hope more thoroughly. Arrested - Lucius - with no more good graces to cash in with the Ministry that he so loyally and consistently gave his support to, both financially and otherwise. When the Healers and guards managing his hospital room permitted no more than thirty (supervised) minutes with her husband, she had escalated to the administrative director and liaison to special programs - a witch named Doris Merrythought, and an enduring acquaintance over the years - in hopes that Doris would advocate to the director of security on behalf of the call for more reasonable visitation, at the very least… but that woman, terrible as she turned out to be, had been chilly in insisting that the director of security would not make an exception, even if she were to attempt as much.

‘Even if.’ If. For years, Narcissa had supported the hospital, hosted charity galas and auctions and any number of events to bolster their research and keep their hospital running, and they repay her with a turn of the back, right at the moment she and Lucius need them. The hospital’s lack of reciprocal support was appalling, and truthfully more hurtful than she would dare show on her face, but it was only as she swept into the safety of her own home some time later that her icy anger began to melt into the dragging undertow of dread.

No one - not the Ministry, nor St. Mungo’s - would bend to favours, and this time, she feared, her husband really would go to Azkaban. The thirty minutes she had spent with him (and the young guard who had accompanied them with fixed and seemingly unblinking eyes) were as precious as they were unbearable, and it had taken every ounce of strength inside of her not to give that wretch of a guard the satisfaction of seeing her weep for her husband.

However just the Cause, she had not signed up for her family to be torn apart, and she could not bear for it all to happen again. Lucius was meant to be more safe with the Dark Lord-

“Cissy!”

The brass tones of her sister’s voice clanged against the walls of the foyer, steadier than they had been earlier that night when Bella had stumbled into the manor with eyes as red from weeping as they were from fury. Though the night had not yet come to its full close, exhaustion had settled in Narcissa’s bones, and what sounded loveliest was a bath soaked in smells that would wash away the stale sickness of a hospital; yet there was a sharpness in Bella’s tone that implied a sort of expected urgency, and in truth, Narcissa still was not entirely certain what was going on, given how quickly the hospital had informed her of his presence there. Her bath would have to wait.

“Lucius is still under arrest at the hospital,” Narcissa said, allowing a brush of despair to colour her tone as she looked up to the source of the voice, where her sister was quite nearly stomping down the central staircase. “The Ministry, St. Mungo’s - neither are budging. Bella, what happened tonight? If we can’t get them to-”
“-He was an idiot to get caught,” Bella interrupted harshly, as if she had not been a crumbling mess just hours before. “But Azkaban cannot hold us for long, if our Lord wills it, and you must trust in Him. You forget so soon that I am here because of the Dark Lord’s reach? Tonight was a complete disaster, to which Lucius contributed thoroughly, but already we move to salvage it.”

There was an air of grandiosity to her sister’s words. Narcissa was not certain what plans the Death Eaters had in mind - nor did she think it was something she was likely to want to know, so long as they released her husband from a life and death along in that dreadful prison.

“This cannot possibly be entirely Lucius’s fault,” Narcissa argued, her voice half defensiveness and half distress. “The Dark Lord must save him-”

“-It is not our position to say what the Dark Lord must or mustn’t do,” Bella corrected crisply. “You know that, Cissy, and I will overlook it only because you are distraught.”

“I know, but our family has suffered so much…’ Narcissa began, feeling a flush of upset. (Had they not proven enough already? What else must they prove?)

“Our family has made a repeated embarrassment of itself,” Bellatrix snapped with a sudden blaze of anger, “That is what it has done. It turns out that filthy blood traitor Black is the blemish that keeps on blemishing. Do you know who was there tonight? Do you know who stopped me from finally ending that wretched waste of space?”

Narcissa steeled her expression against what sounded like a leading question, but it was hard to say what exactly it was leading to. “I don’t know, Bella - the Potter boy? It sounds as though there were quite a few miscreants in the mix.”

“No,” Bellatrix said with a biting tone that put Narcissa on edge, “Regulus.”

In stunned silence, Narcissa stared at her sister - lips parting, as if to speak - but no sound came out. In her mind crashed a swarm of confusion and a hope she’d long-since put to rest, but before she could sort out any sort of response, Bellatrix was continuing her tirade.

“The nerve of it- Cissy, he attacked me!”

“R-Regulus?” Narcissa echoed as she wrangled her voice into action, hating how wobbly it sounded. “But he’s- Is he alive?”

“Not for long,” Bellatrix said savagely, and Narcissa felt a prickling shiver creep up her spine.

“Bella, just calm down for a moment,” Narcissa said, as much to stymy her sister’s rage as to try and collect her own thoughts. Their littlest cousin had been pronounced dead so long ago- before Draco was even born. “Are you certain it was him?” Even as she asked the question, Narcissa could not decide which would be worse- a misunderstanding in which her cousin was still dead, or a true sighting in which he soon would be. But a traitor? Regulus?

There was iron conviction in Bellatrix’s tone as she responded, “It was him. Still shying away from the fight in every way except for attacking me, apparently!” Bellatrix threw up her hands, as if to punctuate the accusation, expression still blazing. “Sebastian Avery saw him too, as did Lucius, though it seems he was not able to tell you as much.”

“That just- doesn’t sound like him,” Narcissa countered, shaking her head as she tried to piece it together, a rising panic in the back of her mind. Their family was so small now, so fractured, dead or imprisoned on every front- and to slot even one piece back into place- “You know it doesn’t. He idolised you - idolised all of us - there’s no way he would do that. Certainly not to help them.”
Disgust curled into her tone as she finished the remark, nose crinkling even as she continued, more matter-of-factly, “If it really was him, there must have be some sort of misunderstanding, something at work that we just cannot see—”

“If there was something at work, I would be able to see it!” Bellatrix said sharply, “I am the Dark Lord’s most loyal servant! If Regulus was operating in the Dark Lord’s service, I would know!”

“Perhaps—” Narcissa’s mind was reeling. “-Perhaps his memory has been compromised, or he’s under duress- Just please, promise me you won’t hurt him.” There was a subtle narrowing in her sister’s eyes, and Narcissa added, “Or kill him, even painlessly. This is Regulus we are talking about. He isn’t like- them,” she said with a wash of some terrible, gutted mix of hurt and anger when she thought of her sister and that mudblood of a husband… “Surely he can be reasoned with. Please, Bella.”

The fire in her sister’s eyes would not cool, but snarling fury gave way to something at least slightly less aggressive as Narcissa held her gaze, stubborn and imploring. Bellatrix narrowed her eyes again, the tone still jagged as she spoke: “I will not kill him until he has had the chance to explain himself.” She did not sound particularly pleased about it. “For you, not for him. But regardless of this promise, the next time the little louse raises a wand to me will be his last.”

“We don’t know if he’s a louse yet,” Narcissa said, more soothingly as the pounding in her chest started to calm, just slightly. (Their family was broken enough, as it was. At least Draco was safe at school and did not have to see all of this…) “But thank you, Bella. He was so devoted to you as a child… He tried so hard for our family, right from the start, and he’s always done the right thing when it matters. There must be something more to this. You will see.”

Bellatrix looked less convinced as she tipped her head to a subtle nod. “And if there is not, then you will see. We trim broken, decaying branches, and you must be prepared for that possibility,” she said harshly, though somewhere in her sister’s voice, Narcissa could hear the echo of that same protective tone Bella had once taken when they were struck with - her - betrayal. “That has been and always will be the way of it,” Bellatrix continued, “but for your sake, let us hope he is less decayed than he seems.”

“Good morning!”

Sirius stirred from the bed. His automatic response given that this was most definitely Andromeda’s voice was to check he still had enough covers on that this wasn’t about to get more humiliating than it already was, but after that, he did wonder what the hell time it was. He’d been keeping track through meals, toiletries, and potions since he didn’t have another way of doing it, but he had found himself sleeping more than anything else in the - four, five days? - since the battle at the department. Without dementors and not wanting to risk a transformation, it was quiet, boring, and enclosed. Regulus, Andromeda, and Tonks had popped their heads in at various points, but Tonks had gone home - yesterday? earlier today? - so he had assumed he'd see less of Andromeda now her daughter wasn't down the hall.

Apparently, not the case.

“Whatimeizzit?” Sirius scrambled.

“A little after seven,” Andromeda replied, dropping a large book on the bed with a loud flop. From here, it looked like something along the lines of 1001 Puzzles to Stop Your Brain Going To Mush, which would be a pain not to use a quill with.
“In the morning?” Sirius asked. “Why?”

“Because something must come between six and eight in the morning,” Andromeda replied. “And because you have an inquiry starting today.”

That caught his attention. Despite the rule, Kingsley had also been allowed to come in and brief him on what had been happening about his case. He was fine now, Sirius had insisted. He wasn't hurt. Kingsley relented and admitted he believed Dumbledore had pulled some strings to keep him there in case there was trouble at the inquiry, as it would be easier to disappear from. He said it should take about a week – they'd hear from the witness statements at the time, take into account the statements from Harry and his friends (though not Remus, as unfortunately, a werewolf would probably hurt him more than help him, a fact that boiled Sirius's blood), check his wand (which Kingsley had made sure did not disappear this last year), and review Crouch's possible (definite) illegal actions regarding the lack of trial. Kingsley had said he didn't want to check the wand without checking if Sirius knew what the last spell was, and if it was likely to be something help or hurt.

(It had been to repair to James's glasses.)

“Black Inquiry Begins,” Andromeda began, straightening her dress before sitting down with the paper. “After the revelation – not much of one for those of us paying attention, thank you – that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has indeed returned in Tuesday's special morning edition – oh honestly – an inquiry into the case of infamous Azkaban escapee Sirius Black- look darling, you always wanted to be infamous – is due to take place today. Convicted of being a Death Eater – poppycock -”

“Poppycock?” Sirius said, making a face at her commentary.

She peered over the top of the paper at him. “Would you prefer it if I were to say it was bullshit?”

Sirius snorted. “Yes, I would.”

“Alright, then, bullshit, where was I? The deaths of twelve muggles from an exceptionally powerful Blasting Curse - you are fond of that one-”

“Never murdered anyone with it!” Sirius replied. He had almost done so with Regulus a long time ago, but he wasn't going to tell Andromeda that. He didn't feel like a safe wand use lecture today.

“-reopened at the request of Hogwarts Headmaster and former Supreme Mugwump Albus Dumbledore, as new evidence has come to light. With statements from the Boy Who Lived along with several other students, the lack of official sentencing and the witness reports of a fight against the other escapees in the Ministry, the inquiry will determine whether the conviction can be upheld without trial. Although there are more than fifty witness reports, it should be noted that these are all muggle witnesses who may not have understood what was happening.” Andromeda looked up. “That reminds me, this animagus business, how are you handling it?”

“Dumbledore,” Sirius shrugged. He was well aware that might be a problem – the penalty for not registering was still a prison sentence.

“Is he planning on telling the truth, or making it seem as if it was a recent thing before you were arrested?” Andromeda asked.

“Probably will just hint at it and let people draw their own conclusions,” Sirius replied.

“How Slytherin of him.” Andromeda looked entirely too pleased about that. “Here we go –
evidence of these being the actions of former friend and confidant, Peter Pettigrew, an illegal animagus, was submitted for review. Black is not thought to be giving his own statement, as he is currently convalescing in St. Mungo's after a battle with self-confessed Death Eater and cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange, in the Department of Mysteries. The Head of the Department of Mysteries, who has asked for their name to be retracted, has not given comment.” She rolled her eyes. “Unspeakables.”

“Don't let Emme hear you say that,” Sirius replied. It didn't sound nearly as cut and dry in the press as Kingsley had made it sound. “How's my chances?”

“I think the Ministry requires a scapegoat. Crouch didn't push for a trial; you've said your wand won't cause you trouble; you were seen fighting Bellatrix; and they seem to be liking Harry again, and I daresay he's your biggest fan.” Andromeda closed the paper over. “I imagine they'll also use what Harry said in the interview he gave to that rag, the one the Prophet reprinted a few days ago. Fudge is having to step down. It's a lot easier to blame a dead man who was known for his callous behaviour, and Dumbledore's word, once again, seems to have weight.”

Sirius nodded, though he still didn't feel entirely convinced. “Reg'll be pleased.”

“Is that going to be a problem?” Andromeda asked, concern leaking into her tone.

“No, I think if Dumbledore says he'll sort it, he'll sort it.” Sirius pinched the top of his nose, the stress of having his life and soul on the line and not having a say in it getting to him.

“He was never arrested,” Andromeda pointed out.

“No, but if he had been, he'd have been fucked,” Sirius replied. “Harder than I was. And your bloody sister could decide to inform them of exactly where those skeletons are buried if she wanted to hurt him.”

“Literal skeletons?” Andromeda asked, tentatively.

“I didn't ask for the gory details,” Sirius replied, sharply. “He came back; he fought to help get Harry out of danger when he didn't have to; he has something on Voldemort that will help get rid of him; and even if he won't talk to me about it, Dumbledore knows and found it good enough.”

“I wasn't trying to say he should be arrested,” Andromeda said, reaching over to take his hand. “You can back your guard dog instincts down.”

Sirius squeezed it and nodded. “I'm just worried.”

“About?”

“He stunned Bellatrix, and fought Lucius. I was so sure he would crumble under that, but he didn't.” Sirius shifted uncomfortably. “I don't like the idea of him being left alone in that house too long with that knocking around his skull.”

“He's not,” Andromeda replied.

“He probably is,” Sirius huffed. “He obsesses, it's what he does.”

“No,” Andromeda gave a short laugh. “I meant that he isn't alone. Remus was there yesterday and Nymphadora was apparently going to knock some sense into him. He seems to be getting a little melancholy about this trial business, given his word can't really be taken.”
“It's disgusting,” Sirius agreed.

“It is,” Andromeda nodded, turning the paper over. “Come on, we'll do the crossword. What famous Hogwarts ghost was also one of its first students?”

When Regulus arrived home after yet another night at the hospital, he collapsed on the bed without ceremony, arms folding under his face - feeling the pressure against his brow, against his nose - and willing his mind to cease long enough to end the already unnecessarily lengthy day.

Several days had passed since his confrontation with Bella - with Lucius, and with Avery - and though his brother proved a suitable distraction for the duration of his visits, in the silence of his home, Regulus’s brain complied with no such reprieve, instead whirring its relentless loop of thoughts as the silence gave way, once again, to memories both recent and distant. Flipping onto his back, Regulus peered up at the clump of articles he’d once collected as a young teenager, naive and desperate and angry. Perhaps he was still all of those things, just to a different end. Even from the peculiar angle, he could see the subtle movements of the magical photographs prominently display on several of the clippings.

When first he had arrived, Sirius had asked him why the clippings remained on his wall. Anger, Regulus had answered. More recently, Sirius had asked why they were put up in the first place. Intrigue, Regulus had answered, and the smile of a friend.

Sirius had called the wall his ‘murder board,’ setting Regulus on edge, for all the productivity that conversation had brought about. Craning back, he tugged one of the articles from the wall - supposed, yet somehow not surprised to see that it was his own. The Boots house fire, a ‘justice’ exacted for reasons he never knew.

‘The Dark Lord’s will is reason enough,’ Bella had told him that night, and he had followed her straight into those blazing flames. So desperate he had been to believe her; desperate to let go of the burden of knowledge, of responsibility, of uncertainty; desperate to be loved for how far he would go to please them.

He could not say if the praise Bella had granted had been affection. It had felt like affection, at the time, lifting and spurring his spirit, stirring him to some purpose that so many would say was greater than any of them, and he had grasped at it like some starving child. And she had let him.

To hate her for what she had done would be easy - practically-speaking, the greatest challenge would surely be list the great many reasons born from her enacted horrors - and to think of that boy, Neville, crumpled at her feet made it all too easy to imagine the suffering of Frank and Alice Longbottom. The thought shook him, frightened him, horrified him-

TRAITOR!

To love her despite what she had done was as illogical as it was dangerous, and he knew it well, but every time he pictured the look of her erupting betrayal, or her broken weeping at the Dark Lord’s feet, he felt, in turn, the desire to mend what the war had torn asunder.

It was foolish, he knew. She undoubtedly wanted to kill him, now, and the others were unlikely to contest it for long, if he was being honest with himself. Who was left among their numbers who would bat an eye? Lucius? Avery? Mulciber had escaped Azkaban with the others, but though he had been something of a friend, Regulus doubted his loyalty would extend so far.

No one had batted an eye for the tragic accident that had taken his father, and Orion Black had not
been a traitor.

It was foolish, he knew - as foolish as it was nagging.

Twisting up to prop on his knees, he let his eyes graze each clipping, a small museum of terrors - and carefully, he plucked off another. The first he’d collected: the burning of a pro-muggleborn establishment, the first time he had specifically started tracking his suspicions of Bella's involvement. Next, he pulled off the poisoning of Tinworth, which he and Barty had assisted in, along with so many others - and for a beat, he looked at them - paused - tensed - and crumpled them in a fist.

Then another, and another, until the space above the pillows was bare, save for large family crest emblazoned above. *(Toujours pur.)*

For a moment, he held the bunched clippings in his hand, unsure of what to do with them. His eyes flicked up to the crest again, then back to his hand before he stood rigidly to his feet, a certain finality to his step as he first took his worn leather photo album from the shelf, then tucked it beneath his arm to retrieve an old envelope from his desk drawer.

The drawing room was still and silent as he stepped inside - as still and silent as every step prior, moving through the halls of the now-empty house. The others were either holed up in the hospital or returned to their respective homes - not even Remus, at the moment - leaving only him and Kreacher now, for the first time since that first night he'd returned. Even then, he supposed Sirius had been elsewhere in the house, if unknown.

Breathing in the quiet, Regulus knelt by the fireplace, seeing it ablaze with a flick of his wand. Summer warmth had already begun swelling outside, but he paid the season no mind as he reached out and dropped the clippings over the flames, watching the immediate char creep over the edges in a bright flash. The flames were overly warm, but he cast a fresh cooling charm and settled in a nearby chair, situating the album in his lap and carefully opening the envelope.

Inside were the torn photographs he had ripped out of his album after Sirius had ran away, memories ranging across all ages. (So long ago…) Opening to the first page - an early family photograph - Regulus thumbed through the ripped pictures until he found the corresponding picture of Sirius, small and dressed far more fancily than his brother had liked, even then.

Fitting the torn piece into the album, he tapped a soft *Reparo*, watching the photograph mend seamlessly, as if it had never been ripped at all. A little smile flickered on his mouth, looking at the shifting echoes of their family - Sirius and himself, and their parents - before flipping to the next to restore that photo, and each page to follow until the envelope was empty.

The clippings had long since burned to ash when he at last lifted his eyes to the mantle, and the flames themselves had begun to die down to gentler embers in the absence of attention. With another swish of his wand, the fire faded, and he closed the album with a soft, scarcely-audible thump.

When again he reached his room, his eyes flicked to the blank space above his bed, wondering vaguely if perhaps he ought to put something else in place of the clippings.

Exhaustion tugged at his eyes - it had to be at least two in the morning, perhaps even three - and it was with a steady sluggishness that he finally changed into bedclothes and again approached his bed, eying, this time, the swaths of Slytherin decor. It had felt so important at the time, a fierce response to the bold Gryffindor tauntings in his brother’s own room, though Regulus had not peeked inside since returning nearly a year before. It was always Sirius coming to poke his head
into Regulus’s room, even back then - and in that moment, it all felt strangely stagnant. So much in his life had changed, yet this space looked just as it had when he was a child, so desperate to prove what he wasn’t perhaps as much, if not more, than what he was.

Slowly, his eyes traced over the green and silver fabrics of his bed, the serpent crest he’d clung to almost as staunchly as he had his own crest, for in so many ways, they had almost felt the same… yet it was so desperate anymore, and for all the lingering, nostalgic fondness and pride he still had for his Hogwarts House, there was nothing left to prove - or, at the least, nothing he could prove with a sorting, for life had barreled so far past that. With a final swish of his wand, the fabric rippled to a solid olive green, more subdued and suddenly less stressful to look at.

Dropping his wand on the side table, Regulus at last collapsed onto the bed, relaxing into the covers as the unnecessarily long day slowly peeled away.

“Emme!”

Turning around quickly, Emmeline managed to catch Tonks doing her usual impression of a brightly coloured windmill and struggled not to laugh. As expected, a few people were looking – some chuckling, some rolling their eyes, and all of them making Emmeline wish she hadn't come down to the markets with her mother this morning.

“A friend of yours?” she asked, as Tonks managed to knock into two people on her way past.

“Yes,” Emmeline sighed, as she stopped in front of them. “Hi, Tonks.”

Tonks finally seemed to notice Emmeline wasn't on her own. “Er, hi.”

Caught between a brightly coloured rock and a maternal hard place, Emmeline sighed. “Tonks, this is my mother, Lottie Henley-Vance. Mum, this is Nymphadora Tonks, she's an Auror at the Ministry.”

Tonks stuck her hand out with her usual enthusiasm. “Hullo.”

Her mother, though looking a little dubious, shook Tonks' hand. “A very dangerous job, especially these days.”

“I can handle it,” Tonks said.

“Mum, why don't you go and take another look at that rug?” Emmeline pointed to one of the rickety antique shops. “I think I’ve changed my mind, I think it would look nice in the hall.”

Her mother gave her a look, then one to Tonks, but left with a polite exit line.

“What's the matter?” Emmeline asked.

“Nothing!” Tonks insisted. “You wanted someone in HQ today?”

How her social life somehow managed to make it around the Order would always astound her. “Yes, your mother requested that wallowing be kept to a minimum, so I asked if Regulus would like to come out for tea.”

Tonks leaned up on her toes. “With your mum?”

“No, not with my-” Emmeline pursed her lips. “I'm not meeting him for another hour, and Mum worries. She's been reading the paper, and she doesn't like to say it, but she's scared to go out by
herself.

Tonks looked a little sheepish. “Hope this inquiry's over quick. Remus seems dead depressed.”

“Why don't you bring him some lunch, then?” Emmeline pointed to one of the street vendors up the road. “If you were planning to stay in HQ anyway, why not do so with good food and company?”

Tonks grinned more brightly. “That sounds cool.”

“I'm a very cool person,” Emmeline deadpanned. “Now if you'll excuse me, I have to get back to Mum and the ugliest bloody rug I've ever seen, since I've now said I like it.”

In the end, much to Emmeline's chagrin, her mother did buy the rug. To add salt to the wound, it was only when they were taking forever and a day to sort it for delivery that she realised how late they were. She didn't enjoy not being prompt, and felt even more frustrated with herself about it after missing the Ministry battle entirely.

“I'm just nipping over to the post office,” she told her mum, as she was now eying up some new dining chairs that looked as if they'd come right out of the Slytherin dungeons. “I'll be back in a minute, I promise.”

“Hmm? Yes, of course,” she replied, absently.

Dashing down the nearest alley, Emmeline apparated with a crack into the Claremont Square and ran the rest of the way to headquarters. Regulus was already stepping out onto the front steps, by the time Emmeline reached her destination, and as he shut the door solidly behind himself, he turned back to her and lifted his brow with the unasked question.

Thinking quickly, Emmeline spewed out, "How is your taste in furnishings?"

“Adequate, I should think,” he answered, brow still lifted as his eyes flicked down the way she came, then back to her again. “Why do you ask?”

"I've left my mother in Camden eyeing a dining set with with trolls on it," Emmeline puffed, putting her hand against her side. "Along with - if you can believe it - a gold and puce rug. I have to go back and stage an intervention, and it means I'll be late."

Puzzlement gave way to a flicker of amusement. “Did you need support in this intervention, or shall I wait here?”

Emmeline thought about it for a moment. She considered her mother to be a formidable woman, but thinking of the woman in the portrait just inside the door, perhaps that wouldn't be such a difficult thing. "You're welcome to come with me if you think you can help save the dining room from imminent tragedy."

“I can make no promises, but I am willing to make an effort, assuming it is not meant to be a lengthy detour,” he said with a quirk of the mouth, “No one should have to suffer a tragic dining room.”

"No, I have tickets for the other thing, I really wasn't expecting this today," Emmeline gave a full-bodied, helpless shrug. "Normally it's a clock here, a vase there, but you just can't predict her shopping habits. Perhaps she was inspired by Tonks’s hair. Side-along?"

“Tonks is on this shopping trip? No wonder the options are tragic,” he quipped, placing a hand on
her shoulder.

Emmeline apparated first, since she wanted to give him the full extent of her ferocious glare. However, she ended up laughing instead. "No, we're only about thirty minutes walk from where we were, I think she just took a dander. Come on!"

The bell chimed as she headed back into the shop. The atrocious rug was sitting on the counter and despite its brown paper wrapping, Emmeline could feel its ugliness coming from within. However, there was her mother, sitting on the stubby, face-ridden furniture. "Mum? Remember when I said I had a tea appointment at lunch?" Emmeline prompted.

"I think the tongues might dig into your back a little," her mother said, checking another seat. "Come and try this."

"I don't need to try it, we really have to go," Emmeline tucked the address card onto the rug in the most resigned way.

"Go? Why?"

"Because my tea appointment is here," Emmeline indicated Regulus.

Regulus was very carefully smothering his amusement as he tipped his head in acknowledgement.

"Oh yes," her mother finally seemed to notice an addition. Never try to get her mother’s attention when she was focused on something. Actually, that might be a family-wide problem. "Hello, young man." Suddenly, her eyes widened, and she beckoned Emmeline over with what can only described as a stage whisper. "That is a young man, isn't it? I really wasn't sure about the last one. I haven't horribly offended a modern young lady?"

Emmeline stared at her mother blankly for a moment. "No, mum. I haven't seen his medical records, but as far as I know, that's a boy."

Her mother said, "With how girls wear their hair now, it's just so hard to tell."

Emmeline let her head hang and her jaw hit her chest. "Mum, this is my friend." She beckoned him over, praying he hadn't heard any of that.

The slightly crinkled expression on his face suggested he might have, but stepping forward, he made no remark, instead extending a polite hand. For a beat, he hesitated to speak, flicking a quick, searching glance to Emmeline, but when she merely shrugged in return, he seemed to decide the truth was not going to burden her double-life too terribly.

"Regulus Black," he offered.

"Charlotte Henley-Vance." The use of her full name suggested that her mother had just recognised the surname from the infamous list of old names. Or, Emmeline supposed, she may even remember one or two from her school days. Hopefully, no one ghastly. "You're not the one she got arrested with, are you?"

Whoops, nope. Apparently, it's Sirius's reputation she's going to have to battle with. "No, mum," she said as Regulus shot her a sideways look. "And we weren't arrested, we were only cautioned. Can you please settle up so I can see you home?"

"I'm capable of walking home by myself," Her mother replied, though the several octaves, she just jumped indicated otherwise. Still, she had her pride, and Emmeline didn't want to destroy it in front
of someone she had only just met.

"We're going that way anyway, and I assure you, he doesn't mind," Emmeline smiled. "Let us leave you off so you can get that rug set up before Dad gets home."

Regulus tipped his head in a nod. “Yes, it’s quite alright.”

They left the shop, with Emmeline giving another shrug in response to what she was sure was a question about her teenage activities and ducked back down the alley. She wasted no time in grabbing both and apparating into the archway next to their family home in Hugh Street. It wasn't an ancestral holding, just an old three story terrace which looks far more modest than the majority in the area.

"I can put the tea out if you'd like to come in," her mother offered, now obviously less ruffled now that her front door was in sight.

"No, thank you," Emmeline said.

"We have an excellent tea service," her mother frowned.

"I know, Mum, but we have reservations at Claridges," Emmeline offered. Not true in the slightest, but if she said they were going to the Observatory, her mother would have insisted they fortify themselves and perhaps look at baby pictures in the meantime. Mum liked Claridges; they always called her by her full name.

"That sounds lovely," her mother beamed with approval. "I'll see you later, then."

When the door was shut, Emmeline let loose a low laugh and pressed her forefinger and thumb across her forehead. "I'm sorry," she said, despite the fact she was smiling. "She's a tough old bird on the inside, but she's still a bit shook up knowing that I was working when the battle happened. I didn't mean for us to take a detour."

“It was not a long one,” Regulus granted, “but I must admit, my curiosity persists. I expect Claridges is not actually the fascinating secret activity you wished to show me?”

"Not unless tea and scones excite you," Emmeline granted. Possibly the wines, but the more she thought of it, she didn't think she'd ever actually seen him with a drink in his hand. "She's a tough old bird on the inside, but she's still a bit shook up knowing that I was working when the battle happened. I didn't mean for us to take a detour."

Regulus leveled a look at her, then settled on a nod. “Alright, then. Greenwich, it is.”

Another side-along apparition landed them once again between another set of two walls, but it only took a few steps to see the iron gates and terra cotta tilings of the Royal Observatory. She fetched the tickets out of her bag and gave him a cheeky smile, handing one over. "Admission," she elaborated. "We're going to have a little look at the space museum."

“Space museum?” Regulus glanced over at the observatory, then back to Emmeline again with his eyebrow raised skeptically. “Are the muggles stargazing? It’s the middle of the day.”

"I can't show you the department," Emmeline admitted. She would have liked to, but despite the usual law unto themselves mentality, they had Aurors down there. Having a gaggle of trussed up Death Eaters was a little unexpected. "But I can honestly say that when it comes to space, muggles have come much further than we have. We look to the skies for prophecies, for spellwork, but we don't think about what it sounds like or looks like up there. No witch or wizard has ever walked on the moon, or taken pictures on Mars, or put a telescope in the sky so we can see stars in all of their
glory. One day, perhaps - but for now, don't you want to know what it looks like to see a star being born?"

Pressing his lips thoughtfully, Regulus turned his eyes up to the sky - a clear blue, save for a smattering of clouds - then after a beat, looked back to Emmeline with the same look. “I did not realise I wanted to know what it looks like to see a star being born, but...I will admit that I am now curious…” An uncertain tip of the head, followed by a small, wry smile. “Let’s see it, then.”

Inside the building, the two hung back away from the smatterings of muggles for some measure of privacy. The entrance hall was white with wooden floors and panelling, with an old telescope in one corner and clocks in the next. But this was not the prize Emmeline had been looking for. She guided him around to one of the other rooms with an introductory panel which stated it was the Hubble Traveling Exhibit. "That is the telescope I mentioned. It takes long range pictures of the universe, and beautiful photographs of the stars near to us. Come along!"

When Regulus considered the ways in which magical culture and understanding differed from the muggle world, it was the muggles' mundane life of inconvenience and inefficiency that so often rose to mind. No call for aggression, at least as they were behaving in modern times, but wholly unremarkable. No ability to apparate (or even portkey), coolboxes that were damp (and most likely relied on ice itself for chilling), photographs that were frozen still with a single view of a moment...

The huge, curving photographs lining the walls and displays might be still, but against the expectations and insistence of his mind, he found them utterly breathtaking. Colours crashing together; colours that seemed to swirl without moving at all; splashing designs, precise designs, otherworldly designs that did not look real at all. None of them looked like they could possibly be real, not a single one, yet Emmeline had not struck him as the sort to lie - at least not in the words she actually spoke. Lies of omission were understandably necessary, given a occupation like hers, but this-

She did not seem drawn to muggles beyond that of the average baffled witch or wizard, but these displays did not look muggle at all.

“You mean to say these are photographs?” he said with a subtle lilt of wonder, eyes flitting to the nearest displays - large, vibrant orbs, splashes of orange and purple, of red and blue and black with smatterings of light - then up towards the ceiling, and back to the displays again. It was with a slight embarrassment that he filtered his tone to something a little more neutral to add: “Are you certain they are real?”

"As sure as I can be without going myself," Emmeline replied. She sounded a little pleased with herself. "They do work similarly to our scopes, it's just we've never thought to put one up there. You can come back at night and look through the one here. It's not quite as impressive as this. To get close to this, you'd have to go to the one in Australia, or perhaps America; they have huge ones in the deserts where you can even see some of this with the naked eye." She gave a gentle directing towards one of the large pictures. "They do them every year or so, so you can track how the stars and gases move in that time. I saw the exhibition two years ago, but even since then, they’ve added some. Look, there's the birth of a star inside the Orion nebula. You can see how it changes in the little pictures."

Chest twisting, he raked his eyes over the photograph, muddled clouds of orange and grey-blue with a sprinkled swath of bright pink dots. **Orion.** He knew their names were stars, were galaxies and nebulae and constellations, but as beautiful as the spreading night sky might be, and as extensively as they had mapped the stars in their astronomy classes, it had not occurred to him that those distant astronomical bodies could be so colourful or so varied when they looked so uniform,
even through a telescope.

“Fascinating,” he admitted quietly, folding his arms loosely across his chest as he leaned in to get a closer look at one of the smaller pictures. “My father's name was Orion,” he commented, that buried sense of loss tightening a little more, though it did not reach his face so much as his eyes. Instead, he tugged the slightest hint of a smile into his lips, still looking at the display.

"I rather guessed that's that the O stood for," Emmeline admitted, fingers tracing lightly over the large image. She turned away to scan over the room. "I didn't see any of Leo, but the large purple one over there is Andromeda, they had it last time I was here. No, wait, over there, Alpha Leonis, that's you, isn't it? With the blue hue?” She gave a conspiratorial spark of laughter. “How Ravenclaw of you.”

Twisting around to look, he focused in on the pictures she was gesturing to, first to the larger swirl of his cousin's namesake, and then to the smaller, with its orange and blue colouring, framed by a glaring orange star off to the side. Alpha Leonis. Cor Leonis. Regulus.

The smile on his face grew, eyes lightening as he tipped his head in a small nod; and though she was teasing, it was not so far off from the almost-reality. Anxiety, followed by the relief of a proper sorting - muddled, as so many were. “Quite so. Perhaps in some other life, in some other mysterious time stream, or however it works.” Shifting from his current attentions - another photograph originating from Orion, pinkish in hue, with a single rocky pillar - he started wandering in the direction of Andromeda and 'his’ respective photographs for a closer look, scanning the others in the area as they passed.

"I'll add it to my list of things to investigate when my department reopens, if it ever does.” Emmeline sniggered. She was quite obviously not watching the pictures, but rather watching for his reactions to them. "There's Sirius - taking up half the board, showboating as usual. I hadn't realised you were both named after binary stars. Was that on purpose?"

“Possibly, though it may just be coincidence. Sirius was named for our father's grandfather, who had died several years before, whereas I was named for a great-uncle, also on our father's side, who passed the December after Sirius was born.” Regulus said as he studied the dual-swirls of the photograph associated with his brother's name - orange and smoky-white against the star-peppered black. “My middle name - Arcturus - came from a great-uncle who also passed earlier that same year, though it was also our paternal grandfather's name, which I suppose was convenient.”

"So you go for a recently deceased family member?” Emmeline replied, with a slight shrug of her shoulders. "So the next one for you would be Orion? Forgive me if I'm wrong, but he was lost to the retaliation for the muggleborn signs fiasco? I think I recall the rant that happened afterwards. I'm relatively sure it was before you, shall we say, took an extended sabbatical. Or would it simply be the most recently deceased, rather than closeness?"

Regulus frowned, feeling the sting of memories that were far more bitter, with little in the way of sweetness - sad and angry and a mess of things. “I had not left yet, no. I was still at school.” There was a subtle strain to his voice, and his arms were still folded across his chest - a little more stiffly, now - as he started walking to the next set of displays, beautiful but insignificant in name, as far as he was concerned. “But there is no strict rule in naming practices. Many like to use the opportunity to honour the recently deceased, but there are those who prefer the favourite family member, or perhaps even just that one name on the tree or that star in the sky they always liked.” He paused in front of a bright green image with three large pillars rising from the bottom - sprinkled all over with large pink specs that still did not seem real at all. Quieting, just slightly, he added: “Even so, you are right in your conclusion. My father is not the most recently deceased anymore, but I would
consider him priority."

"It’s far more sentimental than I would have imagined, but a pleasant surprise." Emmeline acknowledged, plucking off one of the pamphlets. "Perhaps you’d like to come back on a clear evening and see some of it for yourself?"

Glancing over at her, Regulus tried to smother the still-rushing emotion to something calmer, then once again, his gaze settled on the pillars - the ‘Eagle Nebula,’ it was called. When he spoke, it was again with a tone that approached normalcy, charged though it was. “Perhaps I would.”

"We can pick up a book with the pictures in it on the way out." Emmeline looked distinctly uncomfortable for a fraction, but seemed to let it pass. "We can consider it penance for upsetting you when you were enjoying yourself."

“It would be the first penance paid for that particular matter, so there is that,” he said, tone bittering again for just a beat before he continued, more evenly, “But I appreciate the sentiment.”

After a beat, Emmeline sighed and looked away. "I know," she confessed. "It was on the Order list of unknowns, couldn't get past the iron wall of silent society, if I recall. I am sorry, for what it's worth. I take no joy in murder, regardless of politic."

“It was unknown to me too, and I was supposed to be inside the iron wall,” Regulus said dryly, then shook his head. “Regardless,” - murder - “it is the furthest thing from joyful, so we can agree in that.” After stomping out that that unwelcome blaze, two-pronged in its discomfort, he turned to her with a centering nod. “Things are escalating again, but hopefully they will stifle before gaining too much more momentum.”

"Everyone has their secrets," Emmeline replied. "I promise none of mine are murderous."

Regulus forced a nod to fend off the unwelcome crush of guilt, focusing his attention on the room of stunning photographs - grand, distant, and frozen in time. “Well, I am glad this place is one you saw fit to share,” he said, as much to change the subject as anything, true though it might be.

"You've had a rough time," Emmeline gave a brief smile. "I thought it might be a pleasant distraction."

At that, Regulus met her eyes to flick a small smile of his own, and despite the gutted wrench in his chest, he felt at least a small measure of comfort that she had cared to try. “Thank you for the consideration,” he said sincerely, though his eyes had drifted back to the - perhaps ironically - more comfortable photographs. “Surprisingly enough, it was.”

“It's exciting, this stuff,” Emmeline preened under the confirmation of enjoyment. “You know, they have these machines that have cameras in them. There's a picture from the seventies - a full colour picture - from this thing standing on Mars. They're going to send a station up there later in the year. Can you imagine getting to see the stars from Mars? I've never been so upset we're no longer allowed to have muggle jobs. Oh, do you know, they've gone up to the moon?” She pointed to another door away from the exhibit. “They have video - magical photography with sound, that is - of them walking about up there. It's a heady thought.”

“Magical photography with sound?” he echoed, raising his brow, not quite certain where to start with the prospect of going to the moon. “Like a portrait? How did they manage that without magic?”

"I don't really know how they do it," Emmeline admitted. She sounded a little cross about that.
"They put them on these little black boxes with tape inside inside them, and when you put it into a bigger box, it plays upon a screen. And it's not just a few seconds, and you can't really interact with it, you just watch it and hear it. I know it sounds ridiculous, but it definitely works - Benjy had one, and I think I've still got some of them from before Fabian and Sturgis took it apart to try and make it 'better'."

Regulus shook his head with puzzlement, feeling a little uncertain in his mental footing. None of it sounded like something muggles ought to be able to do. Creating stunning, up close photographs of the stars; walking on the moon’s surface; recording an extended experience to look at later, with no spells at all. It felt - uncomfortable, and fascinating, with a prick of frustration that they had not managed the same...and more than a little bit of guilt that he felt intrigued anyway. Emmeline would obviously not look down on the curiosity, nor would Sirius, nor anyone else in his surroundings back at the house, if he were to guess.

Since returning, he had heard only one word from the cousins he had once been close to - TRAITOR - and not very many more from Draco, who would undoubtedly like him less for it - yet he could not silence that ringing accusation. The day had been far too pleasant - of course that echo would creep back in.

Discomfort clawed again at his chest, but with stubborn grasps, he called back to his brother’s words, spoken just a week before: ‘You're a Black, aren’t you? You don’t cow to society’s demands, you set the demands and it falls to everyone else to keep the hell up.’ So closely it rang to his grandfather’s words so much longer ago, yet somehow implied the opposite - calling up a small huff of a laugh, though he wasn’t quite certain why, when it did not feel particularly funny.

“How strange,” he settled in a thoughtful tone, eyes tracing the sweeps of another nebula.

"I'm sure someone in the Order must still have one. I'd put money on Sturgis having something in that workshop. Whether it still works after he's mucked about with it is up for debate," Emmeline pondered aloud. "Still, immortalising a memory with someone you may never see again to be re-lived over and over sounds...more intimate than a portrait. I'm not sure if it would only hurt more."

Expression sobering to a small frown, Regulus nodded. His mother's portrait - his father's study, full of tomes and artifacts - Barty's photographs, and the photographs of his other friends lost - there were sufficient reminders, even without some locked loop talking at him but never to him.

“I imagine it might be,” he said, nodding through the lingering sense of melancholy. “It sounds a little bit like memories in a pensieve, actually.”

Emmeline startled and chuckled, "A flat pensieve. Yes, I suppose you're right." With a tentative hesitation, she looped his arm. "Come along, then. We'd better go find the books now, something tells me you're not any better at muggle financial transactions than I am, and I want a copy of those pillars for my wall. They can replace any embarrassing photographs if you ever do get roped into afternoon tea."

For a fleeting moment, Regulus flicked his eyes over to her. It had been unexpected, the sudden loop of their arms - friendly, if surprisingly familiar - but though it was an invasion of his preferred personal space, he felt, in that moment, that he did not mind it so much. The jarring tug from his own thoughts was almost welcome, and however careful the extension might have been, there was a casual ease to her words that dragged him back to the present.

She was a friend, not a friend, of course; some part of him thought he probably ought to politely restore the previous distance, but instead, he smiled - a small smile, tilting up as the frown slipped off.
"You do realise that by admitting to hiding them, you only make the prospect of embarrassing photographs more curious," he responded, relaxing some of the tension in his frame as they fell into a walk, "Though with the pillars as an alternative, I must admit the competition is a close match."

"If I don't get to see yours, you don't get to see mine. No tit for no tat, so to speak." Perhaps sensing some of the tension, Emmeline loosened her grip and lowered her to tone. "It's all far too lovely to succumb to melancholy today. It's not everyday you see stars and planets like this."

"Indeed...Though I honestly don’t know what you’re talking about. You see our family photographs all the time," he said pointedly, the smile quirking up a bit more as he swept his free hand in an inclusive gesture, "We’ve been looking at them for some time now, even today."

"I've been seeing your family photographs, which are obviously staged," Emmeline responded. "Unless there is a picture of you hanging somewhere in that house puffy-eyed and bawling next to a broken toy or wearing your mother’s school robes and using a wooden spoon for a wand, it doesn't compare."

"You would be hard-pressed to find anything of the sort - if I was bawling next to a toy, they would not have taken a photograph of it." Crying over toys was unforgivably childish, as he recalled, though it was too sticky an emotion to say as much aloud.

"It's the curse of an only child, everything is worth documenting."

Lightly, he quipped back, "Perhaps so, though I would like to put forth that I was a perfect child, so this tit for tat expectation really isn’t fair at all."

Emmeline stopped, apparently because she wanted to make sure he got a look at her disbelief at that statement. "I don't believe you could be perfect, you're too curious, you definitely stayed up past your bedtime reading and looked in places you ought not."

"I will rephrase," Regulus began again, "I appeared to be a perfect child, which is essentially the same thing."

"Hoodwinking from an early age." Emmeline sighed dramatically. "Slytherin from the start, then."

"I believe ‘strategising’ is the word you were looking for,” he corrected with a hint of amusement, shifting a brief glance in her direction. “I prefer to learn vicariously, when possible.”

"It must have driven you bonkers to know there were people around you couldn't see," Emmeline laughed. "The Order - right in front of you, but completely unobservable and salt to injury, can observe you."

"I was positively outraged," he confirmed dryly as they came to what appeared to be the gift shop, near the entrance. He could already see walls of astronomy-themed merchandise, and they had not yet stepped through the doors. "It was more annoying to know that such was the case, but at least I was able to account for it."

"Oh?" Emmeline perked up. "Did you decide to be clever about it, rather than frustrated?"

“Well, of course,” he said matter-of-factly, a little grin flicking back onto his lips as he met her eyes. “Not much use in the outrage if you can’t use it as an excuse for a bit of cleverness.”

"I went to school with seven years worth of Ravenclaws, and I swear to you, not a single one of them enjoys being clever about things half as much as you do." Emmeline huffed a laugh. "You're
"It's ridiculous."

"I'm motivated," he countered as a sense of satisfied amusement crept up into his eyes.

"To get the last word, it seems," Emmeline pointed out. "I think the only way I'm going to get it is to distract you with books, so shall we go in?"

"You're a bit tricky yourself," he said, tugging open the door for them, "But I do like getting the last word, so we'll have to see about that."

Despite the pleasant sun beaming down on Claremont Square, Number Twelve was still a spooky looking house. It didn't look dilapidated as it had the last time Sturgis had called here. It could even possibly be considered nice-looking, but he found that he couldn't get through the door. He'd gone to it twice and changed his mind. If Mad-Eye were here, he'd be ripping right into him for being so shifty.

Steeling himself for round three, he made it up to the steps and found the door opening to him without him touching it. He also found himself uncomfortably nose-to-nose with Remus Lupin, who stepped back immediately with a smile. "Hello, Sturgis."

"Hullo, Remus," he found himself saying in return.

"Were you coming in?" Lupin asked.

That was a good question.

It was now June. Sturgis hadn't been inside Order Headquarters since August. He hadn't been entirely sure that he ever would again, but he knew part of that was the shadowy imprint of Azkaban lingering. No one blamed him; Hestia had said so when she had come to his house last week. Emmeline had said so the month before. He wasn't the first person whose mind wandered on a surveillance, and Arthur Weasley had almost died from it. He'd just ended up imperiused and arrested.

Didn't stop him feeling like a useless lump.

With the news of the Battle of the Department of Mysteries (you could hear the capital letters when Hestia spoke about it) and people out for the count and trying to wrestle with a newly acknowledging Ministry, he knew they were short-handed. They had a prophecy to help decipher; the department had been in tatters; the Death Eaters would be bold now they didn't have to hide; and in terms of hiding, he'd decided he was done with all that. He believed in the Order. He believed in Dumbledore. He believed maybe, if he tried really hard, he'd be able to make a difference.

With that, he nodded firmly. "Yup."

Lupin's smile grew, "Come on, I'll get the kettle on."

The house was still old and creepy, with about a million portraits lining the hallways and that creepy elf-head thing on the stairs, but it wasn't dusty or grimy anymore. He guessed the cleaning went well.

"I thought you were heading out?" Sturgis asked.

Lupin shook his head. "It can wait."

"I indicated down to the kitchen in the basement, thankfully
without setting off Mrs. Black.

The kitchen also looked a lot better and brighter, with a door open he hadn't even realised was there last time. Sturgis took a seat at the table, scanning over the headlines of the Prophet when one of the names caught his eye. “Amelia Bones is dead?”

Remus nodded, though Sturgis could only see the back of his head.

Amelia, Edgar and Ernest Bones were all good people. Edgar had been a member of the Order the first time around; they had slaughtered him with his wife and children, and now his sister too. Would Ernest be next? Didn't he have a little girl too? It felt like the McKinnons all over again. All of the old families were beginning to die out, not due to muggle hands or descending into half-blood status as Sturgis' own had a few centuries ago, but by the very people pledged to protect it.

Sturgis barely suppressed a shiver as Remus placed the tea – and a very welcome plate of jammy dodgers – in front of him. “Is it just you?”

Remus shook his head, “No, Regulus remains here. It is his house.”

“I heard about him deciding to join in the fight,” Sturgis said, dipping half the jammy dodger in his tea. “Bit of a turn up for the books.”

“He's always been decent enough,” Remus said, sitting down with him. “Unless Sirius has spectacularly gotten on his nerves, or James is involved. I suspect Death Eater involvement was largely comprised of a mix of those and upbringing.”

Given the way Snape tended to get on, that couldn't make things easier for little Harry, “I wouldn't know,” Sturgis pointed out.

“No, of course, he'd barely been in on the ward,” Remus winced. “Well. Draw your own conclusions. Most of us have spent almost a year doing so, and you have the right to do the same.”

“I will,” Sturgis said into his cup. “What does Shacklebolt think about all this?”

“Wary,” Remus admitted, “But better the devil you know.”

“Don't imagine Molly's too pleased, she's not even keen on Sirius being about, and he's not even a real Death Eater,” Sturgis said.

“Actually,” Remus gave a slight shake of the head, “She seems fine now. When Arthur was hurt, he stayed up with the children. It seems to have endeared him.”

“Pretty impressive,” Sturgis had to admit. Molly was a tough nut to crack. “Guess I missed a lot.”

“Take your time,” Remus said, reassuringly steady. “I don't think Voldemort is going anywhere.”

“More's the pity,” Sturgis agreed.

The June sun was streaming down from a cloud-smeared sky, combated by the cooling charms lining Regulus's full-sleeved robes and the shade he had found on the far end of the garden, tucked away with the book Emmeline had gifted him several days before. The photographs were not so sweeping and grandiose on these pages as they had been on the walls and displays, largened to full vividness, but they were stunning, nonetheless, and augmented with the strange explanations these muggles had for what they had found, so high beyond the sky. Flipping through the pages, he had
seen Cygnus with its red-swathed smudge, bright blue lines shooting out from a yellow core, and Draco, a spiraling red framed in green, like some strange, twisting eye.

He had heard the vague rustlings of someone in the kitchen - presumed to be Remus - and indistinguishable chatter - presumed to be someone talking with Remus - but he did not bother himself to stir until he had reached the end of his current section describing a 10,000 year old supernova that the book claimed was still expanding, though he was still trying to piece together how the muggles could even know something like that.

Marking his place and slipping the book in his bag - along with two others he had flipped through, on the subjects of artifacts and protective wards, respectively - he slung the strap over his shoulder and strolled into the kitchen through the still-open door. Inside, he was curious to see an unfamiliar face settled with Remus in the kitchen - finer-featured with light, short-cropped curls, no one he had interacted with thus far - cleaning up what must have been a spot of afternoon tea. There were not very many people who walked these halls that he had not met yet, but he wondered if this was the ‘Sturgis’ Sirius and Emmeline had mentioned in passing.

“Good afternoon,” Regulus said, glancing between them, then settled on the new face. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“We haven't.” He looked somewhat unsure of himself, but confirmed, “Sturgis Podmore.”

“I thought you might be.” Regulus tipped his head in greeting, eying Sturgis eying him. “Regulus Black. Welcome back.”

"Cheers," Sturgis nodded. There was a beat of silence, before indicating the house. "I'll, er, do anything to get out of cleaning. Only show up once it's done."

A wry half-smile flickered on Regulus's lips, though he could feel the weight of Azkaban behind the words, however light the joke might have been. Sturgis was the one who had been sent to prison for something he did not do, at least not of his own free will - and in the time following his imprisonment, it seemed a lingering question as to whether he would return at all. Perhaps he would, if he was here now, though Regulus had an admittedly limited understanding of the Order's inner workings and the accompanying expectations. Their claim was that one could walk away at any time, but from a practical standpoint, Regulus wondered how much that could be true.

“That is one way to do it,” Regulus said, matching his tone.

"I better go now if you're holding down the fort," Remus said, giving each of them a look. "I won't be long. If Tonks comes, please tell her, well, you don't have to tell her anything, but er, if she does, I'm sorry to have missed her."

"I can run your errand for you if you want," Sturgis shrugged. "I don't got to work today."

"I appreciate it, but no, thank you, it's better if I'm not here," Remus gave a wan smile. "I need to make preparations for the full moon, and it's been a while since I've been by myself."

"Alright," Sturgis said, though he sounded a little unsure. When Remus slid out the door, his eyes flicked over to Regulus. "Was that weird, or did I miss something?"

Regulus lifted an eyebrow, just slightly, as he looked back at Sturgis in turn. “More weird than usual, yes. Perhaps he's feeling upset because he can't contribute to Sirius’s trial, but it seems rude to say as much, so I haven't asked.”

"He doesn't have to worry about all that, Shacklebolt's a good bloke, he'll see him right," Sturgis
gazed back at the door awkwardly, then back to Regulus. "Or it's the Greyback sighting in Diagon, him about always puts him on edge."

"Greyback would put anyone on edge," Regulus remarked, crinkling his nose a little, "but it’s a fair point. Was that who…?" He lifted his brow slightly, leaving the remainder of the question implied. Greyback was known for setting himself up to prey on children…

Sturgis nodded, in agreement to both the comment and the implication. "You've not heard that one, then?" He took a deep breath in and out, perhaps to stymy discomfort at an awkward subject. "It was back when his father was in Creatures, Greyback got hauled in for murdering two children, and his father clocked it was him but couldn't prove it. Tried to make his kid number three."

Frowning deeply, Regulus shook his head with a cold wash of horror at the thought: two children, bloodied and dead, and a third - the mild-mannered Remus Lupin, cursed as his prize for surviving. "That’s terrible," he said, obvious though it seemed; the children - and to imagine the guilt his father must have felt, on top of it…

"It's very sad," Sturgis nodded. After a beat of quiet, he added, "But it's one of the reasons he's here, to stop it from happening to someone else. Even if you can't save everyone, making some difference helps. Poor Amelia."

"Indeed…" Regulus lowered his head in a slight nod. He had never known Amelia Bones personally, beyond an awareness of her family, but he’d read about her murder in the Prophet - an alarming call back to the last war. (Or perhaps it was the same war, with an extended pause between.) As awful as it was to have the Dark Lord skulking about and hurting the believability of Harry, Dumbledore, and anyone who agreed with them, it was awful in quite a different way for the Dark Lord to no longer be hiding… The people Regulus had left behind...the people around him now...it unsettled him, to think they might not all make it through, this time. They certainly had not, last time… "It seems we must rely on the culmination of our little efforts."

"You went to the Department of Mysteries," Sturgis said, the air of confusion suggesting it was a question despite the intonation.

"I did." Regulus shifted closer to where Sturgis was seated at the table, though he remained standing as he punctuated the words with a nod.

"Might be a dumb question," Sturgis started, with a slight frown. "But why?"

Regulus started to open his mouth to say ‘why not?’, but before a sound even passed his lips, he own mind was quick to point out that there were plenty of reasons not to - arguably more reasons not to go than there were to go. Instead he paused for a beat to formulate the thought a little more carefully - something that had felt very clear in the moment, and that he did not regret in hindsight, but he had not yet put directly into words...

"For a number of reasons, I suppose… Sirius was barreling in, and I did not much like the idea of him facing off against Death Eaters where I could not see him, especially with the likelihood of Bellatrix being present… then of course Harry was in trouble, and whatever I might have thought of his father, Harry does seem like a good kid… and from the way Sirius and Lupin were talking about it, I gained the distinct impression that something important was happening, so in that respect, I suppose I simply wanted to help.” He lifted a shoulder in a small shrug. “Throwing oneself into chaos isn’t always the answer, but ignoring the gravity of important events is not always responsible, either.”

"You simply wanted to help," Sturgis repeated quietly. He shook his head gently. "That's a good
way to put it, yeah. Just a one-time heat of the moment thing?"

“I suppose I'm trying to sort that out, myself,” Regulus said, head tilting thoughtfully. “Emmeline and I followed through with an investigative lead as a point of mutual curiosity, not too long ago, but it has not come up much.”

"I'm just wondering how much you know, how much is still kept as under an Order member lock and key," Sturgis confessed, though he did so with an apologetic look. "The last time I saw you, it wasn't mutual, so it's kind of a shift."

“I would say the likelihood is high that the last time I saw you, I could not see you, so I agree the circumstances have changed quite thoroughly,” Regulus said, though his tone lightened a little. “I’m not certain about the current state of the informational lock and key... I don’t know what I don’t know, after all. I do, however, know that we successfully stole a prophecy. I remain unclear about the details, only that the Dark Lord wanted it, which is of course reason enough to ensure he does not get it,” he added with a tinge of disdain before continuing, “From what I’ve deduced, that is the main subject everyone would get noticeably shifty and vague about if I was present, but that’s not to say there are not other things.

Sturgis seemed a little more content with that as an answer. “I think that's the big secret, you are right about that. For a bunch of vigilantes, we're no great shakes at keeping ourselves from not looking shifty.”

“TMI noticed,” Regulus said with wry amusement. “I like discovering secrets, and I like being right, so I suppose it is doubly satisfactory, in that case.”

“It doesn't mean we're not making difference,” Sturgis said, an edge of defensiveness creeping in. “They are, I mean, but I’m here, so we, again, now.”

“If I did not think you were making a difference, I would not be dedicating my time or efforts towards your aims,” Regulus pointed out mildly, lifting his brow. “I admittedly had my doubts, and I'm still trying to understand the extent of those expectations - your situation included, if you don't mind me saying - but there is merit to it.”

"My situation?" Sturgis asked.

“The decision of whether to leave or return, after time away,” Regulus said carefully, finally settling in a chair across from him at the table. There was a subtle discomfort to his tone as he added: “My past experiences were always very...I suppose you could say inflexible...”

That startled a laugh out of Sturgis. "I know I don't have to come back," Sturgis replied. "I didn't have to. But I still believe in the Order. If I didn't, maybe I'd see my friends less, but I don't think anyone would have said anything about it. That's what Dumbledore always says, you're only here for as long as you choose it, and I do. Choose it. If anything, it's made me realise even more how utterly naff the Ministry is at doing anything that's not, uh, self-serving? And You-Know-Who, he's not, but they don't see it, that there's not going to be any magical world left if people don't try. Everyone’s in danger, not just the new people, but old magic. And that’s my speech.

“I came to a similar conclusion about the magical world - back when I left,” Regulus admitted with a tip of his chin, and a small sting of the rejections he’d experienced and the implications they’d held, even just among the small, core group of friends he had expressed his frustrations to, the night he left for the cave… How long ago it was, and how little things seemed to have changed, in that respect. (As an over-eager teenager, he had not understood, either. How many children were blinded, even now?) “You’re right about them not seeing it.”
"I just figure the Order is the best chance at showing the truth," Sturgis lifted his shoulders in a small shrug. "If everyone is dead, if we have to wait 'til everyone is dead, there's not going to be a chance to save anyone. As long as the Order is about saving people, I'm going to stick around."

“That sounds very noble,” Regulus admitted, his expression pinched and thoughtful as he folded his arms loosely, eyes dropping to examine the table. “I suppose...it’s not that I want to get murdered, nor that I think I ought to be - I don’t want to be trapped… But I understand the reasoning behind service for life, because those who leave can become a threat that knows you well.” With a sigh, he rubbed at his face, and when he lowered his hand again, he looked back to Sturgis. “It sounds like I’m arguing against my own trustworthiness - I suppose I am just trying to understand that freedom to choose, from a practical standpoint. It seems...reassuring, but also vulnerable... It just makes me wonder if there are any loopholes, I suppose.”

“Noble’s for Gryffindors. It's just good sense to look after the magical world: it's our home.” Sturgis shook his head at that. “I think it's just that people who want to leave should leave, because they were asked because Dumbledore or someone else here felt they could be trusted. That doesn't change just 'cause they're no longer in the Order. They're still the same person. I mean, there's Peter, but stepping away is different than handing your friends over to the slaughter. We vote on the person, everyone has a say - with only a single exception, and I think you probably know him.”

“‘Yes…” Regulus began, slanting his mouth in thought, “Truthfully, I was wondering about that.” Severus seemed the closest comparison to his own situation, yet for all the importance he seemed to have as a double agent, no one, including Severus himself, seemed particularly happy about his presence.

“We have tried…” Sturgis frowned. “But he only listens to Dumbledore. He's not one for socialising.”

“Indeed not…” Regulus said with a wry smile, though it stung a little, the distance Severus had kept with them all, himself included. “Even less so now than I recall. We were friends in school, and we've barely spoken a word, though of course the circumstances have been quite complicated, and more than a little bit isolating.”

“We do appreciate the risks he takes, most of us anyway.” Sturgis gave him a fleeting smile. “But I don't know the details of it. I was a late addition in ‘80.”

“He and Sirius continue to have a particularly difficult time of it - both of them,” Regulus remarked, shaking his head, “But I, too, am unfamiliar with the details. Of course, my uncertainty comes from the opposite direction. I left in the summer of ‘79, and apparently quite a lot happened after that.”

"Dumbledore did tell them to cut it out, but I dunno if they can.” Sturgis said, heaving a hefty sigh at the thought. "We were doing okay until Peter - then we lost, um-" he stopped talking, though his lips continued to move. "Five families in four months?"

Regulus frowned and nodded. “That is what I've heard… losses on both sides, as I understand it.” (Evan Rosier- Leander Wilkes-) “A terrible year, from the sound of it…”

Sturgis nodded. "I think Emme and me were the only ones left who hadn't, you know, lose family to it. Being from old families must still count for something, if you're not loud

“Sometimes, yes. Not always, but sometimes,” Regulus said with a frown. The Boots were an older family, if halfblood - what they had done couldn't have been too loud, or Regulus would have known about it - and in his own family… They were often loud on both sides of the argument - but
where he had always assumed their old (and specifically pure) blood could shield from that, it never had. Not even the quite. Not even the supportive. “All the same, for your sakes, I'm glad it did.”

Sturgis accepted that with a nod. "At most, I'm going to guess I lost the Malfoys off the client list. I can live with that - providing no one decides otherwise."

“Client list? What do you do?” Regulus asked, his tone shifting to curiosity.

"Oh, um," Sturgis lifted both his hands. "Mechanic. I usually make muggle machines run off magic. Even the Ministry's got a fleet of cars. They wouldn't know what to do with them if they weren't bewitched."

Lifting an eyebrow, Regulus tilted his head in some cross off puzzlement and skepticism. “Muggle vehicles? The Malfoys?” There had always been an air of *nouveau riche* surrounding the Malfoys that had been a running joke among the more subdued (or at least less flamboyant) families, and there had been some supposed rumours about their family mingling with wealthy muggles, prior to the statute… But his Uncle Cygnus would have vetted Lucius thoroughly. “Surely you don't mean Lucius and Narcissa.”

"I'm usually very discreet," Sturgis looked down at the table with a nod, a smile pulling at the edges of his lips. "You'd be surprised how many people have a car, or maybe, um, a television, video camera. They just rationalise it that if magic is running it, it doesn't matter that's it's muggle. The black market is huge."

“Does Narcissa know?” Regulus asked, his voice lowering to something caught between hesitation and bemused bafflement.

"Dunno," Sturgis shrugged. "Was more trying to avoid death by peacock."

A little smile quirked unbidden at the corner of his mouth, recalling the Malfoy peacocks - that, at least, was familiar. Regulus was not sure of the best method - nor was he secure in the wisdom - of asking Narcissa about the muggle vehicles directly, especially with so many other dramatic concerns at hand… Even if she knew, she would probably deny it, but if it really was true, and Sturgis was not just making a joke of it… (he had experienced his own curiosities, of course, but how baffling it was to imagine Lucius actually *entertaining* the thought… another Malfoy, perhaps?)

But the peacocks… “Are there still two?” Regulus asked, the amusement more clear in his voice.

"More'n that," Sturgis looked mildly distressed for a moment. "I got the car running fine, but a few of them chased it right down the gardens."

Lifting his brow further, Regulus had to admit the likelihood of anyone else in the entirety of the wizarding world having multiple albino peacocks was very low - but the prospect of having more than two would have been shock enough, even without this accusation of chasing a muggle anything through the gardens.

“How many are there?” Regulus asked, a little mystified. “Are they all white?”

"I saw about five, but might've been more," Sturgis chuckled. "And yup, bit of a sight to see if you look in the mirror and they're chasing you right down the driveway. Ducked into the hedges once. They're loud critters, and they gave me a startle."

“They are,” Regulus agreed, shaking his head. Two peacocks had seemed logical, a second to keep
the first company, but as fond as he might be of animals, five - or more - struck him as excessive. “I suppose they have the space for it… But nevermind that. How long have they been customers? For the muggle vehicle, that is… If it was before 1979, I’m going to feel very lied to.”

"The Malfoys?" Sturgis scratched the side of his chin thoughtfully. "So I started doing some on the quiet in ’78, but I don't think it was the Malfoys yet; though I know Abraxas Malfoy, you know, the political one, he had a funny looking car, wheels on the side for decoration, used to get it serviced with the Ministry fleet, dropped it off a couple of times when I was still new to the department.”

Regulus nodded, experiencing a small measure of relief that he hadn’t completely missed that during his visits to his cousin’s manor, though he supposed that even if they’d had one at the time, he was unlikely to have stumbled upon it anyway. There was something unreal about the thought, imagining anything of muggle origin gracing Cissa’s property, but perhaps it could be a foothold for conversation, with enough planning. (If Cissa even knew about it, of course - with Lucius likely being in prison…)

He had felt guilty, enjoying the muggle space museum as much as he had, but it was hard to feel too guilty if Lucius Malfoy was hoarding muggle vehicles in secret. His mother would have still been furious, but in the present circumstances, it was a small comfort.

“I see,” Regulus said after a beat, “Interesting.”

"To me, yeah. You can listen to music in them; you don't get wet; they've got some advantages, so I like them enough to keep one. Arthur, as well, Ron and Harry stole it once." Sturgis nodded. "And your brother, though I think Hagrid still has his. Bit of advice, don't get on anything he's driving. It's always possible it was a teenage thing to go about at breakneck speed, but I like my neck unbroken."

“I recall - not about the speed, because I knew better than to get anywhere near it, but the fact that Sirius owned one,” Regulus said wryly, shaking his head. “Our parents were terribly unhappy about it, of course.”

"Maybe it's where Harry picked it up, from when he was a baby," Sturgis chuckled to himself. "I don't remember Hogwarts being so crazy when I was there, but I did get told this year took the cake. The idea of Hogwarts as not safe is really unsettling."

“It is quite unsettling, yes…” With a heavy sigh, Regulus leaned back in his chair. “With the Dark Lord back and active once again, I suppose it is too much too hope that he will get bored with terrorising the school...but at least Dumbledore will be returning there, and the Ministry is pulling its head from the sand. It’s not a solution, but at least it’s an improvement.”

Sturgis tapped the paper, "I don't think the Bones family would agree."

“Of course not,” Regulus said, propping an elbow on the arm of his chair and thumbing at the grooves along it. “That’s why it’s not a solution. But the public return of the Dark Lord was inevitable, and the sooner we take the him down…” At the back of Regulus’s mind, he thought of Dumbledore’s hand, char-black with a barely contained curse. “...The sooner, the better.”

Chapter End Notes

The Malfoy + muggle cars tidbit is pulled from Pottermore, and we think it's one of
the most hilarious ironies ever, so. There you have it. ;) Bless the Malfoys.

And although it's simple enough to look them up, we also are big nerds who gathered photos of the various Hubble pictures Reg and Emme were looking at (including some that didn't get explicit mentions in the final draft), so if anyone likes pretty space pictures, here you have them:

- Gallery View
- Andromeda
- Cygnus (full)
- Cygnus 1993
- Cygnus (death of a star)
- Draco
- Leo / Regulus
- Leo / Regulus
- Orion (horsehead pillar)
- Orion 1992
- Orion 1994
- Orion 1995
- Orion 1996
- Orion (birth of a star)
- Eagle Nebula / Pillars of Creation
- Sirius
Skulking about Order Headquarters was not the most dignified of activities, but when the chips were down, Emmeline could forget her dignity in search of prestigious prizes. In this case, her prize was looking for a single less-than-dignified picture among the walls and photographs of Number Twelve’s host - if only as the necessary material to prevent total and complete humiliation if he ever made it as far as the parlour and managed to see the picture of herself throwing books. It was a terrible picture taken out of the all-important context of her being only eight, the book she was reading having the most atrocious ending, and rebellion against what was considered ladylike. She was not about to go down without a fight; there were only two children in that house, one of which was not acknowledged, so somewhere, there absolutely had to be at least one embarrassing childhood picture.

The trick was going to be finding it before anyone realised she was there early for her meeting with Dedalus; well, Regulus' meeting with Dedalus, but if there was an opportunity to stick her nose in, she was going to. She just had to be quiet, subtle, and still manage to search through every picture on these tables despite the irritated protests of most of the people in the portraits and photographs observing her.

“If you’re looking for embarrassing photographs, you are not going to find them,” Regulus said from a few paces back before taking a few steps in towards the spread of photos. With a half-smile, he flicked his gaze down at the table, then back to Emmeline again, brow lifting slightly. She fought to control a startle, then adopted an obstinate glare. He was outright taunting her now. Feeling the heady rush of adrenalin that always came with a fact-finding mission, she lifted her head. "I don't believe for a moment they don't exist, so sooner or later, I will."

“As I said - I was, for all intents and purposes, a perfect child who did not do embarrassing things,” he responded lightly, folding his arms loosely over his chest as he stood next to her, eying the framed photographs before her. “You’re going to be very disappointed.”

"Every child does embarrassing things, that's why everyone has at least one picture they're embarrassed about," Emmeline said. However, her confidence in it was dwindling. She was well aware of the fact that propriety was the name of the game in society, and they were far more involved than her own family had been. Was it possible it remained as rigid inside the private walls as outside? There was something disturbingly sad about it, but also something that made sense, given the way Sirius bucked all sense of control and Regulus was intensely controlled. "If all that happens is a little observational exploration, and I find nothing but curiosities, I still won't be disappointed."

Glancing sideways her to meet her eyes, his smile warmed just a little. “There is something to be said for observational exploration.” Regulus again dropped his eyes, looking then between the small gathering of photos on the table and those on the wall it was tucked against - some of him, some of recent family, all looking very serious, all sitting or standing very tall, despite the subtle movements permitted by their magical nature.

"Says who is possibly the only person more nosy than I am," Emmeline rolled her eyes, though the gesture was a little fond. They had definitely reached the grounds of being friends, or at least she thought so, after agonising difficulty in trying to decipher what in Merlin's name he was actually thinking. Still, friendship allowed for familiarity and teasing not to be taken the wrong way. "Besides, I've yet to be disappointed during our social events, I don't think you'll break the streak."
“I will interpret both of those remarks as compliments, though your framing could use some work. We are inquisitive, not nosy,” he said lightly, mouth quirking as he tapped a finger on his arm. “And as it stands, I remain undischappointed, as well.”

“We’re inquisitive to point of our potential detriment. That’s nosy, if not a little reckless. If you can't tell the truth to your friends, whom can you?” Emmeline smiled, then strided across to him away from her explorations.

“But if the detriment is still just potential, is it still nosy? Who determines the detrimental circumstances?” he responded, the tone as playful as it was thoughtful, walking alongside with his arms still loosely crossed. “If you were concerned about the fall out in one situation but not another, yet did the same thing in both, do they both qualify as nosy under this definition, or only the one you would consider a detriment to you, if it went poorly? Or are we considering detriment solely in regard to the effect of the information sought?”

Emmeline came to a stop and turned to face him with a spark of laughter. "At the risk of joining you in overthinking it - I can't believe this is something I've said, by the way, I never imagined I would, so this is extra special just for you - the detriment is context-dependent. If you think it may go badly, and it does, you were nosy and didn't get away with it. If it went well, you did. If you didn't think it was going to go badly and it did, would you put it down to your 'inquisitive' nature leading you astray, also known as being nosy, or would what happened to make it negative be blamed on another source, rightly or wrongly?"

Regulus lifted his brow loftily. “Defining something by the results means you can only define it in hindsight. If nosiness is to be defined by intent, it is unfair to blame the inquisitive nature - naturally the blame should fall on the offending factors.”

He’s ridiculous, Emmeline thought to herself, but she wondered if she too was a little ridiculous because she didn't want to concede the point. "You say hindsight, I say experience and error management-based decision making.”

“I can accept this reasoning when the individual in question knows the situation is likely to go poorly, but if you were not expecting it the first time, wouldn’t that no longer qualify as experience and error management-based decision making?” he questioned, meeting her eyes and punctuating with a pointed finger.

"Then that would be being inquisitive, wouldn't it? There is room to be both nosy and inquisitive, and I'd sooner believe you swim the Thames naked on Christmas day like the muggles do than believe you don't properly consider prior experience, logical reason, and research, and occasionally throw it all out the window because you just want to know,” Emmeline replied, tapping her finger against his triumphantly, as if were some sort of finger-based dueling match. "Your nosiness overrules your inquisitive nature, and your inquisitive nature feeds being nosy. I suggest you make your peace with it. I have.”

“Well met,” he granted as he retracted his finger, tipping his head with a hint of lingering amusement. “I commend your thoroughness and can accept that line of reasoning.”

Emmeline beamed. "There has to be some upside to questioning everything, other than eyes rolling skyward so you can nick their tea while they're not looking. Though I don’t suppose you do such horrid things as that, do you?"

“Quite right. As we've previously established, I only forgo acquisition permission if the person in question deserves as much. And never tea,” he quipped with a sideways look, “That would be terribly unsanitary.”
"Are you calling me unsanitary?" Emmeline asked, crossing her arms. It was in jest, of course, but there was always an undercurrent with this line of discussion when it came to pureblood mania. She still wasn't entirely sure where Regulus stood on that particular bridge.

"Not you specifically, but I'm not drinking out of someone else's cup," Regulus said pointedly.

"I'm sorry to inform you that life is often unsanitary," Emmeline managed to crack a smile at that. "Though I suppose my rebellious youth has skewed my opinions there."

“Oh, I assure you I figured that out, but that doesn't mean I have to like it,” Regulus agreed, then paused before adding: “Specifically in relation to the issue of sanitation, or lack thereof. I was not personally burdened by your rebellious youth.”

"At least, no more than I with your-" Emmeline made a vague finger symbol, which she hoped he would be able to translate as 'being a Death Eater for a while'.

"-unrebellious youth?" he finished in a tone that was wry but careful, though his expression suggested he had caught her meaning quite well.

"There's still time," Emmeline replied. After all, he had enjoyed the time at the Observatory, and it they had time, perhaps they could go stargazing. They could get a boat up at Skye and see the Northern Lights, she'd always mean to go there.

“That is certainly the hope,” he said, mouth slanting a little.

“You hope to be rebellious?” Emmeline let her smile spread.

For a flash of a moment, Regulus seemed to have a more sobered response poised on his tongue - but instead, after the briefest pause, he shook his head, then lifted his brow to say instead: “I’ll have you know there are those who would argue I am quite rebellious, these days, by certain definitions of rebellious.”

"Yes, I was at that Order meeting,” Emmeline replied. It seemed a very long time ago, but even then, quite ridiculous. Someone having to ask the Order for permission to see their own home was peculiar in the least, but at the time, they knew nothing of his motives, and very few had met the man at all. He had done something rebellious, this was true, something thought to be impossible without the help of someone like Dumbledore, and escaped. He could have chosen to remain gone. But despite her initial misgivings, she had to admit she had been pleasantly surprised. Although sceptical, he retained something of an open mind, and the aforementioned inquisitive nature certainly helped. It was refreshing and made for satisfying company. "I hope you remain able to live up to hype - pardon the pun - when you're known as alive. Are you ready to be?"

“It’s a bit past ‘ready or not’ at this point, I suppose, when the most problematic aspects are already in motion” - again, he shook his head - “but it could not be avoided forever.” A pause, a tilt of the head, and then- “...Well, that is mostly likely untrue, it probably could have been; but to specify, not as the present circumstances stand. The legality of it seems a comparatively small thing, but it does feel strange.”

"Legal is more binding," Emmeline nodded slightly, because of course it was going to feel strange. She did notice that he did have a tendency to frame what would be seen as an active choice as something inevitable, something that anyone would do rather than a mark of someone seeking some kind of redemption for the actions they took when they were young and masked. It could all have been avoided forever, but that wasn't the choice he made. Wasn't this why they were implored to give him a chance in the first place? And yet he did not trade on his achievements or even seem
to fully realise them unless they were tangible. He didn't seem to fully realise that leaving in itself was an achievement or the significance of his choices and what they represented on both sides of the war: a way out. "Though I'm not sure if this matters to you, unless you were thinking of leaving again."

Regulus’s mouth pulled up to a pressed slant, shaking his head just slightly. “There is quite a lot to be done here, on every front.”
"Would you want to leave, if that weren't the case?" Emmeline asked.

“I will say it was infinitely less stressful,” he admitted wryly, “but I don’t know that I would call it a preference. There are merits to be found in both situations.”

About to make commentary on how less stressful wasn't actually much of an answer, Emmeline was saved from a lecture on the merits of neutrality by the door opening and the all too familiar sight of an aubergine coloured top-hat emerging from the doorway. So instead she grinned at Regulus, "Have you met our resident lawyer before?"

Regulus shook his head at Emmeline, then turned his attention to the top-hatted man. “I don’t believe I have.”

"Hello!" Dedalus squeaked happily, bringing his usual level of cheer to proceedings. "Terribly sorry, am I interrupting something? We did have an appointment! Oh, we had it almost ten minutes ago, I am sorry, this watch-" He pulled out a gold pocket watch and gave it a shake. "-it hasn't been the same since I went into your department."

"No, you're not. Hi, Dedalus," Emmeline smiled in an indulgent way, but she gave a swift look to Regulus to observe his reaction. Dedalus was not what people assumed a lawyer would look like or act like at all. He was far too easily distracted, star struck, and infinitely polite for all that. But he was good at his job, a creative duelist, and a good friend.

"Hello, Emmeline!" he replied with obvious enthusiasm. "You look very nice today! Do you have an appointment too? Are you going somewhere nice?"

"Um, no." Anyone would think she dressed in old trousers and a t-shirt, given the fact Dedalus was the second person to remark upon her current dress. So what if she had decided to dress a little more smartly? What if she had decided that she'd like to wear her pinned up today? Everyone was just making a fuss. "Weren't you in a rush?"

"Quite right, quite right," Dedalus nodded quickly, "Do we have somewhere we can put out all the parchment? I do hope you have plenty of ink, it does involve a lot more more paperwork if you're not - you know, Thingy."

Regulus had spared at glance to Emmeline, then - puzzled - back to Dedalus. “‘Thingy’? Do you mean to say ‘alive’?" he asked, tone a little uncertain, though he took a few steps and tipped his head towards the staircase as a means of gesturing to follow him.

"No, no," Dedalus replied, hurrying on to follow. "I mean - Lord Thingy."

“Lord-” Regulus started, then seemed to realise who Dedalus was referring to, a little uncomfortably. “Ah. Yes. It seems those circumstances involved rather less paperwork. There is plenty of ink in here,” he was saying as they came upon the nearest room with a desk, tucked away on the next floor up.

“Excellent!” Dedalus exclaimed. “If we can get them all signed now, I can put them in on my way
to court, and you'll be alive by tea time!"

Regulus settled at the desk, setting his quill and ink readily and eying the stack of papers in Dedalus’s hands. “Let us get to it, then.”

When Regulus Black next visited his brother at St. Mungo’s later the same day, it was with a head full of legal-speak and a name that once again belonged to him, strange though it still felt. (‘More binding,’ Emmeline had pointed out. That, it was.) For a year, he had been home, situating himself back into some echo of the life he had once had, however dramatically different it might look in all except locale. There was a certain finality to the change, though a legal shift was comparatively invisible in contrast to a face-to-face confrontation - a record of existence, proof of connection, a re-rooting of sorts.

(Petty though it was, he couldn’t help but feel a little twinge of disappointment that the guard in front of his brother’s door was not the witch from the first night, who had turned him away until Andromeda confirmed otherwise. He was finally official-)

With his wand collected and the door temporarily unlocked, Regulus slipped into the room to see that Sirius was sitting at the head of the bed with a book - such an uncommon sight, though he knew his brother presented himself as less of a reader than he actually was (most likely for the sake of being irritating). There was little else to do in the hospital prison room, regardless of preferences, but right away, Sirius looked up.

"So what say you," Sirius said, closing the book without bothering to mark any sort of place to come back to. "Did you make a liar out of Highgate?"

Regulus quirked a half-smile and nodded. Even now, he had yet to visit his own - presumably empty - grave, curious though he was, with the thought prickling in his head again. “It’s official. I am alive, once more,” he confirmed aloud as he sat in one of the chairs.

"Congratulations," Sirius deadpanned. He pulled his feet under him and repositioned himself. "How does it feel?"

“Odd to think about,” Regulus admitted, shaking his head. “But generally the same, as far as actual practical change goes, in respect to the way my day was progressing.”

"Nothing weird happened at Grimmauld Place?" Sirius clarified.

Regulus shook his head. “Not that I’ve experienced, thus far. Emmeline was in for awhile, and Dedalus came by the house to complete the paperwork itself, but legal completion did not seem to affect the charm in either instance; though I would not have expected it to. I have not yet tested it with anyone outside of those expected inclusions.”

"That's a good sign." Sirius heaved a sigh of relief. "You gonna change the tree?"

“Yes, I believe so,” Regulus said thoughtfully. “The misunderstanding was admittedly intentional at the time, but there is little point to preserving it.”

"Is there a point, if you're not planning on adding to it?" Sirius asked with a shrug. "I wasn't sure if you'd just let it all go, have whoever it was be the last one standing. Unless you wanted to be the last one standing?"

Pressing his lips to a line Regulus leaned on elbow on the hard plastic arm of his chair. There were a great many plans and contingencies he consistently cycled through his mind - war and politics
and surviving family - but the prospect of building his own family unit within the broader context
of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black was an anxiety he had closed his thoughts to, save
for the occasional spare thought. The hypothetical versus the reality - the previously practical
versus the currently impractical - he had not known well how to navigate such things when they
were being constantly shoved in his face, and he certainly did not know how to do so now…

(And yet…)

“I don’t know what is going to happen…” Regulus began. There was a certain poignancy to the
current state of things, the idea that the child who fit the tapestry’s idea of a proper heir had died in
1979 - yet he wasn’t so sure anymore that he wanted to hold to that split, as he had during his years
away in France. Regulus is dead, he had coached himself at one time, but Regulus was not dead
now. “Perhaps it might end up a bit pointless...but I don’t want this part of my life to be erased,
either, I suppose.”

"It's your choice," Sirius said, evenly. "If you want to stop it being a relic, or keep it as one, it's just
your choice. But you have to acknowledge that it's fucking funny to want to amend the tree to
include you for actions that would have gotten you kicked off it half a century ago. Or not; maybe
they'd have made an exception, you being the last and the baby, providing you added to it."

Slowly, Regulus let loose a sigh. “I would adjust that statement to ‘actions that would get me
kicked off it now,’ under anyone else’s control,” he remarked with a wry huff, propping his chin
heavily in his hand. “Trust me, the irony had not escaped me… I will admit that part of me hoped
they might make an exception for just that reason, but it did not seem worth the risk, at the time.”

"That was because you were ickle baby then," Sirius drawled, laughing softly to himself. "Sadly, I
don't think it's an effective threat anymore, not that it ever was for me. Bella would probably just-"
he mimed a blast with his fingers, "-blow the whole tapestry to smithereens if dearest, darling baldy
asked her to."

Though Regulus thought about arguing that he had not been a ‘baby’ - he had been 17, a legal
adult, if not by much - but instead he just leveled a look of mild annoyance before responding: “I’d
rather she didn’t.” A beat of silence, then: “...And I would like to point out that I was not actually a
‘baby.’”

"I don't think she cares what you'd rather," Sirius pointed out, with a bark of laughter. "And you
were just figuring out how to walk on your own two feet and say piss off to people properly.
Sounds like a baby to me."

Regulus rolled his eyes slightly, though his chin was still nestled in his hand, looking a touch more
petulant then it first had. “There are probably other ways to describe the situation without likening
me to a toddler,” he pointed out.

"Everyone is entitled to be a toddler at one point in their lives, and you were useless as one at the
right age. It’s nice to see you’ve reached adolescence." Sirius shrugged. "Still, ‘better late than
never’ is practically the new family motto."

“Adulthood,” Regulus corrected dryly, feeling that the discussion of the family motto in any form
was a bit uncomfortable, in the present situation they were all in. “You were closer that time, but
not quite.”

Sirius squinted. "You sure? Do you feel adult-like? What am I saying, you've been adult-like since
you were eleven. I concede." Fidgeting, he added, "So what else am I missing, aside from your
apparent resurrection?"
“That depends on what sort of things you would like to know about,” Regulus responded, feeling a small measure of satisfaction at the concession.

"Anything that doesn't concern the few hundred witness reports saying I lost my shit and blew Wormtail into a thousand pieces - chance'd be a fine thing - and knocked out a street while I was at it, or whether mandrakes can be frigid," Sirius replied.

“Hm.” Regulus tilted his head a bit. “I’m not sure I have much in the way of interesting updates, but Emmeline has come around a few times. Remus and Tonks, too. I met Podmore yesterday, Diggle today…”

"The things that girl will do to poke about the antiques," Sirius commented.

“She does seem to like them,” Regulus said in agreement, then in a more sobered tone, added, “Though unfortunately, the wider wizarding world has been having a more difficult time of it. The Death Eaters have taken the public reveal as an opportunity to resume activity, starting with the death of Amelia Bones, as the Prophet tells it…”

Sirius looked down at the mention of Amelia. "I saw about Amelia; they went through her older brother, his wife, and his kids last time. Cantankerous old coot, but good people. I wanted it to be out in the open; guess this is the price of it. No idea who yet?"

“Not that I’ve heard,” Regulus said, shaking his head. “But I admittedly have not heard anything beyond the initial Prophet report.”

"Yeah, the only person with access to the Order stuff is Tonks, and she's in a mood, so I'm not asking her," Sirius frowned. He shifted about again, sitting cross-legged on the bed. "I'm going to guess nothing on Harry either? Kingsley said he tried to ask to get in, but mixture of being underage and not technically family. Utter shit if you ask me, he's my godson, of course he's family."

“They’re quite strict with that list,” Regulus said with a tone of agreement, though he wrinkled his nose. “They weren’t going to let me in, until Andromeda provided confirmation.”

"She smack you one when she saw you?" Sirius asked.

“No,” Regulus said, shaking his head. “But it was awkward. Or at least I felt awkward... She was acting quite normal, I think... What I would imagine as normal, at least, though it has been a long time.” (A very long time.)

Sirius raised his eyebrows. "Is there a situation where you don't feel awkward?"

“I’m not always awkward,” Regulus countered with a pointed look. “I have just found myself in a variety of awkward situations.”

"Since birth."

“Not consistently,” Regulus said, lifting his chin a bit stubbornly, “and thanks to you, on no small number of occasions.”

"Speaking of consistently awkward occasions," Sirius plowed on, ignoring the stubborn dig at him. "Andie said she hasn't seen Narcissa again, she was up here before a couple of times. Guess Malfoy got the book thrown at him already."

“Perhaps,” Regulus said, mouth turning down in a little frown. “I still haven’t seen her - or Bellatrix, for that matter - so I’m not sure what happened… but I haven’t read anything in the
papers yet, either, and I imagine they would announce it when they come to a decision on the matter…” He felt a small stab of guilt, imagining how upset his cousin must be to see her husband put on display - and surely Draco must know by now… The thought of how Draco must feel, his father still alive but facing the threat of Azkaban… (the Dark Lord had broken Death Eaters out before - Regulus knew he did not want that to happen again - yet when he thought of Narcissa and Draco, he felt a twinge of shame at the part of him that almost wished he could want that.)

"If you'd seen Bellatrix, you really would need to be resurrected," Sirius replied darkly. "Possibly also reassembled. I still can't believe you hexed her."

Sighing heavily, Regulus pressed a finger to his temple, his free arm tucking over his lap and thumbing at a hem. His favourite spot on the floor to stare at was being blocked by Sirius, at the moment, so instead Regulus looked at the stark white sheets of his brother’s hospital bed. “Her shock did not last very long - shifted quite immediately to fury. She is very forthright.” - TRAITOR! - “And has undoubtedly told Cissa by now.”

"You say forthright, I say bonkers." Sirius sighed heavily. "You gonna try and talk to her? Narcissa?"

“I don’t know what to say,” Regulus admitted with a deepening frown. “I didn’t really know what to say before, either...but these certainly aren’t the circumstances I had in mind for making my case.”

“What do you want to say?” Sirius shrugged.

“That’s the problem: I don’t know how to say it.” Regulus pressed his lips for a stagnant moment, though he spoke again, just as Sirius was shifting to break the silence: “That I’m sorry, I suppose… Not for the reason I left - I don’t regret that, truthfully, not even a little - just...for leaving. For being a spectacular letdown when I promised I wouldn’t be. For not knowing how to make it work without hurting anybody.” (Literally or figuratively.)

"A spectacular let down?" Sirius repeated with distaste. "Truly?"

“Factually speaking, I let them them in a spectacular fashion - so yes,” Regulus said, rubbing at his face with a weighty sigh.

"I'm sure Bellatrix thinks so, but she also tortures children for fun and probably kills puppies in her spare time, so fuck her opinion," Sirius tapped the bed in front of him."You really think Narcissa thinks like that?"

“I don’t think she’ll react like Bella, no.” Narcissa would not have murder in her eyes, but… “But that doesn’t mean she won’t feel as though I let them down. You said it yourself - I was the last one. I feel my reasons were valid, and I would stick to those reasons again because I know getting out was the right thing...but it’s not always so simple, trying to understand that from the other side.” For the first time in months, he felt Sirius’s disappearance like a punch to the gut - more distant, less bitter, but suffocating with the uncertainty of whether Narcissa might feel that way, too.

"Alright, I'm going to say something scandalous, so be prepared for that," Sirius said, adopting a more serious tone despite his words. "If it came to shove, then I think Narcissa would rather lose the name and keep the family. It's not the same situation anymore: there's hardly anyone left, and she's got a family of her own, so I don't think she's going to be thinking about how you let them down by not destroying your soul with the Death Eaters or getting married and having tiny babies for her to dote on or...even denouncing Voldemort and wanting him dead. Lucius did it, after all,
and if he'd bigger balls about it, this wouldn't be a problem. And," he paused either from the difficulty of getting it out or for the need of a dramatic pause, "...she's not you in this situation, Regulus. You may have some experience with someone leaving, but you've never lived through their death. I'm a little closer, I went through some of it, albeit she probably wasn't drinking, what with her being knocked up, but...The question keeping her up at night was never how you failed her, but rather, how she failed you. How she could let this happen. Bargaining for some miracle that has by some measure been given to her. I don't think she's going to want to point fingers, not when she calms down. I think she'll want absolution, reassurance, and to know it isn't her fault."

Eyes flicking up to meet his brother's, Regulus's throat knotted a little as he pressed his mouth to a steadying line. For a moment, he hadn't a clue what to say, and even if he had, he wasn’t sure if he could have got the words past his throat, anyway. Instead, he just nodded with a stretch of silence, his mind knocking about with the guilt of his father's death, brought about by the very group Regulus had pledged himself to - of leaving Cissa, his mum, perhaps even Sirius to mourn. Cissa, with the burden of loss darkening the welcoming of the son she'd was wanted so much - his mum, alone and dead - Sirius, left to rot in prison with no one to advocate for him...(Not that Regulus had much weight in that argument, as far as the Ministry was concerned, and perhaps even less with Barty's dead father.) The guilt of being so angry at Sirius for so long, only to do the same just a few short years later...

"It wasn't her fault," Regulus finally said, monitoring his voice for steadiness, "Or your fault. Or Mum's." It was mine, he thought, like some persistent echo, but that didn't seem quite right either. "It was the Dark Lord’s fault for being such a self-serving nightmare,” he settled instead, with a subtle strain.

"I'm always happy to pin it on Voldemort and his crusade,” Sirius replied, with a wan smile. "But a little blame goes to each of us for shoving the responsibility of grown adults and a whole family down on you and expecting anything other than pain for the trouble. It is what it is."

"I meant in the context of leaving, specifically… The circumstances of getting into that mess into the first place are quite another set of stressors,” Regulus said wryly - and in that, Regulus knew he had more blame that he particularly liked to think about. “But indeed, it is what it is…in both respects.”

"I don't think it is," Sirius said, shaking his head with a small shudder. "The Death Eaters might be why you left, but you can't tell me a burden didn't lift when you were no longer expected to play heir."

“Perhaps a little bit,” Regulus admitted, leaning back in his chair and linking his hands across. Safety - and freedom… And yet, no matter how ponderous the burden had been, it had been important, too. (Some part of it had been important…) “It’s not that I don’t understand the inherent responsibility and import of being the heir; it just felt like a bit much, all together.” He punctuated the thought with a sigh. “I suppose what I meant was...that I did not want to leave them, so much as I just...needed to leave...”

"Because having a thousand year old weight on your chest as a kid is suffocating. And..." Sirius trailed off. For a moment, it may have been the end of the conversation but he found his resolve and carried on. "Leaving didn't really solve the problem, it just shoved it onto you; and you were fourteen, and you didn't make good choices, but it's not as if you had help either. Given the chance without the crap weighing on you, you got a chance to grow and figure your life out and survive not just Voldemort, but, I don't know, crippling self-doubt? Trying to please everyone when each person had a different want and half of them conflicted? It may not equate in your eyes as a reason to leave, but it's like being submerged in deep water, you won't know how much you were affected
by it until you're out."

(Like being submerged in deep water-) It came swift and unexpected, a phrase that led to a thought that led to a flash that led to an unforgiving undertow. For just a moment, a carefully closed off door in his mind swung open, and for all the reassurance in his brother's words, for a moment, it was something else that roared in his ears and quickened his pulse. The confusion, the expectation, the desperation, the self-doubt - each crashed behind Regulus's eyes like dark water and bloated, grasping hands. There was an unwelcome lurch in his chest as he lifted his gaze to the ceiling, focusing on the bright white surroundings, stale and clean and dry. His mind had set to its staggering reel once more, but as he shut his eyes in a slight crunch, Regulus took a slow breath in, exhaling the thoughts as much as possible. (Release the water, the slippery claws - the pressure, the disappointment...)

The silence had reached a point of discomfort when Regulus stirred himself to speak. "That sounds about right." Two different suffocations, yet his brother was right - in a perhaps unintentional way - that those suffocations were, in a sense, quite the same. Steadying the wash of nerves, he dropped his gaze back down to look at Sirius, constructing a strained, stilted half-smile. Rapid those his pulse still pattered, it was gradually starting to slow, and however loud his mind had felt, it was with a small measure of relief that he noted that Sirius did not seem to have noticed. "How strange. It is almost as if you have experienced something similar."

"You're not going to argue with me about it?" The surprise was evident despite Sirius' pleased tone. "Nothing about how it all made you a stronger person or they just did it because they cared?"

"Not today," Regulus said, leaning his head back against the wall with a soft thump, thumbing at his palm in some centering gesture. "Today I feel like accepting that all of those things can be true, in different respects." With a heavy huff, he added, "Perhaps tomorrow."

"Being truthful and accepting without prior notice, terrifying." Sirius huffed a laugh to himself. "Alright, then. The truth of it is I think Narcissa will understand that. I've seen that kid, he's spoiled and a brat, but he's not giving me the Bellatrix aura of sadism and cruelty. I don't think he's terrified to put a foot wrong, so I don't think she raised him like that. If we were all lucky, Bella was never going to be a mother, probably the same way Mum should never have been one, and Andromeda just put her daughter before everything else. That left Narcissa with the expectations, even though she was the respective baby. But against the odds, she managed it - she got to be a mum, and a proper lady, and even after the shit Malfoy pulled last time, they got their free pass and their family and their lives. And right now? It's all slipping through her fingers and she has to be stuck between wanting to grasp it and keep it safe and wanting to support her husband and her sister. No matter what she does, she could lose it all - from Voldemort for Lucius fucking up, or from the Ministry because everyone around her is a fucking Death Eater...but you did it. You got out, and lived."

Regulus nodded, though his head was still tilted back to the wall. Just barely, he thought, even as he tried to relax the tightness in his shoulders. "From the start of all this, I've wanted her to see that - to believe there's another option for them. To find some way to at least meet in the middle... I suppose that's what I actually want to say." Pinching his mouth a little, he added, "It's just difficult, trying to put it to words effectively when there is so much muddying it all up."

"She's a Slytherin, give her a viable option to get what she wants - most of what she wants - she'll probably take it," Sirius shrugged. "And coming from her family, that'll probably add something to it. Chin up, you're not seventeen anymore. She can't threaten to tell Mum or expel you from your own tree, and you have a better arsenal these days."

Regulus was all too familiar with the call of viable options, but he knew just as well the pull of
Bellatrix, and it was that uncertainty that he was a little more worried about. Somehow, emphasising that to Sirius did not feel like the argument to make, especially when his brother was feeling so positive.

“Indeed, The only people left to tattle to are already well aware.”

"Speaking of tattling," Sirius said. "Has anyone spoken to you about that happened at the Department of Mysteries?"

Regulus shook his head. “Not in any significant way. Sturgis Podmore did ask me a little bit about it, but if there has been further discussion, I have not been privy to it.”

Glancing downward, Sirius asked, "Do you want to be?"

Eying his brother again, Regulus took on a thoughtful expression, pausing a beat, then responding, “I’ve thought about it.” he admitted. “I did not want to, at first. Reckless vigilantism is not exactly my style, so to say - among other reasons…” The horcruxes (and their related discretion) had been a priority, a consuming thought, and one he was not remotely willing to share with those who may betray him in the same breath that they thanked him for his information - but though the search still unpinned his pursuits, there was quite a lot more to it. Quite a lot more than he expected to get out of any collaborative ventures. “But I’m intrigued about the broader scope. And of course,” - his expression and tone shifted to something a little more jesting, to smother the strange embarrassment of a shifted opinion - “you clearly require some additional monitoring. I thought we both agreed to avoid Bella, yet there I found you.”

"I better add the caveat that if Harry's got to go up against her, I have to ignore that. You saw what she did to Frank and Alice's boy. I take no chances with her, and no matter how capable and strong Harry is, he is still only fifteen," Sirius replied with resolve. "The last time I left a fifteen-year-old to his own devices around her, it went badly. I am not the only who requires a little babysitting."

“That is a fair point,” Regulus said quietly, then seemed to notice the softness and add a more steel. “I will amend my previous statement to say you require additional monitoring whilst you are monitoring Harry, which under these conditions, is a valid exception,” Regulus granted as he stubbornly held his own fifteen-year-old experiences at bay despite the pointed implication.

"Then if it's something you want - and only if it's something you want - you should ask," Sirius allowed. "Keeping secrets when you're around all the time or out scouting for things you don't have all the information for is getting irritating."

“Vaguely entertaining though it might be to try to piece everything together, it has always come with a measure of irritation for me,” Regulus admitted dryly with a sigh. To join felt so - official, so committed, so locked into place, yet the more he had seen of the Order and its members, the more he had started to think that it might not be the alarming sort of commitment. There was an increased measure of safety, now that Dumbledore was following through with his promise to stand up for Sirius - perhaps Regulus’s own pardon may be on its way. “It is certainly something to think about further.”

"Trust is always hard won," Sirius said, though did not elaborate on whether it was him trusting the Order or vice versa. "After...shit, in a couple of weeks, it'll be a year. The cake and Buckbeak doesn't seem as if it was that long ago."

For a moment, Regulus was struck with the realisation that Sirius was right, and his birthday nearly was upon him again. Technically speaking, it would be more than a couple of weeks, but no more than a month, certainly - and so much had changed, since then… “I still could not see any of them,
last time I had a birthday,” he remarked wryly, “It was terrible. But the cake and Buckbeak were a point in the day’s favour, I will admit. How strange it is, to think it has already been a year.”

"Actually, I might have left out a small bit of information about that." Sirius shifted a little, but this time, seemingly more from awkwardness than restlessness. "Malfoy was the one who wanted Buckbeak offed. I wasn't sure how you'd take that."

Regulus furrowed his brow slightly, at that. “Why would he want that?”

"Because his kid was being a brat to him, and Buckbeak scratched him for his trouble," Sirius elaborated. "Apparently, he fell over shrieking that he was dying; clearly, he got his grandmother’s tendency towards histrionics."

“Well,” Regulus started, shaking his head, “Hippogriffs can do more than just ‘scratch’ if you are rude to them, as I recall, so I’m glad both Draco and Buckbeak are okay, histrionics aside.”

Sirius waved it off. "Buckbeak's alright, just don't call him names or tug him about."

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Regulus remarked simply.

"I know you wouldn't." Sirius scoffed. "But you put Harry in a room with Narcissa's child, and they get instantly worse. It's like putting me and Snape in a room. Oh, I hope he got bollocked for not sorting out Harry's occlumency after what happened."

With a frown, Regulus nodded. (Like himself and James Potter, he supposed, the way the anger always came red and blinding, no matter how good his initial mood-) “I can’t say I’ve heard either way.” Somehow, it didn’t feel quite appropriate to point out his own experiences with what happened to people who failed in their assignment, instead lifting a small shrug.

"I guess I'll just have to wait and find out myself," Sirius huffed. "Kingsley said it could go on another week."

Regulus tipped his head to a nod. “Hopefully that week will pass quickly.”

The Order meeting had been carrying on for perhaps an hour with no audible sound of its conclusion, though Regulus supposed that was less telling than it once had been: the members did seem to be much better at avoiding the triggering of his mother’s portrait, these days. This was the first meeting they’d held since the fiasco at the Department of Mysteries, and though Sirius’s line of questioning the day before had sparked afresh the vague thought of joining, it was strange, coming to terms with the thought of actually doing so. He had considered it, briefly, when at first the arrivals started, but trying to isolate Dumbledore felt too awkward, knowing the meeting would be hovering in wait, and to ask to speak after felt similarly uncomfortable, because then he would not be able to think of much else.

For the first hour, he had not been able to think of much else, but as he settled with a parchment and quill in the library, his mind instead drifted to another sticky memory of that same conversation. (Cissa-)

The morning’s Prophet’s had confirmed Lucius’s conviction, just hours before, though Regulus expected Lucius had been transported to Azkaban some time before. The Ministry wanted to look as though they were acting swiftly, to make up for their year of negligence. They would not be kind to him.

Perhaps his cousin would not want to hear from him, especially with her husband convicted in a
battle Regulus had participated in from the other side - but though he and Lucius had never been particularly close, Lucius had hesitated in that fight. He, like Avery, had at least hesitated, but of the assailants in that fight, it was his cousin’s husband who was taking the fall this time. Narcissa was probably beside herself, undoubtedly having read the papers, if they had not told her directly - feeling the isolation of yet another loss.

Perhaps she would not want to hear from him, but perhaps she would.

Dipping his quill in the ink, Regulus smoothed his parchment and began writing.

To Cissa,

For years, I wondered if I would ever have an opportunity to speak to you again, but now that the opportunity has arisen, I scarcely know what to say.

I read about Lucius’s conviction in the paper this morning. To bring it up is terrible, but more terrible still is the war that has brought such things to pass.
You must be devastated. I would be devastated, in your place. Our family has suffered quite enough, but it seems suffering is to be our lot until the dust at last settles.

Letters are an unsuited medium, following so many years of silence, but I’m sure you can understand my hesitation in initiating a surprise visit.
I do not wish to cause you further pain, but when you are ready, if you can be ready, I would like to speak to you in person. We live in dangerous times, in confusing times, but whatever the circumstances, our family has always been important to me, and though I know how terrible the situation must look, that has never changed.

I wish you well, and I’m sorry for everything that has happened.

Regulus

When at last he settled his quill and closed the inkwell, he stared at the page before him for a good few minutes, watching the ink steadily stain into the thick parchment before folding it neatly and slipping it in his pocket. He had yet to get an owl of his own - not since Canopus, his childhood owl left behind so many years ago with the rest of them - and it would be foolish to borrow any owl owned by a member of the Order, recognised or not. A trip to the post was due - perhaps on his way to visit Sirius, later that afternoon. Sirius would undoubtedly want to hear about Lucius, if he hadn’t already - though Regulus wasn’t so certain he actually wanted to hear the conversation that might follow.

Perhaps another half-hour of restless reading had passed before soft footsteps from the hallway caught his ear. There was a soft rap at the door, before it opened a crack. "I thought you’d want to know we're done," Emmeline said softly, as the door opened to reveal her. "Everyone is filing out, with the exception of Remus who shot off up the stairs, and is undoubtedly hiding somewhere in the house."

"Why would he be hiding in my house?" Regulus asked with a prickle of vague curiosity, marking his place in his book.

"I don't know, it seems like rather a good place to hide to me." Emmeline admitted, with a twitch of a smile. "If I had to hazard a gaze from my keen intuition, he and Tonks have disagreed about something, and they're both sulking. It's the first time I've been able to tell you're related to her from looks alone."
“Are you trying to suggest I’m always sulking?” he asked pointedly, though his tone was starting to lighten. He stood, then, to push his chair to the table, moving to return the inkwell back to its place in a nearby cabinet pressed flush to the wall.

"You're not when I can help it," Emmeline shrugged. "I thought I was being quite entertaining."

His mouth flickered a little as he closed the cabinet, then turned back to looked over at her. She was not wrong on either count, though it felt a bit embarrassing to say as much. “Well, if that was not the point you were making, is she walking about untransformed as a means of protest, then?”

"While I'm not an expert on metamorphmagi, I do think part of it is linked to emotional states,” Emmeline considered. "So whether it's means of protest or she's just upset and stuck looking like a brunette Moaning Myrtle, I have no idea."

“Huh.” The sound was more a means of acknowledgement than a further question. What Tonks and Remus could be having an argument about was beyond him, when the former was relentlessly cheerful and the latter was relentlessly polite, but he supposed it must have been something of significance to have them both depressed about it. Suddenly, he tried to imagine what Andromeda’s daughter would look like with a proper head of brown hair before promptly giving up on the task. Depending on how long the disagreement lasted, he would likely see it at some point. “Curious,” he said.

Emmeline nodded in agreement. "Don't make plans for next Saturday night, I have an idea I think you'll like, but it requires some planning."

Intrigue of a different sort cleared the fog that had settled in his mind, warming a little around the edges, and he granted a nod in return. The last outing might have technically been a muggle one, but he was far more fond of those space books than he would like to admit - and the one before, an investigation that found him the ring. They were two for two, with enjoyable company, at that. “Sounds mysterious.”

"I'm a very mysterious person," Emmeline smirked, giving a full fingered wave as she opened the door. "I was right last time."

“The expected standards are quite high now. You should know I can be a very strict judge,” he said, though a little quirk of the mouth had mirrored on his own face as he first met her eyes, then retrieved his book from the table and circled back around to where she was now standing in the doorframe again.

Emmeline stopped in her tracks to stare at him. "Intentional witty pun or happy accident?"

“I have a wit of - I suppose you could say - astronomical proportions. Draw conclusions as you will,” he quipped dryly as he slipped past her into the hallway, a hint of amusement lingering in his eyes as he shot her a sideways glance.

Emmeline laughed, though she seemed to startle that she did. “Completely ridiculous,” she muttered, as she headed out the door.

Clicking the library closed behind them as a small twitch tugged up at his mouth then smothered again, the warm mood settling. She was proving herself to be a purveyor of curiosities, so to say, and he doubted the next would be an exception on that front. She had mentioned returning to see the stars at night - perhaps it was a follow-up trip. “I will be certain to keep Saturday night available for an outing,” Regulus stated more directly, “In the meantime, I will keep an eye out for Remus, should he linger long.”
An unfortunate side effect of adulthood was the knowledge that you were being childish or irrational, but still not feeling as if you had the proper faculties to stop yourself.

This is how Remus Lupin found himself loitering, for lack of a better term, in what he imagined was once Orion Black's study. While he had been in here a handful of times, Sirius only ever called it 'the study' without further elaboration on its potential shared use. The point was that it was a few landings upward and far away from the Order members quickly taking their leave. It wasn't unusual, Remus reasoned, for him to be there. He did technically live elsewhere in Ministry subsidised housing, but it made more sense when Sirius was here to have a base here. He had a room within these walls. While not his home, he certainly had an accepted presence.

So as he wandered (not skulked) around the study, looking idly at the books and waiting for an inevitable screech of Sirius's mother that was apparently not going to come. He could stay there all night, and it wouldn't be unusual. Especially not the night before a mission.

Yet any hope Remus might've had for solitude was soon quashed by the creak of the door as Regulus slipped inside, glancing over at the other occupant. “Good afternoon,” Regulus greeted as he made his way towards one of the bookshelf.

Remus deflated, then instantly felt badly about doing so. “Er,” he said, a little unsure of himself. “Good afternoon?”

Regulus flicked a glance over to him, then back to the books. “Will you be staying, or are you looking for something in particular?”

“Just…” Remus wracked his brains for an acceptably suitable reason to be in there and found little came to mind. “Avoiding the rush.”

“This is a good place for that,” Regulus said, tipping his head thoughtfully. “Did the meeting go well?”

"Yes, I think so," Remus replied. He wasn't sure, he wasn't paying a massive amount of attention until it came up about the roving werewolves, and he could feel all the eyes suddenly either looking at him or pointedly not looking at him. "More of about what to do now it's all out in the open and attacks are increasing to a couple a week. Likely more that we're not seeing."

Regulus shook his head with a frown. "If it's not one thing, it's another..."

Remus nodded; it was true. "I'll be gone for a while," he said, on the off-chance someone needed him for anything. He doubted they would. He couldn't do anything with the legal problems; he was warned not to go near Greyback; he had no legitimate claim to help with Harry. It would be the best thing for him to go undercover. "But hopefully, it will be fruitful."

“I suppose even if I asked where you were going, you wouldn't be able to tell me?” Regulus clarified, lifting his brow slightly in question.

"Although obviously grateful for the assistance," and they had been, Remus thought to himself, regardless of some people’s opinions on the matter, "You of all people understand the need to maintain secrecy for some things."

“I do,” Regulus said in agreement, “I was just clarifying if it was Order business.” Pulling a book from the shelf, he glanced over his shoulder again, hesitating for a beat before shaking again.
“Though truthfully, I've been considering a change on that front, as of late. Sirius brought it up more directly yesterday, but it has been on my mind, I suppose, with all the events lately.”

Hoping his surprise wasn't evident in his tone, Remus asked, "What brought that on?"

“I have felt more motivated to collaborate lately, and as things are, information is fragmented, making it more difficult than necessary to grasp the greater perspective. Though I have been hesitant to commit myself to anyone else's purposes, my confidence in your organisation has grown significantly, in several respects.” Regulus turned his body to face Remus more directly. “Sirius said to ask, but it seems awfully direct, so I was uncertain if he literally meant to just walk up and ask.”

"I think that while the sentiment is correct, he's left out some of the more pertinent details," Remus said, letting the desired eye roll colour his voice. If anyone knew Sirius's tendency towards picking and choosing what parts of information he felt he should share, it was likely his brother. "You can ask, but then it is voted on, and we try to abide by the answer. The question, as I think I asked you back when we were talking about patronuses, is now a little moot. I was worried about it being traced to the Order, but I think that ship has sailed after the battle."

"Sirius did fail to mention the vote, but Sturgis brought it up when he was here the other day,” Regulus said, a wry slant to his tone. “And as much as I might like discretion, the connection is a bit more obvious now, it's true.”

"I believe you would have the votes, if it's a route you choose to take," Remus replied, despite his own wariness at the idea. There had been more than a few protests about letting him on the ward, but given the amount of time Emmeline had been spending around him, at least one of those votes had now probably changed. "Even if not, I believe you do have the right to call for help if you want it."

With a nod, Regulus’s face crinkled slightly in thought as he folded his arms loosely across his chest, book still dangling in his hand. “I’ll wait for Sirius to return,” he said in a tone that was probably at least half-joking, though perhaps a little bit sincere, too. “However, on the subject of patronuses - in light of the Death Eaters knowing that I am, at the very least, collaborating with you all, anyway, would you now be more willing to show me how to use them for communication? It seems quite useful, and I have been working on obscuring the corporeal form, as you recommended.”

About to make a joking comment that he doubted it'd be like their school days where Sirius was likely to box anyone who tried insulting Regulus (it was his brother and thus only he was allowed), Remus stopped. He actually wasn't sure it would be much of a joke. Sirius had never had much control when it came to a protective streak. "If you'll agree not to share the spellwork, I see no reason why not."

“Excellent,” Regulus said, his expression cheering a little. “While you’re waiting for the downstairs rush to pass, would you have time right now? It’s sounds as though you will soon be unavailable.”

"I have a little time," Remus nodded. It wasn't as if he had much else to do, was it?
A strange stillness had fallen over the house when Remus departed for his mysterious mission some days before, once again leaving Regulus and Kreacher in their solitude. The past few weeks had felt deceptively calm in his brother’s absence, however unsettling the newspaper coverage of Death Eater activity, and even with the occasional house guest, it made the place feel - different. Perhaps more his, or perhaps something else, though he had not quite put a finger to it.

In some ways, the house truly did feel more like it was his now, though a change in legal status had modified nothing in the day-to-day sense. For nearly a year, he had left the house untouched in almost every way, had felt some jarring anxiety at the thought of changing anything that had been set in place before them - photographs, room arrangements, decor - but there was a certain finality to resurrecting himself, to facing (if briefly) his family. The ancestral home felt like some sort of living museum of their personal histories, yet he had started to feel like perhaps there was some room to settle. (Removing his death date had been the first change. Removing Great Aunt Elladora’s house-elf heads had been second.)

No word had yet come from Narcissa, and ever since he had sent that nondescript owl towards Wiltshire, he had coached himself not to worry about it, however easy it might be to imagine such a thing turning on its head, were Bellatrix to intercept his letter instead. His eldest cousin had not shown up on his doorstep to murder him in the night (surprising, in truth, though his sleeping patterns were not yet back to normal), nor had Bellatrix extended any word of her own, which was either a testament to her sudden development of patience, or perhaps to some force holding her at bay.

He had been distracting himself with patronus practice, and the night before, Emmeline had come to humour a run of back and forth messages across landings. When he had returned to the ground floor sitting room to regroup for dinner, only to find her head buried in a cabinet, he had begun to suspect a certain persistence in her ulterior motives. In response to such an accusation, she had proudly presented to him a photograph of five of his Great Aunt Cassiopeia’s cats roaming about and sleeping, uncovered from where it had been face down under a container of magical ash (burning with memories that he had done well not to dwell upon in that moment, focused as he was on Emmeline’s delight in her non-austere discovery). He had explained that it was unlikely to have been a coincidence that the cat photograph was left under the fire-starting ashes, but she did not seem terribly disheartened by the implication, instead asking if he recalled their names. He was a little bit surprised to find that he did.

Friday morning was now upon him, rolling still and slow, and Regulus had been in that same sitting room, caught somewhere between reading a book and considering prospects for lunch, when he heard a knock at the front door of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. It was as foreign a sound as any, and one that may well have gone unnoticed completely, had he not already been on the ground floor, uncommon a practice as knocking seemed to be for any of their visitors, who came and went as freely as if it were their own house, in many respects.

Indeed, it was out of place, a knock, and what began as a curiosity was soon knotting in his shoulders. It was those who knew this place as a home, who would treat it as such, and the number of people on that list who were not also a danger was a very small number. Death Eaters - at least most - would not be expected to alert him to their arrival, yet he wondered for a terrible moment if it might be Narcissa, taking it upon herself to simply show up rather than send a letter in return. However much he wanted to see her, the house was not Narcissa-ready, with its subtle tells of the Orderly in and out, and the suddenness of that possibility set him on edge. The angle from the
sitting room window made it difficult to see the person at the front door, but the glimpse of hair did not appear to be blonde - which, in truth, could be good or bad news. In his favour was the admittance that at least Bella was unlikely to wait so nicely, but it was with a measure of care and a readiness for his wand that he at last slowly cracked open the front door.

Andromeda let her complete lack of surprise cross her face. "I thought so."

The detail slotted into place, as so many others had over the last year. Of all places, Grimmauld Place was the last place she would consider Sirius to be, and for good reason, but somehow, it seemed perfectly logical that Regulus would be. She wondered if that had been what the business before had all been about; Sirius had a penchant for both dragging Regulus into his shenanigans (when he'd been young enough to still want to be) and mucking about with invisibility cloaks. The more things change, the more they take a very similar shape again.

At least he looked well. Not the pre-teen she could picture clearly, no, some of his nervousness had bled out, and despite the awkwardness between them, she could see far more of the family steel (so to speak) radiating through. He was still thin, but the Blacks had a tendency towards resembling a large green bean in stature, so not so unusual at all. You could be forgiven for assuming he were an apparition of a relative long past, though from a certain point of view, that was certainly true. Passed and back again, devotion above common sense, Regulus Black, the human boomerang. She strangled the thought; boomerangs were not the most dignified of objects and unlikely to be taken in a complementary way.

"Do you mind if I enter?" she prompted. "Loitering around estranged familial holdings is bound to draw the wrong sort of attention."

There was some measure of tension still stiffening his stance as he stepped backwards to allow her swift entrance, but when the door had been shut gently behind them, Regulus seemed to relax, if only a little.

"I was not expecting anyone," he admitted, and a little more carefully, added, "Sirius still isn’t back yet, if you were checking around for him."

"I was not. I've left he and Dora to sulk together." Merlin save her from two people who were not moody teenagers but we're making up for it now. "I simply tried to ignore my own curiosity and failed miserably."

Regulus tipped his head in a nod. "Surprisingly enough, you are the first to settle your curiosities. Part of me expected some attempt on my life by now," he noted wryly, flicking a brief glance to the still curtains of his mother's portrait, then back to Andromeda.

"I did have a head start," Andromeda pointed out, following his line of sight to those same still curtains and whatever remained of Walburga Black. A horrifying caricature of a very proud woman, disturbingly illustrated without property faculties. "As I understand it, provided I keep my voice down, there should be no shrieking involved."

Regulus nodded, just slightly. "I think we should be quite alright…” A glance around, then back to Andromeda. “Would you like to sit down somewhere?"

"You don't have to play host," Andromeda said, amusement pulling at her tone. She'd collectively spent more holidays in this house than either of the boys and she was quite familiar with it, even if it didn't have the charm of the Mayfair where she had grown up. "Don't concern yourself; I've had no machinations towards you. Not since you were a baby, and hogging everyone's attention, but
you can't hold it against me too much."

Regulus’s mouth turned up at the corner. “I will forgive it.” With a subtly sweeping gesture, he added, “Make yourself at home, then. It has not changed a great deal, with the occasional small exception.”

"I'd hazard a guess that it hasn't changed significantly in a few centuries, if ever." The house had been a standing relic, one her mother had never much cared for. Far too dark and foreboding, not enough class with a touch of whimsy. Still, there was a deep sense of nostalgia that could be instigated by something so stagnant: birthdays, Christmases, family dinners, Cassiopeia's new additions to the family while her grandfather sulked. She could see his portrait now, an old man and not as formidable in retrospect. "I apologise for the gawking. I didn't really have the time nor inclination last time to take it all in."

“It’s quite alright,” he responded, shaking his head. “Suffice to say it had been awhile.”

"Yes, the size of Dora attests to that," Andromeda snorted. Still, it was very much a curiosity that no one had thought to look in his own house. Perhaps there was something to hiding in plain sight. "Elladora's elf heads no longer remain? I had thought you'd ditch those, you've never liked them."

“They’re in the attic now,” Regulus admitted with the tug of a sour expression, “I could not quite bring myself to throw them in the garbage, but at least now I don’t have to look at them.”

"They were there a few months ago," Andromeda observed, because she had seen them during her previous visit but not thought to mention it. Sirius was unlikely to be consulted with redecorating anything. Good taste was not one of his strong points. "A recent ejection?"

Regulus tipped his head in a nod. “Quite, though it has been a long time coming. I suppose it feels uncomfortable, changing things about the house that have been in place for so long - long before I existed - but I’ve come to the decision that perhaps a few wouldn’t hurt, and that seemed the place to start."

"Your mother was a traditionalist; she didn't like to change things. Grandfather was the same.” And it showed, as even by magical standards, it was a house in severe need of updating. "Aside from that, I imagine every family that has lived here has left its mark in some way. Both in terms of decor and in terms of most little tykes liking to cause a little damage or mark things that they shouldn't, present company excluded."

“Indeed, some are more destructive than others.” With a little smile, Regulus shook his head, letting out a light huff of a breath. “In many instances, I would rather leave it as it is, but I must confess I have not missed the elf heads yet.”

"Did you miss them in last decade and a half?” Andromeda asked, by way of testing the waters on that as a subject matter."

“The decapitated elf heads?” Regulus clarified, lifting his brow. “No.”

"Then what makes you think you will now?” Andromeda gestured up to the wall, now bare. It was always the little rebellions that were the most amusing. "Unless you have a desire to mount something else up there."

“Not particularly,” he said, shaking his head, “At least not anything that was, at any point, alive.”

"Then I stand by my original statement. Sometimes, a little change is good for the soul," Andromeda said, decisively. Of course, large change could also be good for holding onto one's
soul, but perhaps for him, this was a big change. Hyper-focusing on detail had been something of an issue with him, especially back when a then-very-young Sirius would decide to move things to see what would happen.

“So it seems,” he said, mouth tilting up a little, folding his arms loosely across his chest. “There has been plenty of that.”

“Are you well, then?” Andromeda asked, more out of the courtesy than anything else. He had always liked politeness.

“I am, actually, all things considered,” Regulus said with a little nod. “And yourself?”

"Very well," Andromeda nodded. As well as one could be expected to be when one sister was now indebted to a Dark Lord, another was fanatical and murderous and on the loose, and your only child was an Auror sworn to protect the magical world. Still, it was important to be grateful for the small mercies. "I have a deeply personal question to ask, which you may choose not to answer, but it seems polite to ask permission regardless."

“I can see that lead in like that going many directions I'd rather not go,” Regulus said with a steeled half-smile, “but let's hear it.”

Andromeda barely contained her smirk. "Did you learn to cook?"

With a little huff and a fleeting look that suggested he had expected quite a different question, Regulus paused a beat, then responded wryly, “Well, I miraculously didn't starve to death.”

"There's enough deli's in -" Andromeda considered leaving the location unsaid, but she supposed if she wanted any level of trust, honesty was going to be the best policy. Or at least, a mutual respect between Slytherins if they could not attain anything else. Narcissa was much more attached to the youngest than she ever was, and she had no delusions about Bellatrix or healing the fracture after all this time, but she would be a liar if she didn't admit to herself that she missed not having a blank space - a burn mark - where her childhood family had been. She could blame nostalgia later, if she so chose. "There are enough places to order from in, judging by the lilt of your accent, somewhere in Belgium, Canada, or the more likely - given property holdings, family history, and innate enjoyment of snobbery that has been bred over many generations - France. I was just enjoying the thought of you learning how to cook. Spells clean easily enough, it's simple, but cookery is an art form, and I'm not above amusement at someone else having to learn it when my own attempts were disastrous at first."

Regulus hesitated for a moment, then tipped his head slightly. “An accurate appraisal. I would ask for discretion in saying so, but you would not be completely wrong in thinking such an unfortunate circumstance might have occurred in the past sixteen years. However, should you say as much to Sirius, I'm going to be very cross with you.”

"An ask for discretion followed by threats of being cross if this is not met," Andromeda snorted in an entirely undignified manner. "I have truly reentered the House of Black. Surprisingly, the nostalgia is not entirely displeasing. But I've no interest in poking into your private continental affairs; everyone is entitled to privacy, provided it's not murderous, indecent, or American."

Amusement brushed light over his expression, mouth slanting just slightly. “I appreciate that. It was fortunately none of those things.”

"I don't believe you have ever been indecent," Andromeda quirked a smile, feeling more settled when it seemed more like he was amused than anything else. "In which case - unless you've
developed a taste for coffee - do you want to have tea? If I'm riding a wave of nostalgia, then it would make it complete."

Regulus’s own stance seemed to relax a little in turn. “Tea sounds lovely.”

In the end, Regulus and Andromeda had settled to make their own tea down in the kitchen - a task that might normally be delegated to Kreacher in such a hosting situation, yet felt, in the moment, out of place. Kreacher had done well to minimise his use of derogatory terminology in respect to their in-and-out guests, and there was a decent chance that would maintain in Andromeda’s presence too, though it felt insensitive (to both of them), pulling Kreacher into that interaction without warning. It had been some time since the expectation had been put in place, with little in the way of change, since then, but if Andromeda was to make even occasional visits, it seemed prudent to reassure Kreacher that she, too, was not a threat to the House as it now was.

Perhaps Kreacher’s absence implied he had already figured out that she was present - normally, Kreacher hung about the room when Regulus was having tea - but that conversation would have to wait a bit longer. Andromeda had suggested they listen to the news bulletin in the drawing room, and though at the back of his mind, he had wondered if it was a room he ought to avoid (given the disownment), she did not seem terribly bothered about it as they found chairs by the wireless, steaming cups of tea in hand. Neither she nor Sirius (nor Tonks) ever seemed quite as bothered as he might expect.

"Does it worry you?" Andromeda prompted, indicating the radio with her head as she kept her hands around the teacup. "The news?"

“The content is concerning on a consistent basis, yes,” Regulus began with a crinkle of his nose. Between the stress of Sirius’s inquiry, the Dark Lord’s (now acknowledged) return, and the Death Eater attacks that came along with it, there was plenty to be annoyed about, though at least in the case of his brother, it seemed to be going in their favour. “But I suppose it is better to know about it, if it all must happen.”

"So you are only having the normal amount of discomfort?" Andromeda gestured to him vaguely. "I'm afraid I'm not sure what normal looks like."

“I suppose it is more a question of ‘normal relative to what?’” Regulus responded in a musing tone, tapping a finger along the rim of his cup. “The state of worry is higher than has been typical of the past sixteen years, but in some respects less than was typical of the eighteen or so years prior to that, so I suppose it averages out to normal.”

"You have seen my daughter, my elder sister, and well, if we're going to be fully honest here, I suppose we can also add Sirius into that mix in Ted’s stead, as I don't believe you've ever laid eyes - let alone anything else - on him." Andromeda carefully set down the cup. "Whatever makes you think that I would know anything about what normal is?"

“It’s not so much a matter of expecting normalcy from you as determining which state we are using as a reference,” Regulus said wryly, and though the subject felt a bit like walking at the edge of a ledge, he kept his tone light. “I’ve come to discover my - rather, our - experiences were perhaps a bit skewed.”

"True," Andromeda nodded in assent. "I suppose it's just whether this the regular sort of awkwardness one feels when it comes to estranged and disowned blood kin; or if it's the awkwardness in relation to my general appearance, which at this point, I'm starting to envy Dora's ability - well, usual ability - to change how she looks at will; or if it's general post-Death Eater life
in an openly Death Eater hunting and Death Eater active society; or if I was too forward to ask to stay for tea, and you're trying to imagine the right way to inform me of this egregious misstep of manners."

"I suppose it is a mixture of all of those things - except for staying for tea. I'm not bothered by that," he said, sipping the cup in his hands, and strangely enough, he truthfully wasn't so bothered by her presence. Though the years were distant between them, her ease of manner dispelled some measure of discomfort - and in the walls of his home, the ground felt steadier than it had in the hospital after that gutting night at the Ministry. "Your manners are fine."

"Of course my manners are fine," Andromeda huffed. "One shockingly ill-mannered daughter was enough; if she'd had two, I imagine my mother would have taken a long walk off a very short cliff. I do wish I'd been a fly on the wall when you met Dora, though. She's usually very excitable and more than a little unruly."

"She was both of those things," Regulus admitted, shaking his head.

"However did you handle it?" Andromeda asked.

"Our first interaction was admittedly quite rushed." The dementor attack on Harry - some time ago, he thought, before Harry and the other kids had even gone off to school. Before he'd met Harry at all, though not by much. "By the time we spoke again, I had at least begun to process her strange choices in aesthetics as much as her existence at all, which I suppose did help."

Andromeda stilled. "You were unaware she existed?"

"No, I was aware," he clarified, shaking his head slightly, "I mean more in the sense of physically existing in my environment, rather than being an unspoken concept of sorts."

"Ah," Andromeda nodded. "I confess I have no idea beyond Sirius' ruminations on the subject of what was actually said after I eloped."

"Not much at all, truthfully..." he began, discomfort tightening his tone a little at the edges. "I heard about your daughter from Sirius, and at the risk of being overly honest, nothing beyond that. It became abundantly clear - abundantly quickly - that no one liked to talk about it."

"No, I don't imagine so, it wouldn't have been an easy thing to explain to a child," Andromeda nodded softly, leaving several moments of silence afterwards. "Then again, I doubt anyone here was ever seen as a child from the moment they entered Hogwarts, if we are to take the level of responsibility and tendency towards early parenthood."

Regulus tipped his head, slightly. "It's quite a lot."

The radio crackled, the voice of the news presenter cut off directly after the greeting. "Friends, adversaries, people of the magical world - it is with great sorrow that I must observe the rot that has further set itself in the time I have been indisposed. There may be some of you who believe I had died, but you were misled, for I cannot - and it is to you, Minister Fudge, that I say you must step aside and allow us to take our rightful places. You have a single day, and night, and if you choose not to comply, if you choose wrongly, then I shall show the muggle world the worthlessness of their blood by staining it over London. Do not attempt to stop me - magical blood is precious and ought not to be spilled - but if you choose to,
they too will perish. Twenty-four hours, Minister. Don't forget.”

For a tense moment, Regulus stared at the wireless, the presenter’s voice knocking at the edge of his attention, though it was the Dark Lord’s message - calm and chilling - that he could not shake from his thoughts. A threat like that was never just a threat, yet it was far too vague to know where in the massive stretch of muggle London that such an attack would strike - nor could Regulus confidently answer the question of whether Fudge’s fear or his pride was going to win out.

“That’s...unfortunate,” Regulus said tightly.

Andromeda quirked her eyebrows at him. “You remain master of the understatement.”

“Perhaps. But it is not untrue,” he said with a huff, setting his tea down with a prickle of something caught between anxiety and irritation. “Seems like a waste of breath, bothering with an ultimatum when it’s a bit obvious that blood will be staining London regardless, whether it is tomorrow or another day; but I suppose it is much more than an ultimatum, fostering some air of fear and distrust. It’s not as though there is a true concern with the strict ease of power handed over without a fight.” A little more flatly, he added, “Ironic, though, this talk of ‘protecting’ precious magical blood.”

“He’s not just talking to the Minister or potential rabble-rousers,” Andromeda replied, with a bitter edge to her tone. “He’s talking to potential recruits. He must keep the charade up.”

Charade, indeed - the promise of some greater purpose, phrased so eloquently and so carefully that it really did sound like whatever happened to their adversaries was their adversaries own fault for poor choices or poor blood alike. The Dark Lord did not value any of them, did not value the society he was threatening to ‘protect,’ but there were those who would step right into that trap today, and it made his stomach roil hot and angry.

“I know,” he started, voice as quiet as it was stiff, “It's just infuriating.”

"Even more so when it is someone you love deeply," Andromeda replied, through a smile that did not reach her eyes. "And there is little to nothing you can do to stop them, or help them."

Subtly, he tipped his head in a nod, hollow dread pulling at his insides. “I worry for Draco, though I know he doesn't know me from a stranger.” (Regulus knew that distance was his own fault, necessary as it had been, yet it stung to think his concern may well mean nothing…)

"Yes, his tendency to repeat what the adults around him say is troubling, given that they are Death Eaters in majority." Andromeda, despite the situation, smirked. "But if you'll excuse the implied insult, if anyone understands the repetition of peer and adult rhetoric before one's mind is old enough and experienced to make their own choices, I do believe you would be it. It is very difficult to be objective and true to yourself when all it will do is cost you, and offers only the not unsubstantial knowledge you are in the right in return. When it is truly a choice, rather than born out of circumstance, is when it is the most important to have people who understand."

“It’s quite lonely, feeling as though neither side understands.” With his lips pressing to a line, Regulus tipped his head with a heavy sigh through his nose. The past was all too convincing, ripe with memories of a path hastily pursued, and though it wasn't flattering, it was impossible to deny - and if nothing else, at least it had opened his eyes. He hoped Draco would not require the same path to open his own. “Remarkable, the way time and experience can cast the same choice in such a different light. It is both troubling and all too familiar.”

"Not particularly," Andromeda considered out loud. "Despite our differences - and there are many -
there is a common thread of being willful, stubborn, and uncompromising when something truly matters. When faced with a stone wall such as that, how else do you learn truth but to experience it and decide to accept it?"

“I don’t question our capacity for willfulness,” Regulus said with a humourless quirk of the mouth, “I meant it more as an observation of my own experiences, musing on how thoroughly convinced I was that my present situation was impossible beyond debate.”

"An impossible thing is only impossible ‘til an impossible person comes along and proves it otherwise," Andromeda replied. "It is both a wonderful thing and a terrible one, depending on circumstance."

“Quite so,” Regulus said, lifting a slow, thoughtful sip of tea.

"And I believe you are nothing if not impossible," Andromeda smiled.

At that, a little smile lifted the corner of Regulus mouth. A nonconventional compliment, but a strangely comforting one, nonetheless. “Hopefully it will make for a compelling point.”

"If not, I recommend a quick stunning spell and exiting stage left so you can try again at a fortuitous time." Andromeda shook her head. "And not mentioning Harry Potter either; the interview he gave about him was not complimentary."

“I don’t feel particularly complimentary either, though I will hopefully have more tact and historical context at my disposal in presenting such an argument to them,” Regulus said with a soft, scarcely audible huff. “I’d like to talk to Cissa, at the very least, though it all feels a bit uncertain right now.”

Andromeda nodded. "Then I hope you have better luck than I."

“As do I. I suppose we shall see,” he said with a thin smile. “When did you try to contact her? She, of course, never mentioned it. Or do are you referencing attempts from before you left?”

"Oh, I see her now and then. Magical Britain is relatively small." Andromeda waved him off. "Fundraisers here and there; Diagon, of course; Quidditch from time to time; the bathroom at Salamander’s a few years ago became very frosty very quickly. There were exchanged pleasantries once or twice, though I believe the last time we had a full conversation was shortly after Bellatrix was arrested and Lucius was busy making sure he would not be."

Regulus found it logical, of course, though it seemed to highlight, in a strange way, just how isolated his childhood had been, beyond school and holiday gatherings. In the year following his brother’s departure, they had crossed paths more than he’d have liked, but it was to be expected at a place like Hogwarts. Had he remained, would he have run into Sirius in situations outside of Death Eater scuffles and funerals? What could - or would - he have said in such a situation?

(He doubted they would have been half so productive as those he was granted now.)

“Quite the opposite of the current situation, I suppose,” he observed.

"But no less humiliating, I'm sure," Andromeda mused, before giving a pronounced shrug. "I imagine she's more prone to listening if she thinks she cannot be heard or judged by others. You know Cissy, she took after our mother and mother always stressed appearances."

Regulus nodded. “I, too, would prefer to avoid the crowd of opinions, so that is just as well.”
"You do have an excellent leg up," Andromeda said. "I've never come back from the dead to see her."

A small, sobered smile flickered at the corner of his mouth. “Hopefully she will see it that way. I’ve missed her quite a lot. Bella was, predictably, not so pleased, but she is quite a different situation, as it is.”

“You did cast on her,” Andromeda pointed out. “She may have been more pleased had you not.”

“I know.” Regulus’s mouth slanted downward to a frown. (TRAITOR.) There were plenty of factors that would have left him feeling more pleased, too: Bellatrix not landing Sirius and Tonks in the hospital, Bellatrix not torturing the Longbottom boy, meeting Bellatrix under circumstances that weren’t a fight at all. It was unfair that the blame should fall squarely at his feet, yet her furied expression wouldn’t fade. He wanted Narcissa to understand, and he wanted Bellatrix to understand, too… “It was just a stun, though I suppose she is unlikely to see much difference, given the implications…”

“I’m not sure the spell matters, defiance is defiance,” Andromeda agreed. “Defiance around Sirius is even more charged.”

“It certainly is.” His frown deepened. Sirius was charged in both directions, in truth, with a penchant for stumbling into trouble, so perhaps he had not expected otherwise. In a way, he truly hadn’t expected otherwise - a motivation to go in the first place, knowing his brother was likely to cross wands with her, intentionally or not. “That was not exactly how I envisioned my first impression back, but I suppose not much can be done about now.”

“I think you made an excellent impression,” Andromeda told him. “You made it clear you were not to be pushed around, but that you held her no deadly ill will despite being within your rights to do so.”

Slowly, Regulus nodded. “I had hoped for a less aggressive start, but I suppose that is one way to avoid ambiguity, even if it veils some of the finer details…”

“Such as?”

“That I am not trying to reject the family, but rather the Dark Lord and related atrocities… Perhaps it would have made no difference with Bellatrix, but it is certainly not how I wanted the information to get back to Narcissa,” he clarified, shaking his head. “But I must make the best of the situation as it is.”

"Must you?" Andromeda replied. "If you want things to change, you may well have to go out and make sure you are not misunderstood. Safety first, of course, but if you cannot achieve what you want in its current state, change the state. Offer compromises, affirm where your priorities are and who your priorities are. I've yet to meet a single family member who did not enjoy being told that they are one of the most important things in a person's life. There is a reason most of us were Sluggy's, after all - he always knew how to make you feel special and exactly as gifted as you were.”

“I know - I don’t mean to suggest I’m not intending to make an effort to be understood. I’ve already written to Narcissa, though I have yet to hear back…” With a subtle crinkle in his nose, Regulus shook his head. He’d heard the lecture before, just the other day from Sirius; and to some degree or another, he had been pondering how to reach an understanding with his remaining family members, from the time he’d decided to leave… He did not require anyone to tell him about compromises and priorities (especially not family priorities), but he could tell in her tone that the
intention was to be helpful, so he bit back the ruffled temptation to say as much. “I was speaking in the sense of trying not to dwell further on how I wish it had gone differently.” A sip of his tea.

"Letters can be intercepted," Andromeda replied. "You're sure it got to her and has not met an unfortunate end with Bellatrix's temper?"

“Of course I’m not sure, but I would rather Bellatrix intercept my letter than intercept me,” Regulus said dryly, trying to calm that gnawing worry in his stomach that his eldest cousin might have intercepted it, for all he knew. Even if Narcissa responded, he knew any meeting could very easily be an ambush, but he would have to prepare for that possibility when it came (if it came…)

"Of course, but you didn't think to intercept Narcissa?" Andromeda said, with a snort of amusement. "I realise you don't usually frequent girls’ bathrooms but there are other places to speak to her alone. I would consider it. She'll only see you for the first time once; I'd make it count."

“Don’t condescend to me,” he responded, tone clipping as a small rush of annoyance rose up with little warning. “Not only is it inefficient to specifically try to cross paths with her in a timely manner by mere guessing and happenstance, but it clearly did not work when you attempted it. I will continue giving her time to respond before pulling her into a conversation she might still be trying to process. It is still quite recent.”

"It worked fine when I attempted it, for what it's worth." Andromeda huffed, before breaking into a smile. "You sounded so worried and defeated. Patience is another matter entirely."

“Worried, yes, but not defeated,” Regulus specified, though at her smile, the bite had begun to loosen in his tone, and what little wave of annoyance had washed in was again washing out. He thought privately to himself that if the attempts with Narcissa had truly worked that well, then their relationship would be in a better state than he assumed it to be, but it felt unnecessary to entertain the hurtful thought further. “I would like to hope for the best, acknowledge the situation is unfolding in a manner that is far from ideal, and act on something in between.”

"That sounds sensible," Andromeda replied. "Are you quite sure we're related?"

A small smile cracked the line of his face. “A decade and a half might have been a little excessive for clearing one’s head, but the hope is that it was effective.”

"And if not?"

“Then I must continue the effort, I suppose.”

“Do you truly believe it will make a difference?” Andromeda asked, tentatively.

“Which aspect, specifically?” he asked, sipping his tea and meeting her eyes.

“Trying to maintain both,” Andromeda replied. “More specifically, trying to keep the parts you like of both without it ending in disaster.”

“I don't know yet,” he admitted, and with a tone quiet and earnest, continued, “Perhaps it can be managed, or perhaps it cannot, but I tire of being at odds with people I care about over the Dark Lord’s self-serving cause. This war has torn our family asunder in more respects than one, and if there is still common ground to be found, I intend to find it.” His tea was starting to cool, the rim of the cup resting against his mouth for a second before finishing what was left of it. “I suppose that does not strictly answer the question, but I don't know that there is a yes or no answer.”
“It answers it well enough,” Andromeda nodded. “I wish you luck.”

“Thank you.” Setting his cup aside, Regulus tipped his head with a small home of a smile. “I suppose we shall see.”

The crash was deafening, tearing through Number Twelve Grimmauld Place with a harrowing clamour that set his mother’s portrait shrieking with a vigour Regulus had not heard in quite some time. If the crash had not been enough, he spared a startled look out the drawing room window to spot a few stray sparks dot the night sky at the top of his view as the sound at last died down, leaving only his mother’s screams from the ground floor.

First, he felt a rush of unsettled confusion - then, a dawning dread. (It had been more than 24 hours, with no announcement of resignation from Minister Fudge.)

The Thames seemed the best vantage point, both directionally and in respect to its wide open spaces, and though it was hard to say if the damage was done or only beginning, he found it suddenly difficult to sit and wait for the inevitable news report. There were a great many muggles in London, but it was his city too, and if he was truly honest about the matter, it was not as though the muggles were actually bothering them all that much, for all the terrible horror stories of his childhood.

“Kreacher!” he called out to the otherwise empty house as he pushed himself up from his chair, uncertain for a moment if Kreacher would even be able to hear him over the shouting; but as sure as ever, there was a familiar crack as the elf appeared in front of him. Before any inquiries could come, he began, “There has been an attack on London, and I am going to go investigate before the place swarms.”

“Does Master Regulus require anything of Kreacher?” the elf asked with a twinge of visible concern.

“Just that you stay here and stay safe,” Regulus said, hoping the Death Eaters would not take the opportunity to pop in while they were in a destructive mood. “Should anyone come in, besides myself or those who have frequented the house for the past year, remain hidden and avoid talking to them. I do not think the stronghold of this house is in immediate danger, but if it is, I do not want you caught in the fallout.”

“Kreaches wishes for Master Regulus to remain safe, too,” the elf said with a wrinkling expression. “I intend to,” he began. “Try to calm Mum, if you can, but I should not be long.”

With a crack of his own, Regulus apparated directly to his room, slipped on two silver rings and disappeared once again just seconds later, this time appearing in an alley just off the walkway of the River Thames, peeking out to glance along the stretch of red brick buildings situated along the lower level. Immediately, his hand slipped into his pocket, fingers ready to grasp at his wand at the first sign of trouble-

-And the first sign of trouble did not take long to surface.

Regulus saw the collapsed Brockdale Bridge first - or rather, did not see the bridge where he ought to have, beams hanging and sticking up from the water, and silhouetted at the concrete edge of the walkway was a dark, characteristically-robed figure he could only guess was the offending Death Eater (... staining it over London …) Horror plucked at his insides as he stepped back into the alley, sparing only a brief glance for muggles before casting his patronus, a bright spot in the late-night.
darkness, and taking special care to do it in the manner Lupin had most recently instructed. There were different methods - sending to places, to people, to groups - and in this case, a general alarm seemed suited, if only to alert to the possibility of other attacks.

“Brockdale Bridge has collapsed,” he said to the glimmery, wispy silver fox, “One assailant visible, unconfirmed if there are more.” With a swish, he sent the patronus leaping forth, unsure of who it would reach, but they could not very well counteract the destruction now anyway, and when again his head stuck out from the alley, he peered down several building-lengths to where the bridge had been, with no shadowy figure to be seen.

The Thames was spread like a pane of black glass, rippled by jutting steel panes and peppered with bodies floating and sinking beneath the surface. All at once, something cold and clamping seized him, yanking his mind back aggressively for the second time that week. Behind his eyes, the world went a little fuzzy, swathing the scene in a sickly green glow he knew wasn’t there, and even as he stumbled backwards again, floating bodies and clawing hands lined his mind and the inside of his eyelids. It wasn’t real (the bodies were real), they could not stir from the water (don’t touch the water).

A rising beat of panic drummed in his pulse, and as if to restrain it, Regulus leaned a forearm vertically against the brick and buried his face in the sleeve, focusing on slowing the shallowness of his own breath, as if to shield against something unseen. (In, and out-) He could feel the pressure in his eyes, both real and imagined, but no matter how hard he shut them, his vision would not dim.

The Thames was as still as death, yet the death in Regulus’s mind was far from still.

Not far from him, the crack of apparition sounded. There was a shuffle of soft, but hurried footsteps before a familiar voice joined him. “Are you hurt?”

Like a wave, the words washed up over him, but Regulus remained frozen against the wall, scarcely hearing the steps and the words and the shifts that thrummed distantly in his head. His arm was an anchor to the brick, steadying the dizzy buzz as he breathed in, and breathed out. It was the tentative touch of a hand that at last pulled his attention to a point, panic catching in his throat as he recoiled a step back from the ghost of a grab.

He was startled, at first, to see Emmeline studying him with a frown, but just as quickly as the startle flickered onto his face, he remembered the patronus he’d sent just a (seemingly stretched) moment before. Rubbing his hands over his face, he tried to blot away that pattering feeling of panic, breathing it out slowly, and with it, some measure of embarrassment. It was just water - those muggles weren't going to move anymore - yet his mind reeled with little care for reality.

After a still moment, Regulus dropped his hands again to cross stiffly across his chest, breathing out a steadying huff. “The Death Eater in question seems to have left, but the damage is clearly done,” he said at last, his tone quiet and carefully filtered.

"The Ministry's flooding in,” Emmeline said, her own voice kept at the same level. "The muggles too. Were you here?"

(The Ministry - he thought they might.) “No,” Regulus began, though as he said it, he wondered if he ought to have lied, if only for a better excuse for how badly he wanted to get as far from the river as possible. Instead, he shook his head. “I was at home. I heard the crash and guessed - correctly, it seems - that it came from this direction.”

Emmeline nodded, taking a quick look behind her and deciding something. "Let's take a walk. Get
your sea legs back."

Regulus tipped his head in a nod, falling quiet as they slipped out of the alley and took a sharp turn away from the water - and with each step, he felt himself start to settle a little more, counting the cobbled stones and lines of concrete as they walked.

"First time?" Emmeline asked, falling into step.

"For what, specifically?" he asked, arms still folded as he forced himself to look up, instead watching the buildings in front of them.

"The massacre," Emmeline said. "A massacre. They're always rough, I just wondered if perhaps it was the first you'd seen the aftermath."

To say it was and brush it off felt a lot easier - no explanation was required if Emmeline answered the question for herself - and it was not entirely untrue, when he had so rarely seen the aftermath of the deaths they brought about, whether directly or indirectly. For a moment, he found his words were caught in uncomfortable quiet, not wanting to lie and not wanting to tell the truth - yet she had extended him trust, in her way, and when he flicked his eyes over, he decided to be more truthful than not.

"It just reminded me of a particularly unpleasant memory, a little more aggressively than anticipated," he answered with a frown, carefully partitioning his thoughts to block out the scene itself.

There was a beat of silence. "This wouldn't have something to do with a certain boggart experience, would it?"

Subtly, he tipped his head. "That would be the one."

"Pretty sure you couldn't call secret vigilante club friends then." Emmeline cracked a smile. "Even if some of us show up in our house slippers."

"There were no secret vigilante friends to speak of at the time, no," he said, glancing down at her slippered feet then back up again with a small, strained smile. "At the time, it had felt like he might not actually have any friends at all, save for Kreacher."

"I commend your commitment to responsiveness."

Emmeline tapped the side of her hand against his, seemingly a warning to the touch after the last, and this time, he did not recoil. "We were expecting something, but the hit was too fast. We don't usually come out as well as we did at the Department of Mysteries - but at least there's a leg up, and we appreciate the back-up."

"I heard the broadcast yesterday," he said with a frown.

"Yes, I heard about it," Emmeline admitted. "But there's nothing more that can be done right now - the Ministry, and the Order within it, will clean up, and we try again next time. Is HQ still largely empty?"

"Yes," he answered as some of the strain loosened in his voice, "Just Kreacher and myself, with the exception of visitors; at least until Sirius's inquiry is resolved."

"Then congratulations, Monsieur Black, looks like you are about to have an overnight stay at Château Vance," Emmeline gave him a light pat on the back. "No one should be left to their own devices after a nasty shock. So, sleepover it is. We can stay up and drink hot chocolate and gossip
about boys, if that's your heart's content."

“Despite your mother's apparent confusion, I do hope your realise I'm not actually female,” he responded dryly with a subtle shake of his head, smothering a different sort of embarrassment - the suggestion registering as a definite violation of propriety, however friendly the motives were - yet her light manner was cutting through the remaining tension, and there was a small flicker around his mouth, nonetheless.

"The world would be in an even sorrier state if access to hot chocolate were gender-restricted," Emmeline said, in a faux cross tone. "Besides, you cannot blame her, Tonks is your cousin."

“Well, I could blame her, but I probably shouldn't.” His mouth tugged up a little more as he granted another sideways glance.

"Not if she's going to cook for you, you shouldn't." Emmeline gave him a light pat on the back.

“I suppose I accept your gender-inclusive hot chocolate invitation, then,” he said, supposing he could always check on Kreacher after his mind had calmed. He could admit with some confidence that his anxieties often did, when she opened her mouth.

"I apologise for incoming fuss, I rather think she likes being in a tizzy about visitors. I was a very solitary child, and I think they believe bribing people to stay will get me more friends, despite my current age. I'm fully capable of my own bribes."

“I can attest that your bribes are quite effective,” he said with a warming tinge of amusement, believing with some measure of confidence that Emmeline was not exaggerating about her mother's capacity for fussing. Solitary though he was, his friends had been laid out with an ease that had required no thought or effort, and his mother had not been concerned with the number so much as the nature of his friendships - though he thought it was probably best not to say as much.

"If only my determination had translated to ambition, then we'd have been in the same house." Emmeline frowned to herself. "Or if you had less of it, I suppose. Besides, I only use bribery when I absolutely need to."

“There is bribery, and there is reciprocity,” he countered with a half-smile, “I would say you veer towards the latter. Bribery has a facet to it that implies you do not deserve the benefit of the outcome.”

"Be careful," Emmeline replied, smiling back. "That veered towards an unbidden compliment. Are you sure you don't want to side-step it?"

“Arguably, implied compliments are not strictly forbidden - just the explicit acknowledgement of them,” he said a little wryly, though some part of him twinged at the thought that it was not entirely a joke.

“Why are they casually forbidden?” Emmeline asked. “Just out of curiosity.”

Shaking his head, Regulus huffed softly. “I don’t think there is a simple, straightforward answer to that.”

“Oh no,” Emmeline feigned horror. “Not complex and complicated things! You know how I hate those!”

With a sideways look, Regulus thought to himself that he actually was not certain how to put to words the reasoning for that generally unspoken guideline. “It isn’t so much that anyone ever said
as much, but rather...I suppose you could say it was a rule that was constructed based on experiences more so than instructions.”

“You need better experiences,” Emmeline replied.

A sobered half-smile lifted the corner of his mouth. “So I've heard.”

Emmeline breached in, presumably to reply, but stopped in her tracks instead and reached back into her coat pocket. “I didn’t leave the door unlocked,” Emmeline said, nodding towards the ajar door.

With a deepening frown, Regulus hovered a hand towards his own pocket, feeling a gnawing dread - for the Vances, and for Kreacher at home, if they might be leveling attacks against known quantities. She had not been in the battle at the Ministry, but that was not to say they might not have figured out some other indication… His own home was far more fortified, but it was with silent earnestness that he hoped nothing would befall the elf on his account.

But right now - right now, it was Emmeline and her parents who stood as the most immediate concern, their front door left open in some bold declaration. To leave so blatant a signal was not a creeping ambush - it was telling of a message, and he did not much like messages.

Meeting her eyes briefly, his hand grasped the wand in his pocket, and they filed inside in silence.

There was no dark mark.

The symbol that every person dreaded seeing above their homes in times of the war was not present, but the door was open, and left that way brazenly. Either it was a trap and the person did not care if she knew it, banking on the idea that Emmeline (rightfully) would come in there regardless (and wanting her to), or they were still busy. Something dropped in the pit of her stomach, because busy in anyone's home was not a good idea.

Her mind raced; why hers and why now? She had done little to draw attention to herself, unless this was Rookwood making an educated guess about who might be Order in the Department of Mysteries. Her family had drawn even less attention to themselves; they were middle of the roaders, professionally. She couldn't really wrap her mind around the idea of getting hit now. Unless someone had seen her at St. Mungo's? Though even that was not so unusual, and surely, not definitive. Not that she imagined it would be definitive.

(When had they gotten here? She had run out of the house and apparated not thirty minutes before, why then, why so late, why-)

A plunging thought took her. Perhaps they were looking for any of the experimental work, and it had nothing to do with the Order at all. She worked with time, something many Death Eaters had lost (through fault of their own entirely, in most cases), and it was possible she'd keep things here. That meant her room and the office upstairs were the most likely targets.

(Unless they'd decided no witnesses, or one of her parents had awoken, or-)

"Upstairs," Emmeline mouthed, to her unexpected and even more entirely welcome company, given the circumstances. Unless they had an interest in bundt cake and over-priced antiques, there was nothing downstairs of interest to a Death Eater.

Without a sound, Regulus nodded, scanning their surroundings as they shifted towards the staircase, past bookshelves and a spread of framed photographs he could spare only a fleeting glance towards before they were creeping toward the upper landing.
A sound caught Emmeline's attention, and she waved Regulus down towards the bedrooms; in another moment, this would have an embarrassing action, as far too many childhood and otherwise absurd pictures were along the walls, and she'd always thought perhaps they spawned more overnight. Someone was going to get a nasty shock if they went into her office drawers. Things were going to get far more sticky if something got triggered that shouldn't - the last things they needed right now was to get stuck in a time loop or to deal with some very irate cuckoos.

Movement at the far end caught her eye, and without delay, she cast a petrification, glancing back to see if Regulus had been equally fruitful in his findings.

Lining down the hall, Regulus had gently opened a series of three doors to check for immediately obvious invaders, but standing in the doorframe of the last - her parents’ bedroom - his eyes had locked in stony silence. Slowly he backed away, pulling out his wand with an ashen frown before pausing statue still.

"There you are!"

The Death Eater fired back, grabbing Emmeline’s attention again and causing her to take a step back, much to chagrin. She had a ‘no Death Eating for a minimum of 15 years’ rule before she let even a former Death Eater into the house, and even then, only the one with actual manners. Not someone who sounded more than a little smug and irritatingly familiar, but in the low light, she couldn't be sure.

"Incarcerous!" Emmeline cast back, pivoting to get another look behind her quickly. "Make an appointment next time!"

Seeming to snap to attention, Regulus ran up behind her just as the Death Eater was releasing himself from the constricting ropes and hurtling an ear-ringing curse that Emmeline blocked with a bright flash of light. Taking notice of the movement, the Death Eater shifted attention between the two of them.

“So it’s true, then - you really did go full on blood traitor,” the Death Eater said with that unsettlingly familiar voice, though he seemed to be looking past Emmeline now. “Lucky for you, Bellatrix has dibs. Or maybe not so lucky.” Rearing his arm back as if preparing for a throw, the Death Eater flung out an emphatic *Crucio*.

Despite the flourish, the curse must have clipped her because Emmeline felt the white, hot pain streak through her. Dimly, she became aware of the carpet being much closer than she imagined (disturbing, as who knows the last time it'd had a deep clean) and another streak of light from behind her heralded the abrupt stop. With still fuzzy vision, she was pleased to still feel the weight of her wand in her hand. Somewhere, Mad-Eye was thrilled.

"R-reducto," she managed to stutter out, as the far side cabinet rid itself of *Twenty-Five Witches Who Changed the World* commemorative thimbles by turning into kindling flying towards the Death Eater.

Sweeping his wand, the Death Eater turned the splinters to dust on contact, coughing through the cloud. “*Cru* -” he was starting to sputter when Regulus shot an interrupting blast, knocking him back into a bookshelf.

“You should be more careful, Regulus,” the Death Eater was saying with a cough, a little more irritation in his tone. “Accidents happen, ‘captures’ go awry - people die when they put up a fuss, as you must have noticed,” the Death Eater said tauntingly, flicking his head in the direction Regulus had come from - the direction of her parents’ bedroom. “And cowards can’t run forever.”
With a glare and a silent flick of his wand, Regulus pulled the heavy-set bookshelf toward himself, toppling on top of the Death Eater - a crash that was soon punctuated with a surprised, angry exclamation.

“You’re going to regret that!” came the muffled, snarling threat, the tumbled pile stirring just under the wood.

“You’re right, it was really disrespectful to the books,” Regulus countered with a chilly tone. Holding his wand at the ready, Regulus waited until he had a clear shot at the Death Eater, and then- “Petrificus Totalus.” It was only when their assailant stilled to a statue that he spared a more sobered, searching glance over at Emmeline.

Having made it to her feet, something in Emmeline's brain was stuttering. "Regulus," she said, quietly. The intonation was more of a sentence than a word, as she glanced down at the bedroom with a cold, sharp feeling of panic.

The frown on his face deepened as the last vestiges of heated anger flickered again to ash. Hesitating for a beat, Regulus seemed to be steeling himself to speak, attempting to steady his own voice as he began, “Your parents…”

Emmeline nodded, unable to keep a full body shudder under control. The panic rose, and she went to grip onto the cabinet that was no longer there, grasping at air in a jerky motion. She blinked away the itch of water she felt rising, because she was absolutely not going to cry in the middle of a duel.

Shakily, she cast again, and a flood of wasps came flying from her wand.

Regulus first watched the wasps make a line for the petrified, half-buried Death Eater, then reached a hand to hover hesitantly over her shoulder - and after a few stretching seconds, settled to clasp gently. “I can contact the Aurors to collect him,” he began uncomfortably, “but if you need a moment, I can wait.”

"No," Emmeline replied, in a strangled tone. She didn't want to delay it. She would very much like it if she didn't have other people crawling all over her home again, so she wanted to get it over with so she could deal with it in peace. "I think we ought to do it now. There's probably a backlog."

Regulus nodded, and without further word, slipped out into the hallway, though the low murmur of his voice on the other side of the wall suggested he had not gone far. When he walked back in, no more than a minute later, Emmeline and the Death Eater both still seemed to be frozen in place.

Glancing up from her masked staring contest, Emmeline was at a loss of what she was supposed to do. She had done this with friends, parents, children, but she had never been quite so on the receiving end. There had always been someone else who needed help or comforting more so than she felt she should, and it had always been a welcome distraction. However, looking around the half-demolished hallway, she couldn't even bring herself to smile at the half-hearted buzzing sounds, hitting against what sounded like metal.

She had brought Regulus here as her own personal safe haven, only to find it wasn't much of a safe haven at all. She had let him walk in with - the bodies. Bile rose in her throat, and she coughed to keep it down, but her eyes were already burning.

"Can you-" She indicated the heap, then tried to clear her throat. "Would you - when they get here - I need to -" crypukescreamputonshoes "-to-" she gestured then towards the bathroom.
Regulus nodded, and in a measured tone, responded, “I’ve got it. Take your time.”

It was a point of pride for her that she reached the bathroom with enough dignity to turn the taps on before seeing her mother’s dressing coat and bursting into tears.
IMPORTANT NOTE. To try and avoid the confusion that inevitably comes with Change, we thought it would be appropriate to warn ahead of time that change is, in fact, coming. Hopefully this will help, at least for those of you who are reading along as we go.

We will be splitting the story into "book" arcs, though given the nature of this AU, HBP and DH are going to be blended for the second arc of the story, with how much it will be diverging from HBP (and from strict canon events, in general). With that being said, this current arc only has a couple of chapters left before it will wrap up, and we'll move into the second arc, which more aggressively addresses the horcruxes, the Death Eater/Voldemort situation, and the larger-scale complications of the Black family (now that they are all aware of each other).

Multiple "books" was not the original plan, so we did not initially title it in an appropriate manner (oops). Basically, we are going to be adding a subtitle to this story after its completion, Star Wars Original Trilogy-style. ;) We're still deciding for sure what that subtitle will be, but there will definitely be a subtitle added to mirror the next "book" having a subtitle, as well.

The last change will be the organization of the "side stories." Currently, they are all in the same series, as part of the same 'verse, but we will most likely create a "main" series (for this chaptered story and the other "main" installments to follow), while all supplemental backstories and side stories in the Renascentia-verse will be in their own AO3 series group, to make it feel more neat and organized, as that list continues to grow.

Most likely, these changes will not happen until we wrap up this installment, but again, that's coming up pretty soon. Granted, we have been "two chapters away from the end" for the last three chapters, so we'll see how this goes, LOL. Thank you for your attention!

The Aurors, when they arrived to cart the Death Eater off, turned out to be a younger bloke along with Kingsley. Caught up in the details and with a brain like a music box stuck on repeat, Emmeline must have asked why it wasn't Tonks with him about three times, yet despite being sure he gave an answer, she couldn't recall any. The night felt as it had simply gotten away from her.

Going back to Order HQ was not an unusual thing after a death in the family, let alone two, and she had seen it done many times, but it also felt different. This wasn't some private holding or run down shack, but someone's home, and it was someone she had promised a place to relax from a shock and instead dragged him into this.

The tea in her hands was barely lukewarm. She supposed she ought to have tried to sleep, but it wasn't going to come easily, and she had no desire to chase it. She would have to do other things. Adult things. Call her Nona, for one, which would be hard enough. Answer more questions at the Ministry. Find out the name of the person responsible. He had sounded so damn familiar...
"Do you know who that was?" Her voice was startled out of her, unexpectedly.

Regulus frowned into his half-empty cup, hesitating for a moment before answering: “I can't say for certain, but I have my suspicions. It has been too long to be absolutely certain about the voice, yet it aligns with what I recall… and the lights were too dim to see the details of his mask clearly, but again, the shape was right, assuming he did not get a new one. And his…” - for a moment, he hesitated, then continued - “…his manner is certainly consistent, if exacerbated. I think it was Mulciber.”

"Mulciber..." A part of her wanted to commit that to memory through the haze, but she could remember Mulciber. Emmeline went to school with Mulciber. Mulciber had been mucking about with dark curses when they were barely OWL students. "From school?"

Lips thinning to a line, Regulus tipped his head to a nod. “No confirmation, of course, but that is my best deduction.”

Emmeline could accept that - for now. She ran her palms across her eyes, finding they were still feeling raw and sore. She really ought to go wash her face again, but the idea of getting up and moving seemed like some impossible feat. "That's the bell end who went around hexing people left, right, and centre for kicks, right?"

With a heavy sigh, Regulus nodded again. “That would be the one.”

Emmeline gave him a sharp look, perhaps somewhat dulled by the tiredness. "You were not friends or something, were you?"

Propping an elbow on the arm of his chair, Regulus cupped his chin in the curve of his hand. “Something like that. We did not see eye to eye on most things, but we existed in the same circle.”

"You can exist in the same circle and not be friends," Emmeline reasoned, though the more she thought of her own, the less she thought was true. While she didn't dislike anyone in the Order, not even Snape, she supposed, though she had little to do with him, she couldn't think of anyone she didn't at least respect. "I believe that's the first time I've ever actually seen you cast on anyone, that I know about." And it was that ‘knowing about it’ that had been interesting at first, baffling at second, and felt like a razor’s edge at the moment.

“I prefer not to,” he admitted with a pressed frown.

"I know," Emmeline crinkled her nose in response. She let things fall quiet for a long moment. "It was strange."

For a moment, Regulus sat still in the weighty silence, but as he rubbed a hand over his face, again he released a huffing sigh. “What happened tonight was one overstepping injustice after another. Platitudes often feel hollow in the wake of tragedy, but… although I would wish it on no one, I'm sorry this happened to you.” He paused only a beat before adding, “And if you would rather discuss something else, we can leave it at that.”

Of course she didn't want to talk about it, but since she was rolling it around in her head, it was difficult to think of anything else. Emmeline could break it down into facts, that she had left the house, that somehow she had been a target, not from Rookwood as she assumed, but almost a random target-

"I don't understand," Emmeline frowned. "That's all. I'm not conspicuous. I'm not obvious. I have little reason to be targeted, beyond possibly my department, but there was nothing missing that I
could see."

“I wish I could provide some insight, but I honestly don’t know for certain,” he admitted with a
frown, shaking his head. Though a thoughtful expression settled on his face, he left the words
hanging.

About to blab some meaningless saying about how there wasn't always a reason, sometimes this
stuff happened, Emmeline stopped herself. Because it wasn't true. There had to be some kind of
reason of why them and why now, and so help her, tomorrow she was getting on at the Aurors and
was going to find out what was going on, one way or another.

"Very few things are certain," she admitted, "but that doesn't mean I won't get to the bottom of it."

“As you should,” he said with a little more steel in his frown. “I thought it might have been an
attack on Order members, but you are far from the most logical starting place.”

"And logistically, Rookwood would be the only one who may have suspicions there," Emmeline
frowned, pushing some of her deflated waves out of her face. "And that was not him."

“No, it certainly wasn’t.” Regulus sighed. “Unless, of course, he shared his suspicions.”.

"Even then, despite being contemporaries, it's not as if Mulciber and I really crossed paths,"
Emmeline said. She supposed it could have been out of sheer boredom, but somehow the idea they
died over sheer boredom was even worse than dying over her. "I'll have no idea what to tell my
grandmother, other than I shall likely have to move. Again."

Nodding slightly, Regulus paused a beat, then responded, “That seems wise… Should you wish to,
you are welcome to stay here in the meantime. Strange though it felt at first, this is a safe house too
- and I would not put it past them to retaliate for the arrest, even they took first strike.” For a
moment, his expression pinched, but it was with a sobered, drawn smile that he added, “It is your
choice, of course, but even beyond matters of safety, memories can be as great a wound as they are
a comfort, and sometimes it is hard to tell which they will be at any given moment.”

Emmeline managed a weak smile, thinking that she knew that Harry, half the Weasleys, and
Remus had all stayed here for considerable amounts of time in the last year. It was already a ‘safe
house,’ it was HQ. Of course, it was now also someone’s home. "Didn't half the Order move in
already? Of course, I suppose they did it without permission...well, Sirius, but what he wouldn't
consider permissible is an extraordinarily short list."

His mouth tugged up a little more, wryly. “At times, it has felt like that, with all the in and out in
the past year.”

"I warn you," Emmeline said. She tried to modulate her voice for a joke, but wasn't sure how to not
make everything sound as wet and miserable as she felt. "I'm a jinx. Four out of five moves have
been Death Eater related."

“I would not fret too much about being a burden of danger. They already want to kill Sirius and
myself, and ironically, they've come closer with Kreacher than either of us.” With a dry slant to his
mouth, he added, “One could even argue that two out of two of my moves have been Death Eater
related, as well, so you will fit right in.”

Aware that the mental fuzz was leaving her not quite as sharp as usual and struggling with
completing her own thoughts, Emmeline looked cross for a few moments as she tried to parse that.
There was a section of Left because [x] did not want to be a Death Eater anymore (reasons????) in
her own mental notes that she was currently trying to match to the idea that both were related to Death Eaters. She supposed leaving for one reason and coming back for the same would be illogical, but perhaps understandable with time.

But was he not talking about the resident house-elf? He seemed relatively harmless, reminding her of some of the older wizards in the Wizengamot, well past their prime, who muttered things about muggle encroachment and the duties of ladies despite the fact that when speaking to them, they said nothing of the sort. Grumpy, prejudiced old coots, surely, but prejudiced in a way that would benefit the Death Eaters. Would the same not be said for Kreacher? Of course, it didn't sound like it was on him directly - but this house had not been breached, and house-elves didn't really leave their residences. Unless it had been some cruel game used against Regulus and Kreacher, striking against a being considered less sentient, and therefore, fostering less guilt about harming someone sentient? She shuddered at the thought.

"I'm not sure that's true," Emmeline replied, finally. Her cogs were grinding, albeit slowly. They just kept getting stuck on the horrible thoughts that wouldn't leave without banishment. "Something had to have happened to you, or you would not have had a funeral. I've seen Sirius have close calls in fights before. Would it really be closer, for Kreacher?

"I've seen his close calls too - the most recent, just a few weeks ago - but though Kreacher and I have shared a similar experience, I stand by my assertion. That's why it's ironic," Regulus said with a bitter slant to his mouth - one that could not be called a smile - then leaned his head against the back of the chair. "A depressing line of thought. It appears I have little to offer in the way of cheerful company, and for that, I apologise."

"I don't accept it," Emmeline replied, slipping off her shoes despite the ill manners of doing so in someone else's house. She had been invited, and if she couldn't stop her chest from seizing every few minutes from fear and sadness (in full view of someone who, although she liked a great deal, she wasn't quite at snotty shoulder levels of familiarity with), then she supposed she ought to at least attempt comfort. "You have nothing to apologise for. I attempted to get you out of a traumatic situation and brought you to another one, but had I not ventured out, perhaps I would also be part of a traumatic situation, so I don't know at all how I feel about it. All judgement on emotions, feelings, ramblings, and other things of that nature are going to have to be suspended until further notice."

Regulus allowed his head to loll to the side, just slightly, as he looked over at her. "Such judgements can wait, yes. And to make the point clear, should you like to turn on the wireless, settle with a book, or attempt a game of sleep-deprived chess, you needn't feel obligated to talk. It's quite a lot to process."

"You haven't done this a lot, have you?" Emmeline said, before her brain could catch up with her mouth. It had been a simple, sad fact that this sort of thing happened a lot within the Order. It had in the war: people would lose friends, family, relatives, each other, go missing never to be seen again, and they'd gotten...not used to it, per se, but there was an air of awkwardness that had come at the beginning that by the third death in two months, they'd left it long behind. "It's alright; not the situation, of course, that's going to be devastating when I can wrap my mind around it fully. But I'll extend you the same courtesy. You don't have to sit here and watch me attempt to reign in my own mental and emotional rebellion, nor do you have to say anything if you don't want to. I can talk enough for two. Twenty-two, probably. Maybe more."

Releasing a heavy sigh, Regulus shook his head. "If talking helps, then talk as much as you like," he granted, taking his wand and glancing into his abandoned teacup, flicking one swish to fill it again, then a slightly different one to set it steaming. "My own experiences were likely quite
skewed."

"I'm not sure what will help. It differs from person to person. Some people get drunk, but I don't like throwing up, so I've never been a fan, some reminisce, some logic, some get angry - and I am, and will likely be more so later." Emmeline listed things off one by one on her fingers, thinking over all of the reactions she'd seen. "I suppose there's also crying about it, but I don't think it'd help the awkwardness any, and frankly, I did not bring the good handkerchiefs. But I suppose it differs with the how. It wasn't as if they were involved, they were actively uninvolved, but still, it doesn't change matters, whether they were innocent bystanders or not. Did you not lose your own father the same way? He wasn't involved either, if I recall, which...I don't know if I do."

A frown pulled down on his mouth, pinching his expression as he picked up the teacup, looking more like a flimsy barrier than an intention to sip. “He was not involved, no.”

"Then there you are," Emmeline huffed in sheer frustration. She dimly recalled the explosion, even more so the fallout from it, but for all of their bluster, the guys had always closed ranks and been pretty private about the intense things. Death, particularly this gaping and unexpected sort of death, certainly felt intense. "It is one thing to die for a cause you believe in, and to know the risks of it. Getting killed for adjacency is an insult to good people."

At first, his nod was slight - pausing a moment in strained silence before he spoke again. “It is an insult, yes. Unfair and infuriating.”

"Then I intend to make sure, however vain the death seemed, it was not for nothing," Emmeline said, trying push as much determination into her voice as possible.

“I can agree with that sentiment.” Tapping a finger along the rim of his cup, Regulus frowned down at it, eyes distancing for a moment. “It felt really meaningless - my father's death... I was furious, but I couldn't decide if I wanted to snap at everyone who spoke to me or lock myself in my room and never come out again…” With a slow, measured huff, he shook his head. “But...well, as far as my own experiences go, I don't know if it counts as ‘finding meaning’ if he would have hated the meaning - the criteria remains a bit unclear - but I think it probably does. It is something, at least…” A crinkle of the nose. “But I digress. All the same, intentionality can go a long way, and I expect you will make your intentions a reality.”

“At least I got an arrest out of it,” Emmeline said, though an edge slipped into her tone as she remembered the break out. “For now.”

Regulus nodded with finality, catching her eyes. “And every moment he is there is a moment he isn't hurting anyone else,” he said with a tone of bracing reassurance.

Struck by the unfortunate urge to laugh at him, Emmeline felt as though she were showing great restraint. It wasn't in a cruel way, she didn't think, but rather affectionate - he was trying, and despite obvious discomfort, continued onwards. In a detached sort of way, she rather hoped he wouldn't get the chance to get used to it.

“Thank you,” she replied earnestly.

“It's not a problem,” he said with a tip of his head. “We'll whittle away at the war, little by little.”

“Not if we're too exhausted to move,” Emmeline sighed. She was unlikely to sleep without help tonight but knew she ought to try.

“When you are ready to retire for the night, we can determine where you would like to settle. We
keep a room reserved for Lupin, and it's probably best to leave Harry and Ron's alone, at least for
Harry, but the others are available. Most of the rooms have had people stay in them at one time or
another in the past year, but generally visitors don't leave anything behind, so I don't think it
matters too much, which one," he began, lifting a have to vaguely gesture. "Lupin and Harry's are
on this floor. Downstairs is the room Ginny and Hermione were in. There is another bedroom that
was inhabited by a ghoul for awhile, but it should be cleared, now. The floor just above was
dedicated to the remaining Weasleys, along with a room for Buckbeak, so it's best to avoid
Buckbeak's; and Sirius and I are on the top floor. Suffice to say there are plenty of options." As the
explanation concluded, he again sipped his tea.

"Do you imagine he'll come back here? Harry." Emmelione asked. She managed to stop herself
referring to him as 'little Harry' - not difficult when he was around, but at other moments, it was
easy to forget that he was no longer the chubby toddler still attempting only a few steps. While
obviously important in the grand scheme of things, it was also now undeniable that Harry was also
a teenage boy in need of a safe and stable home. Had that not been why Dumbledore removed him
from the magical world to begin with? She had been displaced by the war all too often, and it had
been difficult enough in her twenties. It was hard enough to feel as if her own sanctuary had been
violated.

Regulus lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "He came here for at least part of last summer, as well as the
Christmas holidays, so I suspect he would do this same this summer too. Sirius is certainly
expecting as much, but I've heard no absolute confirmation."

Emmeline nodded, "I knew he'd been here last summer. I was his escort. Despite my appalling
performance this evening, I'm quite capable." There was a stinging embarrassment, but she didn't
know if it was because she'd been petty in front of him or because she had not been petty enough in
revenge to finish the job. She pushed the thought aside, attempting to focus on the conversation at
hand."However, that was an extenuating circumstance, and he has returned to Lily's sister."

"I do not envy the person who tries to tell Sirius that Harry isn't coming, should that turn out to be
the case," Regulus said with a dry huff.

"Not it," Emmeline nodded, flashing a weak smile. "Besides, he does tend to look at the house like
it personally offended him. Which is rude, it's a rather nice house, sturdy build, pleasant
furnishings, the outside walls could use some restoring, but...I suppose I've probably snooped
enough to see most of it. Except Buckbeak, it seems wise not to disturb him too much."

"Sirius would have everyone believe that everything in connection to our family is in some way
responsible for his unhappiness, and it is quite unfair to the house, I agree." With a glance around
at the wall of books, Regulus let out a soft huff. "Though I grant him some credit in saying he has
been comparatively less grumpy about it, in recent months."

"I can only comment on the structure, not the people, as I only know small sample size well
enough to make any sort of educated guess. I don't believe I ever did meet Bellatrix Lestrange, I
don't draw attention enough for her-- (didn't, she reminded herself with a pang, as it was very likely
this was no longer the case) " - Madame Malfoy, I have exchanged pleasantries with a few times,
but only in passing. I didn't meet Tonks' mother in the last war. I suppose like many with young
children, they were shielded as much as possible, just in case, and Tonks herself, I met only after
she began working under Kingsley. I suppose Sirius himself, but we didn't really become friends
'til our sixth year, after any point by which I would have met any relative, given the um,
disownment. Oh, and you, but I would consider us at least friends enough to know you're not
responsible for any such discontentment. Nor many people's, I'd imagine."
“I might’ve been in the past,” Regulus said, pressing his mouth to a wry line, “To a degree, at least. Our ability to get along was more… inconsistent, I suppose you could say. I think he mostly tolerated me over the holidays because his preferred options were not available. At least, that is how it felt at the time, though looking back, it is hard to say. Truthfully, we were both a bit difficult.” Shaking his head, he let out a sigh. “Primarily, the clashes were with our parents and Bellatrix, but he got on well with Andromeda and our Uncle Alphard, and arguably our Uncle Ignatius, too. Everyone else was somewhere in between, mostly veering towards discontent, as far as I could ever tell. Our perceptions on that particular subject have always been markedly different, and he has been grumpy about the house and the capital-H House alike for most of our lives.”

"I think it was Remus," No, it was definitely James, but Emmeline had seen enough flinching for one night from both of them, and she wasn't blind to the reaction Regulus seemed to have whenever James was brought up, "He told me that Sirius doesn't like people, just has people he dislikes less than others, though admittedly, I think that was during the Gryffindor-Slytherin free-for-all at the beginning of sixth year, and it was not a pleasant time for anyone."

“That was a terrible year. I did not particularly like people at that point either, except perhaps Barty," he said, crinkling his nose. “And even he was in a bit of a mood because his father was giving him a hard time over me making prefect.”

"As in junior?" Emmeline clarified, searching her mind for the image. "Sort of gold blonde, quiet, rather fond of taking the good table in the library where you didn't get blinded at midday?" It seemed a nicer moniker than 'came over a little bit Death Eater,' but in all honesty, she had wondered if part of it had been his home life driving him to it. A common trait, the more she thought of it. You had your genuine sadists - the Lestranges, Dolohov, Mulciber - but some seemed mostly to be people who were a little bit messed up and perhaps a little bit broken by something or someone and looking for a way to not be. She really wished they'd just taken up a more healthy hobby, but vigilantism was only a step up, legally, despite being different morally.

“That would be the one,” he said with a sobered half-smile, shaking his head. “But all in all, it was a terrible year on multiple fronts.”

Emmeline’s thoughts then circled back. Ignatius did sound familiar, and after another moment, she realised it was because it was Fabian and Gideon's uncle. She didn't exactly socialise with their family much, though she had nursed a little bit of a school-girl crush on Gideon (she'd always been attracted to brilliant minds, and he had been brilliantly inventive), and thus spent more time around him than most. It was even possible they'd been introduced through her parents; neutrals tended to run in similar circles, even if he couldn't have been that neutral to have married a Black. But then, not everyone had the same wild intensity and pureblood drive, even there. "Was Ignatius the one with the comb-over? Rather jovial?"

At that, Regulus nodded with the lift of another half-smile. “That sounds like him. Ignatius Prewett. He married our Aunt Lucretia. I always enjoyed his company quite a lot, myself. He was not the only person in the family to like quidditch, but he was the only one who was as enthusiastic about quidditch as he was about academics, rather than just the latter in isolation.” With a slight tip of the head, he added, “We usually talked about quidditch, though. Aunt Lucretia tended to cover school-related questions in depth.”

Emmeline nodded. "I think I did meet him, I used to be close with his nephews before their murders." How many times could she say that now? That exact sentence? It was enough to make anger burn bright. "You would've liked them, I think. Fred and George do remind me of them a little bit, but the Gryffindor runs strong in them and they're incorrigible. Fabian was a Gryffindor too, but more in that way of if you told him something couldn't be done, he'd find a way just to be
contrary. Quidditch nuts, too. I wouldn't have called them academics, necessarily, but they were
creative. It's where our double-use portkeys came from; you could trigger it by pressing it one way
or another, depending on location."

“I wouldn’t say I knew them, but I knew of them; and from what I’ve heard, I think you’re right. I
probably would have liked them,” Regulus granted with a slight nod, lifting another drink of tea. “I
do like creative adjustments.”

"I know you do," Emmeline replied, settling back into the chair and wondering if it would be
completely impertinent to just curl up right there. It was quite comfortable, actually. "It's nice you
were close with such an extended part of the family. I should have guessed, given the pictures,
tapestry, knickknacks, and ability to recite relations, but it's still nice."

“We saw them more consistently when we were younger, but most holidays involved some manner
of family gathering,” he began, “All of my family is important to me, of course, but he did take a
special interest in a...less intimidating manner than some others.”

"It sounds intense," Emmeline agreed, with a heavy sigh. "There are some advantages to not
playing the politics. Though I don't know anyone I'm related to, living nor dead, who didn't have
magic, I'm not considered pure, and thus have never had to deal with any of that intensity. But I
would have liked a larger family. Not like Molly and Arthur, seven is a bit much."

Regulus paused for a moment, then nodded slowly. “Just thinking about seven children is
exhausting.”

"It sounds loud," Emmeline replied. "But silence can be too loud too."

“That, it can...” Regulus trailed in a thoughtful tone.

"I believe I'll try to rest," Emmeline decided, pressing her hands on to the arms and pushing herself
reluctantly to her feet. Sleep would not change things, but maybe, if it came, tomorrow would be a
bearable. "If you don't mind."

“Not at all,” he said, shaking his head. “Feel free to settle into whichever room you would like, and
let me know if you require anything in particular.”

"I'll be alright," Emmeline replied, hoping it was true in more ways than one.

Quite some months had passed since the call of sleep had been flooded with black water and
framed with bloated claws, and though Emmeline had retired around midnight, it was nearly two
hours later when Regulus at last returned to his own room, feeling the weighty tug of exhaustion
but knowing his mind was less kind when the walls of intentional distraction fell down. Their stock
of sleeping draughts were out, following the reeling nights left in the wake of the Department of
Mysteries, yet if he had known such an assault would be mere weeks later, he might have saved
them - or at least prioritised a refreshing of his ingredients.

The lingering exhaustion of the morning to follow spoke of unwelcome echoes - some otherworldly
mesh of inferi and the Thames and Emmeline’s parents with their insides on their outsides - but
with consciousness came control, to some degree, and it was with stubborn grit that he stirred from
bed at the same early hour and settled by the drawing room window with tea and a book he had not
yet started to read.

Kreacher had inquired about his absence the night before - and he had explained, as carefully as he
could, the destruction and the murders and that it was quite a terrible night - but to his relief,
Kreacher had accepted the tragedies without a veiled, loopholed mutter about their guest. Several days before, Kreacher had been lamenting her poking about in the cabinets and cupboards so regularly (“Staining Master’s things with nosy hands,” had been the accusation), but when Regulus had explained her oft expressed fondness for the grandness and the history of the house, Regulus almost thought that perhaps there was an improvement to Kreacher’s mood, if slight.

But Kreacher had wandered off some half-hour before, and now Regulus was looking out at the pale morning sky, thinking that on the other side of that line of building, the bridge would still be collapsed - the bodies undoubtedly fished out by now. Muggles, most likely, but the magical blood spilled had been innocent of resistance, whatever threats the Dark Lord had claimed. Mulciber had murdered the Vances with needless cruelty - had brought gore and loss into a situation that could have sufficed with petrification. Even without confirmation, Regulus knew it was him - felt it blaring in his manner.

A strange anger still boiled in his gut, and though it could not be called a betrayal in any strict sense - not when Mulciber was presumably unaware of Regulus's developing friendship with Emmeline - it was no less a staggering blow, landed like a kick behind the knees. In the wake of the bridge, in the wake of gutted parents and Unforgivable torture, it was anger, not the seemingly-ever-present press of guilt, that rammed against the walls of his mind.

‘Bellatrix has dibs,’ Mulciber had said with provocation in his tone - an uncomfortable suspicion that Regulus had required no help to imagine when she’d had dibs on Sirius for two decades now. ‘You’re going to regret that,’ Mulciber had said with a snarl, and maybe that was true. Maybe some sting would strike if ever he had to face Avery and try to justify his stance, to explain how a budding friendship could take precedence over the old - but if he was uncomfortably truthful with himself, he had been truthfully uncomfortable with so many aspects of his own childhood as he clenched his eyes closed. Friendly though they had been, he knew Mulciber had been every bit the twat Regulus remembered Potter to be, complete with in-group mockery that Regulus had found irritating far more often than he’d found it entertaining...yet Lorcan Mulciber had served his function. A meanstreak that attacked so he didn’t have to. A comparison by which to feel less cruel. A fellow pureblood in his age bracket who qualified as an Expected Friendship by default. A casual grouping to identify with when he wanted to feel as though he was doing what he ought to be doing. That he was part of something.

It was a terrible train of thought - one that, even in his lingering fury, he knew was not entirely true - but what had happened the night before was wrong, one traumatising blow after another, and Mulciber had confirmed in no uncertain terms that he intended to be unsafe.

(Bella, too, was unsafe, but that was an emotional tangle for another day.)

As the dust had settled around him the night before, he had wondered if morning would bring with it a crushing regret, but felt only a stabbing prickle of anger and the steeling reminder that the wizarding world was one Death Eater lighter than it would have otherwise been, and for that, just a little bitter safer. (The horrors of Azkaban trickled like a cold wash down his spine, yet it chilled no more thoroughly than the afterimage of the Vances, gutted for sport, nor or Emmeline dropping to the floor in a controlled writhe.)

A soft, clicking tap on the window drew his attention, then, and when he saw a small brown owl with a letter, he forcibly shoved the thoughts from his mind and twisted slightly to open the window just enough to retrieve the envelope.

For a moment, his chest seemed to jolt in some mix of hope and anxiety, but it was not Narcissa's delicate script on the envelope, but rather the much messier tell of Julien's handwriting, responding
Allowing some of the stickier anxieties of the present to loosen and slip again to the back of his mind, he sharpened his thoughts to the larger matter at hand. (The horcruxes. The basilisk venom.) Though Dumbledore’s return to credibility meant that the Chamber of Secrets might again be available, to have a guaranteed stash beyond any hopeful reliance on others felt far more secure than the disaster of his most recent attempt. Shutting the window again and leaning back into his chair, Regulus pulled out and unfolded the letter - scrawled out in French - with his mouth pressed in focus.

‘Rian,

When you’re ready to come back, I have what you asked for.
It was really nostalgic, you know, from that first year you were here.
You ask for the weirdest stuff. Honestly, who wants that?

Know that the context of ‘When you’re ready to come back...’ is actually
‘Now you’re ready to come back, because...’ which I thought I should probably specify,
considering you’ve been taking your time with this mysterious return to your roots.
Write ahead if you want, or just come, either is fine.

In the meantime, stay safe in that crazy homeland of yours.

Julien’

It was a small comfort, these words that remained untouched by the war (at least for now), and even if they were, in a sense, written to a person he felt less and less connected to, the memories were no less clear. Julien had provided the venom last time - and the dagger, among other failed attempts at destruction - and however steeped Regulus was might be in the mires of his own past, Julien, at least, remained a protected entity, unconnected from the goings-on of wizarding Britain and its deadly dramatics.

Regulus was folding the letter again to slip into his robes when he heard the soft shuffle of someone in the drawing room doorway, which of course turned out to be Emmeline, and he felt a light tug - something sad and fond and a little more shy than he dared to let on, even if guests were hardly a rarity in this house, as of late. It had felt different, somehow, inviting her to stay, but the sight of her safe and still unmurdered by vengeful Death Eaters was enough to warm some of that shyness to something more akin to contented relief.

“Good morning,” he said with a tired smile, tucking the letter and lifting his teacup for a drink.

“What are you feeling if you don’t like animals?” Emmeline replied in a smushed together rush, before she blinked several times in succession and started again at a more appropriate pace. “Good morning, or morning, I suppose, I haven’t decided if it’s good yet.” She must have brought a change of clothes, as these were not the ones she wore yesterday and remembered to change into her shoes. Aside from that, her hair still sat wet and lank but thankfully no longer dripping and her eyes still obviously red. “But my suspicion is that you do like animals, you remembered all of those cats’ names, and you don’t seem bothered by the hippogriff, and I believe I saw you with Hermione Granger’s moggie more than once, and I don’t at all want to sit here and wait for the news, as they’ve undoubtedly got a hold of it already. And we were supposed to go out, but I think a boat trip is inadvisable; but perhaps the museum, or the animal park, would hold an appeal. Oh! Or the science and technology centre, I thought since you wanted to know how the telescopes worked, it might be interesting....”
Her words tumbled out in one long stream, and for a moment, Regulus sat silent to let her speak. In truth, the thought of body of water large enough to support a boat made his skin crawl, just a little, but with a mental shove, he ran through the varied suggestions she had offered instead - old things and history, animals, a means to glimpse at space - and in truth, any of them sounded like a sufficient mix of welcome exploration and welcome distraction. “I expect that any of the three would be an interesting outing, but do you have a particular recommendation?”

“Nowhere in London,” Emmeline replied, nostrils flaring for a moment before she seemed to calm herself. "There's the Exploratory, that's up near Godric's Hollow. It has artificial atmospheres, like Hogwarts, where it mimics a rainforest; and I did want to show you the Mars exhibit before it left.”

Regulus lifted a small smile and nodded, feeling a fresh wave of curiosity. “Exploratory and Mars exhibit, it is.”

“Of course, you don’t have to come with me.” Emmeline continued on, as if somehow realising she hadn’t so much asked if he’d like to go so much as the destination. “It was a difficult night, I know that, even if I don’t necessarily fully understand it, but if you want to come with me…”

“I do,” he said without hesitation, and though he probably would have holed up all day otherwise, in truth, filling his thoughts with something new and potentially wonderful alongside Emmeline sounded preferable to batting off bad memories by himself. “I had originally blocked off tonight for our mysterious outing, but I suppose I can make room in my obviously busy schedule for earlier in the day,” he added more lightly, catching her eye with a half-smile.

"I had tickets to go and see the Northern Lights," Emmeline admitted, with a wince. "It's a big boat, you go out at midnight, and the whole sky lights up like those deep space photographs we saw. But instead maybe we could -" Emmeline let out a laugh, then with an embarrassed look, she covered her mouth and cheek with her hand. "I was about to say camp out to see them instead, but you really don't seem like the camping sort of person.”

Regulus had fought a wince of his own at the mention of the midnight boat, feeling a twinge of embarrassment that she had caught even the tailend of that horrible crash of a flashback - but it would have been perhaps more embarrassing to have attempted such an outing and experienced a similar crash on something that was meant to be fun. He had not realised how long it had been since he had been around bodies of water at night and had assumed the feeling would have passed, with all the years between himself and the cave, but with the Thames so fresh in his mind, it took more than a little effort to keep pressing it down.

Her intended sentiment was touching, however, and though she was right in thinking that camping was far from a Black family outing, he felt a prickle of fondness at the gesture of embarrassment over it. “I must admit camping is another thing I have never experienced.”

"It's not a frequent outing for myself either, but trying to apparate without a designated point to somewhere with no unnatural lighting is not advised. Trying to find a hotel - or Merlin forbid, a B and B, in those circumstances is difficult." Emmeline listed off the reasons with enough flow that it had to have been pre-researched at some point. "I think Lily put me off the last time. Did you know that's literally the size of their tents? Without any charms, you have that little triangle, and you squeeze in. She could have brought a magical tent! Despite her part in killing V-voldemort last time, meaning people seem to remember her as some sort of saint, let me tell you, she kneed me in the stomach in her sleep so hard I swear I was red for days; I hit my head every time I tried to stand; and there were no-" she flapped a hand "-facilities. I swore it off after that, but I imagine it won't be that bad again.”

Regulus shook his head with a huff of something like wry amusement. “That sounds legitimately
awful. If camping is necessary, one should at least do it properly. If the tent is nothing more than what it seems, where do you fit everything? From the way you described it, there wasn’t even room for the two of you.”

With an exaggerated grumpy look, Emmeline held up four fingers.

“Four is too many,” he settled with confidence, once again shaking his head. “It sounds as though there was some incomplete problem-solving.”

"Or just the problems of being friends with overly impulsive people," Emmeline sighed. "Not an issue with you, I would imagine."

“That would be correct,” Regulus said, lifting his brow with a sip of tea, and when it lowered again, he added, “I am strongly in favour of magical tents, like a reasonable person.”

"Four teenage girls sharing an enclosed space is also a whole different kettle of fish to a man and woman in their thirties," Emmeline half-mumbled, along with something unintelligible but undoubtedly derogatory about sleeping bags and communal showering.

A little rush of embarrassment flickered on his face in conjunction with the tent-sharing implication he had been so carefully avoiding - one that tugged the hypothetical a little too close to reality. “True though that might be, the point stands that it is the reasonable choice, regardless of age.” He subtly cleared his throat. “But we digress. Rainforest atmospheres and Mars exhibits.”

"Yes! Yes, of course," Emmeline resettled herself, but her shoulders slumped a little. "I will need to go to the post office, as well. I need to send out a few owls before someone sees something in the Prophet and tries to contact me to no avail. I won’t be long, but tedious, I know."

Regulus had an owl to send, himself, but to say as much might risk discussion about it, so he instead tipped his head. “Just let me know when I should be ready to leave.” He did not much like the way her shoulders slumped, if subtly, but as stunning as the Northern Lights sounded, he was not sure how to say as much now without feeling even more embarrassed - and if it was in fact the owls she dreaded, he did not know the words to say to take away what had to be a terrible feeling. He had been a teenager when his father had died; interactions at school had been dreadful, but at least he had not been responsible for sending notifications to anyone. Instead, he angled to catch her eyes and added, “We shall see if today’s activities can live up to their predecessors.”

It was not unexpected to find it crowded, but it made Emmeline's hair stand on end regardless. Perhaps she'd been wrong and she didn't want to be distracted, or she needed a quieter distraction than this. There were children running around the large reflective dome outside, putting their fingers in the rippling water, parents yelling or running around - and at the sight of it, she found already that something ached inside her. This could end up being humiliating.

Taking a glance over the exhibits for the nearest possible one to duck into, she spotted a sign showing Space Gallery and decided it would be close enough. Given the relative racket, she patted Regulus' arm - perhaps an even larger introvert than herself and probably not enjoying all of the noise at the entrance either - and pointed in the direction of the dim, much less crowded room to the side.

By way of distraction, she pointed to the first exhibit she could see: Is There Life On Mars? There were black and white pictures of what was presumably the surface of Mars. "What do you think?"

Regulus followed the line of her gesture to the sign. “About the exhibit, or the prospect of life of
“The planet Mars?”

“The exhibit,” Emmeline said, wincing as someone small, likely a child, went screeching past. “I would hope you’d wait until afterwards to decide if alien life exists.”

“To be quite honest, that is not something I have dedicated much thought to,” Regulus admitted, eying the black and white photos for a moment longer before they slipped inside. “We shall see if they can make a convincing case of it.”

“I did read they would be sending something up at the end of the year,” Emmeline replied, as they entered what looked like a pristine version of a spell creation lab. There were small screens showing video of the marble. “Oh look!” she said, practically lighting up with excitement. “It’s us!”

The room was cut with shadows and sharp light, and Regulus tore his eyes from the prominent circular structure in the middle of the room to investigate Emmeline’s exclamation, lifting an eyebrow as he saw a small version of himself moving immediately in concert with every shift on his feet. The image seemed to be looking down on them, and when he turned his eyes up to a smattering of lights and contraptions, he asked, “Where is it looking from? Is this what you were talking about, the other day?”

"Over..." Emmeline watched herself on the screen to try and see which of the overhanging contraptions looked most likely before pointing to a large silver one. She wasn't sure exactly, but it wasn't as if she felt comfortable asking anyone. "There, I believe. A big camera, so it just continuously takes picture."

Regulus looked between the screen and the silver object hanging from the ceiling several times. “So it can display these pictures in the moment, or they can be viewed later?" He was looking at some of the other screens now, showing not people, but rather what he assumed to be moving images from space. Curiously, he started wandering toward the large circular structure in the middle of the exhibit.

Emmeline nodded. "Yes, I think so." She hadn't seen many done in real time, so to speak, so this was quite impressive actually. But Regulus had wandered off towards the larger screens showing the slowly moving Earth. She leaned in and whispered with amusement, "That's also us, but we're just too tiny to be seen there."

“‘Too tiny,’ indeed.” For a moment, he stared at the slow and steady rotation, eyes sweeping over the curving line of the Earth from further away than seemed possible. Again, he glanced back over to where they had been viewing tiny versions of themselves, and after another beat, spoke again. “I can’t decide whether to be more fascinated or horrified that they can watch us like that. It’s like some sort of projection of the whole area.”

After another brief glance to the turning Earth, he pried his gaze down to what looked like a spread of brightly lit rocks. The plaque situated in front of them indicated they were meteorite samples, and he peered a little closer.

"I was going to track down some of the recordings for you," Emmeline remembered with a sharp breath. They'd talked about the Prewetts only the night before, but somehow in the midst of all of this, it seemed very long ago indeed. "I suppose moving will provide ample opportunity to go through everything. It does make me sad none of it works at Hogwarts. I saw muggleborn students try a few things, but it's a security concern as much anything. Still, imagine being able to perfectly capture sortings, Quidditch games, the moments you would never want to forget in perfect and full length detail. Parents being able to show their children their own experiences in full colour and
sound. Did you know Harry had never seen his parents before Hogwarts? Not in conscious memory. There was a whip around for every photograph people could find of them to make him an album so he could keep it."

Regulus was staring hard at the display, a little frown turning down the corners of his mouth. "I suspected as much, given the timing…” he said, a little uncomfortably.

"Sorry," Emmeline said, in a wince. "I alluded to the J-word. I try not to."

“The effort is appreciated,” he said with a little crinkle of the nose. “He was utterly unbearable… but I would not have wished orphanhood on Harry, and I pity the circumstances. It’s a complicated feeling, to say the least.”

"Of course it's complicated." Emmeline managed a slight smile at that. In another life, perhaps she wouldn't have liked the Gryffindor group so much. She wouldn't have had the friends she'd had, and likely would never have joined the Order.

(She might still have parents.)

With a gutting refusal of that line of thought and the guilt that came with it, she cleared her throat. "He ticks every box you seem to find challenging. I think Moody has a similar issue with me: he doesn't like secrets, and as a professional secret keeper, I'm not his favourite person. Besides, you will forever have to judge him for the choices he made at sixteen. You’ll never experience the Order member, just the bloke that thought giving Montague giant pink bat ears mid-match was an excellent use of his time. But if we did that same judgement now, it would be different, ot at least, a little different. And in our own experiences, we would have missed out on this, as we would likely have found each other unbearable at sixteen."

“Most likely, yes,” he conceded, “though I’m certain you would have still been more bearable than Potter ever was, unless of course you, too, were making a sport of hexing as you dreamed up an extensive list of targeted derogatory nicknames, and I simply never heard about it. And he was always so~” Tightening his mouth a little, Regulus shook his head. “I expect this is a subject in which it is best for us to agree to disagree.”

"Oh, I don't know, it's quite nice to know what subjects trigger an uncontrollable need to rant in people. If you ever want to divert their attention, it comes in terribly helpful." Emmeline thought of Hestia with Cuffe, of Lily and the Statute, of Sirius with Severus, of Bill and his mother's attempts to muddle through his love life, and decided it was nice that they all have rather normal things that got under their skin. "I don't much remember you at all, which was I asked you to come with me that first time. I wanted a frame of reference."

“For the most part, I preferred to keep some distance from the constant back and forth,” he said as his arms folded loosely, “but as you were saying, that was probably for the best.”

"Otherwise, I'm not sure you'd be enjoying yourself," Emmeline said, in partial agreement. She thought about the sense of wonder and curiosity the Observatory had brought on and decided it wasn't worth pushing the subject to lose that. Instead, she scanned for something else that may be appropriate. "There's a planetarium show in an hour, perhaps we could go and eat and come back to see it?"

Some of the tension in his shoulders loosened as he tipped a nod. “That timing should work out nicely… What exactly is a planetarium?”

"Oh, er," Emmeline scrunched up her face, trying to think of a way to describe it. "It's a projection
of the images across the ceiling, like the ones in the book you had last time and other celestial phenomena. Except these ones do move, and it's usually very large, so you can see more details. You usually get these reclining seats, and it's a little like Astronomy class, but more deep space."

"Hmm." A thoughtful expression crossed his face. "Intriguing."

Emmeline huffed a laugh at him. He had a talent for the understatement. "Are you truly this understated, or is it a reaction to everyone else you're related to being the epitome of drama?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he lifted a half-smile. "Perhaps a little bit of both."

"I'm just going to have to try harder," Emmeline bemoaned, taking his arm in as dramatic a fashion as she could manage. "I think I saw somewhere selling ice cream out there, and I'm designating it an ice cream for lunch sort of day."

"I've never heard of such a designation. I'm not sure that's a real thing,"

he said as he was tugged forward, amusement starting to creep into his tone - but even as they approached the vendor, a tiny smile still lingered on his face.

The rest of the day had proved a welcome distraction from the ache in her heart. Emmeline had decided not only to go the planetarium, but visit all three of the artificial rain forests, and in a moment she could only describe as being overcome by madness, had wandered into the animal corner as well and fed one of the lemurs. Again, foregoing returning right away, they had remained outside for a dinner at the park discussing some of the finer points of what had been quite a beautiful show - small pictures did not do galaxies justice. She had quizzed why certain names seemed not to hold current favour in the last few centuries, despite being prominent in mythology and celestial bodies - Mars, being the prime example but also other planets. Perhaps planets were too down to Earth.

However, night had begun to fall, and street lights were beginning to flicker to life. She couldn't put off going back to the quiet any longer. They'd apparated in a couple of streets away, an amicable quiet walk seeming appropriate. They couldn't see what remained of the bridge, and her own home could not be seen for the buildings, but they occupied a space in her mind enough to feel as if they could.

"It's gotten a little cold," she said, in idle chit-chat.

"It has, a bit," he agreed as they stepped out onto the sidewalk, though he did not seemed terribly bothered by it.

"How can you tell?" Emmeline scoffed, before indicating his own clothing - plain, if a little conspicuous for anyone not magical, not unlike her own. Except she had a short sleeved dress on and as such, she could feel the goosebumps. "You always seem to be cold, I don't think I've ever even seen you roll up your sleeves, and we had a massive heatwave last year."

The frown was brief, nearly imperceptible and smothered with a small shrug. "One of the many beauties of magic is that I can make my sleeves be any temperature I would like."

"But that would mean constant spellwork and doesn't account fully for internal body temperature," Emmeline pointed out. "Is it not easier to dress accordingly?"

"I don't mind it," he said, a little stubbornly, starting to rub a self-conscious hand over his left arm, though it seemed to turn into a clasp of his hands in a single motion. "The charms can actually last for quite some time, when done correctly. Furthermore, as we can observe just now, the external
temperature can change, too. You’ve noted the chill, but my sleeves are quite comfortable,” he countered, meeting her eyes in a sideways glance.

“You realise you're bragging about sleeve charms and are utterly ridiculous?” Emmeline looked him over, wondering if perhaps they'd overdone it today and he was simply uncomfortable.

For a moment, Regulus looked as though he was going to counter the point - but instead huffed a sigh, watching the sidewalk as they slowly strolled. “My apologies.”

Another apology that was utterly unwarranted and not required. Perhaps she ought to be apologising. She had monopolised his time all day, they'd been largely social situations, and she’d ruined a perfectly pleasant amicable silence by attempting humour. Emmeline did wonder fleetingly if that was simply his nature, to apologize regardless of fault or requirements to do so because it moved the moment along without making trouble.

“I wasn't serious,” Emmeline said, awkwardly. “I hadn't realised it was a sensitive subject. You can bundle up like an Eskimo all of July if it makes you more comfortable, and I'll refrain from teasing you about your fashion choices.”

“It’s just that…” Pressing his mouth gently to a line, Regulus pinched an expression that seemed to want to say something, yet could not, for all the words stuck in his throat. The silence went on for a beat too long, but when at last he found the words, he shifted subtly closer to say, “I’ve made this unnecessarily uncomfortable.” The tone was caught between a statement and some sort of indirect apology, but when he turned his head to look at her, the hints of strain were loosening in his face. “And perhaps more importantly, I have not actually thanked you yet for another enlightening experience. Though I am not yet convinced there is life on Mars, the planetarium truly was…quite beautiful.”

"It was as much for me as it was for you. I don't like to dwell on things I can't do anything about, because the inaction will drive me to insanity." Or something worse, a drive towards the vengeful, the hurt, and even worse, the wallowing. It was different from most things. Most things she could do something about, but Mulciber was in custody, she had her overnight bag, she had sent her owls and would have to arrange a funeral once her owls were returned, but aside from these things, there was nothing to do at all.

"I don't want you to be unnecessarily uncomfortable, and I know going to muggle places is a little jarring, and the clothing can be a little different, and I suppose I thought it may be some kind of armour against that feeling.” It had to be more difficult with muggleborns, to come into the realisation that they were part of two worlds that didn't mix well, and trying to maintain both cultures in a comfortable way while you had Death Eaters on one hand and anti-magical propaganda in the other sounded lonely. But the armour of a magical object upon you did sound like a comfort in such situations, or perhaps just in general. He certainly seemed to prefer not to be jostled too much, and she did forget it at times. While she didn't believe he'd actually recoil in horror at skin contact - she had held his hand with little issue - she couldn't help but remember there was a time that it was possible he would, and without the reasons, she could only speculate. There were only a handful of reasons someone feels the need to remain covered. “I have no desire for you to feel unsafe in your own skin.”

With a pressed smile, he shook his head, though the smile did not quite reach his eyes. “You needn’t worry about it. Uncomfortable though muggle situations might be, I came along because I wanted to.”

But if not that, then what? What other possible reason was there, if he wasn't uncomfortable due to that alone? He was definitely uncomfortable about something. Emmeline opened her mouth to ask
what then the problem was when a thought slammed into her mind without the brakes and situated at the forefront of her mind. Feeling her heartbeat in her throat, she know that she would cross an unspoken line if she asked it, but given the events of the last day, of the last few weeks, months, even a year, she didn't want to let unnecessary secrets wreak havoc on a friendship now.

"Then it has nothing to do with the Mark?" She asked, unable to keep her tone steady.

The tiny muscles in his face tightened downward, in concert with the rest of his frame, and he said nothing.

Emmeline came to stop, the silent tension palpable between them. That likely meant she was on the right track, and she had a choice to either back away from it or address it. Thinking of the Death Eater the night before, she steeled herself and plowed onwards. "While it is difficult to reconcile who you are with what you did when you were teenager, there's never been a point where I was unaware of it. You can hide it if you want to, but if in this moment, if..." she took a quick breath, to steady herself, "If while this hurts more than I ever imagined it would, I still do not hate you for your past, I very much doubt I ever will. So there is no need for such censorship on my account, but if it is on your account, then..." She gave a wet laugh, and pressed a smile. "You may borrow my full coverage concealer next time so you don't have to rely on charming your own clothes."

Amidst a look of profound discomfort, Regulus made some attempt at a small, forced smile of his own. “And again, you are cheering me up when I ought to be doing a better job of cheering you up, given the circumstances…” - a subtle wince - “In truth, I would hate me...but I appreciate the sentiment.”

"I'm alive, and I can't guarantee I would have been if you hadn't felt so awful last night that I didn't think you ought to be by yourself," Emmeline pointed out, crossing her arms around herself. "But you are no more responsible for what happened than I am for joining when I could have stayed out of it and protected them from it. But I have to do what I think is right, and the guilt of placing the fate of the world above my kin is causing so much guilt I'll struggle to breathe under the weight of it if I dwell. So just keeping busy, it's helping. The fight when it comes, it'll help."

Regulus tipped a solemn nod, hesitating a moment before extending a hand to rest on her shoulder with a gentle squeeze. “That is not an easy thing to shoulder, no… Should you require further distractions, I will oblige as I am able.”

Emmeline looked at her shoulder and then at him with a look of disbelief. "Was...was that a shoulder pun?"

“It wasn’t meant to be, but - it seems that it was,” he said, retracting his hand a little awkwardly, but the tension had started to crack from his face. “I suppose I had shoulders on the mind. Not that I was specifically thinking about shoulders, just the-” He vaguely gestured. “-association.”

With a surprised laugh, Emmeline moved over and gave the briefest of hugs, which he did not seem quite certain what to do with, but accepted nonetheless. She moved back and indicated back to the street, "You're still ridiculous, but thank you. We shouldn't linger too long. I've hit my capacity for Death Eater discussions for the week."

“As have I,” seeming to settle into more obvious relief as he pointedly smothered any tells of embarrassment. “In regards to your assertions of ridiculousness, I continue to vacillate on whether it is more dignified to claim intentionality or feign ignorance, so I must follow up on that point at a later time.”

"Ridiculous," Emmeline confirmed, but it was a fond assertion. She couldn't knock him for trying.
"You can show me that book from Observatory, I'm sure you've told no one about and are desperate to debate it."

Regulus pointed a warning finger in jesting response, then as they stepped into the alley, held out his arm as an offer to side-along back to the house. "I will do just that."

"You look like shit."

It wasn't much of an exaggeration. Despite the waves of panic and claustrophobia that had been ripping his insides to shreds for the better part of a fortnight, Sirius thought (at least from his limited vantage point) even he looked better than Tonks. Far from her usual bright colours, she looked beige in appearance and clothing. If he had to guess her mood, beige would be the perfect descriptor.

"Cheers," Tonks said, pulling her chair around so she could lean her arms on the front of it."You look a picture too."

"I haven't exactly had the tools for a little personal grooming, have I?" Sirius huffed. He could feel enough stubble to know that it was coming in patchy, giving insult to injury. When given the choice, he always preferred to be clean shaven. Unbidden, a half-fuzzy memory of discussing the matter with his father came to mind, something about excellent jaw lines and fur. He wasn't sure if it was a real memory, or he was simply inventing them from sheer boredom.

"That excuse wears off the minute the inquiry's over," Tonks grumbled, but didn't protest anymore.

"So, are you here as my cousin or an Auror?" Either she had news and wanted to share it, which didn't bode well for the news given that she looked like someone had just told her she couldn't have a puppy and kicked her for good measure, or she was just upset in general and this was a social call.

"Both. I'm multitasking," Tonks replied. She smiled, but it was tight. "They've broken to make a decision. We should know in the next day or two."

In the next day or so, either he'd have to be ready to run again, or he wouldn't have to run at all. His throat felt surprisingly tight at either scenario. "What's your money on?"

"That they'll blame Crouch for never checking the wand and taking the word of muggles over a wizard," Tonks said, an edge breaking into her tone. "It's an advantage right now, even if it's not great in general."

The idea of anti-muggle sentiment being part of the reason for his own exoneration was enough for him to want to tell them to fuck off, that it did not matter, and he could deal with it, just playing convicted mass-murderer for the rest of his days. Except while he could, did he really want to? With nothing but time to think, unlike Azkaban, he could dwell on anything he liked, and he'd found himself wondering about life afterwards. He had only considered life afterwards once, for a brief period, when he'd finally seen Harry again ("Of course I want to leave the Dursleys! Have you got a house? When can I move in?") , and so much had happened since then. He hadn't truly let himself consider the possibility in Grimmauld Place, feeling as if the time there were some sort of loop to his childhood. It was a strangely hopeful thought, and he was shy in the face of it.

"They tested the wand, which - you were right, reparo-" Tonks continued, "There was some rubbish from Fudge. They're sacking him. They've got him admitting he knew You-Know-Who
was out there: 'I must say, You-Know-Who alone and friendless is one thing...but give him back his most devoted servant, and I shudder to think how quickly he’ll rise again...'; he kept that quiet.

Sirius admitted he'd had the same thought when it came to Bellatrix. "What, was that in January?"

Tonks shook her head, "No, it was two years ago."

But two years ago, Bellatrix had still been..."Me?" Sirius asked, in disbelief.

"Yeah."

Sirius was fit to burst from laughter, coughing hard enough Tonks gave him a tissue and was looking at him like he was crazy. Crazier. "That's brilliant." He choked out.

"I don't think you've grasped this whole 'innocent' thing," Tonks said, with such a deadpan that Sirius wondered if she'd perhaps gotten a little bit of their side of the family a lot closer to the surface these days. She did look like her mother, albeit if Andromeda had done it with an augury.

"It's just funny," he wheezed. "It would annoy Bellatrix no end to know anyone but her was called that."

Tonks cracked a small, albeit more genuine smile. "That's looking on the bright side."

"Fudge getting lopped out is too," Sirius reminded her. Fudge was power-grubbing, self important, weak, and short-sighted. "You think Scrimgeour'll get it?"

Tonks shrugged.

Sirius sighed and pulled his knees under him, trying to move into a more comfortable position. "What is eating you?"

"Nothin'," she replied, with all the sullenness of the teenager she no longer was.

"Was it the duel?" Sirius pressed. That had to be a strange experience for her.

"No," Tonks replied, before relenting. "A bit. I thought it'd be weirder, but it wasn't. She didn't remind me of Mum at all."

"There was a time when she would have," Sirius admitted, with a deep sigh. "But that time is long since passed, and whatever she was, there's nothing left of it."

Tonks looked down, quieting again.

"But you're still not spilling," Sirius prompted.

"I can't talk about it," Tonks said, making a face at him.

Sirius frowned. "Why not? Will you get in trouble?"

"With you," Tonks clarified, her discomfort seemingly growing. "I can't talk about it with you."

"Oh," Sirius said, feeling a little indignant that he was apparently being left of it before a thought hit. It would explain the comfier looking clothes, and he tried to remember the few times he'd lived with witches long enough to find something that might help. "Oh. Uh, maybe try a hot water bottle?"
Tonks looked at him like he'd grown another head for a moment before taking aback. "Not that!" she cried in frustration. "Sirius!"

"I don't know, I've never lived with girls, not really," Sirius wanted very much to pull the blankets up and hide from that conversation. "Yeah, I stayed with Lily sometimes, but mostly when she was pregnant and James couldn't, or when he was hurt."

And he wondered if that was the centre of his stagnant thought. It had been fourteen years, but he had spent it either running for his life or fighting for a tenuous hold on his sanity. He'd never considered what every day life - a normal life, not the hiding away kind - would be like without them. It felt all too bright, and too real, as if while he was still running or hiding or fighting or imprisoned, he could have pretended they were still out there somewhere and not face the facts of life, moving on without them. It felt surprisingly fresh, the wave of emptiness that would come over, as if some part of him was ripped out, and the idea of just going on as normal sounded impossible.

But it was possible. He'd been doing it, on and off, for a year. He'd have to pull it together because Harry wanted to stay with him, because he had a little brother to look after, because there was a war on, and he was still needed. For the second time in his life, he'd lost what he'd considered family, but that didn't mean he'd lost everyone, and he could pull himself up. He'd done it before.

"How's Harry?" he said, to cut the awkward silence.

"Moping, far as I can tell," Tonks said. "I've got watch with him tomorrow."

He opened his mouth to point out she looked a bit like that too, but cut himself off. If she didn't want to talk about it with him, fine. Besides, he knew Harry really didn't like living with his aunt and uncle. He'd never really elaborated upon it, but he supposed if they were a bit posh and they didn't like magic, it would be a hard place to be magical. He'd be better off when he was out.

"Let him know I'll come get him the second I can?" he asked.

"We don't talk to him," Tonks elaborated. "It's surveillance."

Sirius gave her a look. "You just sit there and watch him and decide on his mood without him ever knowing you're there?"

Tonks fidgeted. "It sounds creepy when you put it like that."

"That's because it is creepy," Sirius told her. That was alright, he supposed. They were all a bit creepy and maudlin. It must be a family trait, given the souvenir murder board, the shrieking harpy, the lap dog, and maybe even his own stalking of Harry when he escaped the first time. "Besides, thought you weren't fussed about keeping rules. It might even cheer him up."

Tonks relented with a sigh, "Yeah, alright."

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Sunday brunch was bright and warm, settled under Malfoy Manor’s ivy-laced gazebo as a small group of ladies picked delicately at the last vestiges of their meal. For some time now, they had been discussing the details of the upcoming charity event - an auction celebrating the beauty of magical art - but Narcissa found herself uncomfortably distracted.

Though the previous day’s newspaper was tucked away inside, it lingered still in Narcissa’s mind. Another day, another Death Eater back in prison, heralded by the *Prophet* as some small victory in the wake of the Brockdale Bridge collapse and the murder of a magical family - one that did not
seem connected to the Dark Lord’s threat, at least as far as Narcissa was aware, though there was always some connection at play when truth came out. Vigilantism, more than likely, though the Vances had always seemed wholly unremarkable in their neutrality. The media was grasping at straws to call the arrest a victory, but the Dark Lord’s plans had not gone as anticipated - something that Narcissa did not require Death Eater membership to figure out - and her heart ached for Lucius, though he had been gone barely a week. The newspaper had yet to announce the Death Eater in custody who would soon be joining her husband, but Bella had told her in a storm of contempt, the night before, that Lorcan Mulciber had been assigned to capture Vance - the daughter, who had survived and remained pointedly uncaptured.

Mulciber was twice to Azkaban, now, and the same age her cousin Evan would have been, were he still alive. Just a year off from Regulus, who had been dead for even longer and would be dead again soon, if he truly had defected. (Yet his letter was so vague - perhaps…)

Narcissa had liked it better, before everything was out in the open. For several months. her sister had been home again, hidden away and treading water, rather than splashing chaos across the wizarding world. Lucius, too, had been home. Draco had been safe. However important the fight for their traditions and livelihood might be, the risks had encroached far too close to home, and they crept closer still each time Bella went out into the world for the sake of the Cause.

“Corban has been so busy, lately,” Priscilla Yaxley was saying with a put upon sigh, twisting a mahogany curl in her finger, “I suppose with the Ministry’s scramble to save its reputation, that is to be expected, but between that and the nightly outings, I feel like I never see him.”

Narcissa leveled a cold stare, and though it took a few awkward seconds to register, Priscilla deigned to don a thin, awkward smile.

To Narcissa’s other side was Persephone Avery, a bit younger than either of them, but less phased than she had once been by the rapid shift in atmosphere. She was a Greengrass by birth, a family less actively devoted to the Cause than some others, but the girl had slipped into the fold quite well. “I think we should be mindful of how we present ourselves with this event,” Persephone was saying in the sort of earnest tone that indicated she was brushing past the uncomfortable moment, “With the Dark Lord’s return, the average witch or wizard might be a little sensitive, even if now is the most important time to be fostering solidarity.”

“You would pander to the masses?” Priscilla said with more than a little disdain. “If anything, the return of the Dark Lord just supports the importance of our views.”

“It’s not pandering, it’s strategising,” the younger witch countered, a little defensively, though the argument started to fade to a buzz as Narcissa watched one of the peacocks strut out of sight behind one of the artistically-manicured bushes. It was her husband she was concerned about, her husband and her son and her sister and - if fate allowed it - her resurrected cousin, and the opinions of the unwashed masses felt even less important than usual.

“Persephone is right. We’re already losing influence, and we have to be smart about it,” Narcissa cut in, not paying attention to which woman was talking, nor what was being said, but Persephone immediately smiled a preening smile. “We do not debase ourselves to please others, but it is our intelligence and our cunning that sets us apart.” Certainly, there was a place for grand displays - and Narcissa did love a grand display - but the last thing she wanted was another humiliating rejection by a St. Mungo’s official for their associations with Death Eaters. “Persephone, I trust you would be interested in overseeing the promotion of this event?”

Persephone was as pleased as Priscilla was piqued, but the finer details would need to wait for another time. Narcissa’s patience for the day’s brunch was fading much more quickly than usual;
in truth, the shimmering delight found in all of her favourite things seemed so much duller, these
days.

“Though I regret the need to cut our gathering short, I have an appointment I must prepare for. We
should come together again sometime next week with progress. Priscilla, make certain to have a
theme and colour scheme prepared for the decor.” The two women soon parted in good spirits
(“Charming, as ever!” - “Your brunches are always a delight!”), and Narcissa noted with some
satisfaction that their elf Dinky had already cleared most of the table in the time it had taken to say
their goodbyes.

Without further word, Narcissa swept back inside the manor, making a quick line for her bedroom
without detour. She knew it was probably wise to locate her son and her sister - it had been several
hours since she had seen either of them - but she had spotted Rodolphus reading in one of the
sitting areas, which was enough to give her some hope that the others were doing something
equally normal while she was busying herself.

It was only when the bedroom door was shut securely behind herself that Narcissa let out a slow,
measured sigh and approached the writing desk, experiencing no small amount of relief when she
found that her younger cousin’s letter was folded exactly as it had been, in exactly the same place,
hidden beneath several other papers and knicknacks.

The words had struck her swiftly, stealing her breath, so soon after the news of her husband’s
incarceration. Patches of Regulus’s letter were now smudged with tears, but every word had
sounded so much like her little cousin that she had been unable to stop herself. Missing for so long,
then all at once, writing of family and reconciliation as if he had not stood in opposition to the
Death Eaters just a week before writing to her. However vehemently she had defended him to her
sister, she could not help that gaping hurt at the thought that him being alive meant that he had
truly left them without a word, that he had let them - let her - think he was dead for so long…

More than once, she had tried to write him back, but she never knew where to begin, what emotion
to feel between the hurt and the relief and the hope and the terror and the anger and the joy.
Whatever the circumstances, he had survived defection as a teenager, and she knew that was a
threat to the stability of the Death Eater organisation, and she feared that even if she could keep
Bella calm, that it might not be enough to stop the others - many of whom would not care in the
least if he died for real this time, no matter who he was… However thoroughly Lucius and Bella
might have shielded her from the rougher edges of the Dark Lord’s followers, she knew they
existed - men and women and beasts who cared not for ideals, but for power alone, or a fear-driven
pursuit of personal safety. Those who would not care what happened to her family, no matter the
side they stood on.

With a delicate dip of ink, Narcissa held her quill at the ready for a fresh attempt. ‘My darling
cousin,’ she had nearly written before stopping herself. It would not do to show too much affection
before determining that he was not the traitor she so desperately feared he could be, but it was with
steel in her manner that Narcissa reminded herself who she was speaking to. Regulus - her little
cousin, their little prince - and no matter Bella’s report, he would never be another Sirius. It was
not possible. He did not have the disposition for it.

‘Regulus,

You must realise this is difficult to understand. Sixteen years ago,
we buried your empty casket at High Gate. For years, we have believed you must be dead,
and it seems you let us. I don’t want to believe you could ever be a traitor,
but you are right in saying that it truly looks terrible,
and you have put us in a very confusing situation.

I want to understand what has happened, what is happening,
but I know it is essential to find the right time. To rush could well bring about
unnecessary complications. It would be best to meet without company.
I cannot yet confirm a time or place, but there are a great many things to be said.

Narcissa’

For a moment, she stared at the parchment, a knot of emotion caught in her throat, and she quickly sealed the letter in an envelope (neatly labeled ‘R’) before she could change her mind again. Bella could not know of the meeting - not when she may well take it upon herself to crash the reunion - and although it seemed important that Regulus have the opportunity to explain himself to Bella, too, Narcissa would much rather have a grip on his situation before throwing him to her sister’s cutting lack of mercy. Bella would eat him alive - she always had - and if Narcissa had any say in the matter at all, she did not want to see that happen again.
“Wotcher, Harry.”

With a great startle, Harry fell off the bench that he must have dozed off on. From his vantage point on the ground, it took him a moment to register what had been said and thus the identity of the long-haired brunette that had taken up residence on his former napping spot.

Not that he'd meant to fall asleep, but he'd been having trouble sleeping again. This time, it was not from nightmares - he hadn’t had any since the Department of Mysteries battle, except the normal kind - but instead from feeling as if he wanted to be ready to go sprinting off back into the magical world at the slightest hint he was welcome to. It had been an agonising two weeks. For once, this was not the Dursleys, who were no worse than usual. Even Dudley, who was apparently spooked badly enough by the dementors last year that he'd quieted down a bit, had been almost bearable. It was just that now everyone knew Voldemort was back: things were definitely happening, and he was stuck in Little Whinging reading the *Prophet* for all the good it did him after the fact.

“Tonks?” Harry wasn't entirely sure; Tonks could take whatever form she liked, but she looked drab and serious in a way he'd never seen before. Had something happened? His heart began to kickstart. “What happened?”

“I think you fell off the bench,” Tonks replied, but even the smile seemed forced.

“Not that,” Harry scrambled to his feet, looking around the play park and finding no one but them. “But what are you doing here?”

“Keeping an eye on you,” Tonks replied. “What else?”

Harry had suspected that the Order had been keeping an eye on him again. He was sure he'd caught sight of an all too familiar lop-sided bowler hat at the station, and he'd seen Arabella Figg eyeing him much more frequently than usual. Still, in the last two weeks, none of them had actually spoken to him, and he informed Tonks of just that.

“Yeah,” Tonks looked a bit shifty. “I'm not meant to either.”

“But?” Harry prompted.

“But I thought you might want to know what's going on with Sirius?”

Might want to know? Of course he wanted to know! On the great stack of things he'd been worried about – his OWL results, what happened at the Ministry, his friends, Voldemort out in the open, Death Eaters, the deaths in the papers – the top spot had been reserved for his godfather. The last time he'd seen him, he was lying unconscious in Madam Pomfrey's side room with his younger brother, who had inexplicably shown up despite not being a member of the Order. (Thinking of the frantic panic that had gripped Ron when Ginny had been in danger, then again, perhaps it wasn't all that unusual at all.) Harry had waited outside in St. Mungo's when he'd been told he wasn't allowed in, until Lupin had come to sit with him for a while, then Mrs. Weasley had taken him in to sit with Ron while he recovered. Dumbledore had shown up later to take him back to Hogwarts, and to Harry's own embarrassment, had to suffer through the delayed panic that had been ripping him apart all year.

He wanted to know all of it; he'd said as much to Dumbledore that night. That if it was on him, then he needed to know what he was up against. Dumbledore had let him listen to the prophecy,
but he still didn't fully understand it. Dumbledore had promised there would be more, but that he was needed elsewhere. Harry had wanted to argue that he was needed there too, but he'd been too tired from all of it.

He just wanted to know what was going on. Why did everyone seem to think he shouldn't?

“They reckon it should all be over by Friday,” Tonks replied, as if Harry hadn't probably just stared blankly at her for a few minutes. Maybe it was going around.

“What'll be over?” Harry asked. “What is the inquiry? That's all people are saying, that there's an inquiry and that Fudge was sacked, but I don't know what it means.”

“It means that back when Sirius was arrested, if they felt there was evidence enough, trials were forgone. It's not really even whether or not he's innocent, but if they find that doing that was wrong-”

“It was wrong!” Harry interrupted.

“-if they decide it was wrong, it's not just his case they have to reopen,” Tonks replied. ”Anyone still alive in Azkaban who went through the same thing would probably have to have their cases reopened.”

A chill at the mention of the wizarding prison took to Harry's gut. (Still alive?) “Isn't that a good thing?”

“Yeah, it is,” Tonks replied. “But Harry...it also leaves room for the Death Eaters that are caught now. Trying to balance out not handing them a free pass to murder people and us to have to prove it beyond loads of witnesses isn't easy, especially without Pettigrew in custody. It's really rough, and we gotta be really careful.”

It sounded as if they didn't know what would happen either. That wasn't much of a comfort. “Like the ones at the Department of Mysteries?” Tonks nodded. “So what happens on Friday?”

“If everything goes well, he spends his morning with a lawyer and will probably be here by lunch time.” Tonks smiled weakly. “He said to tell you that.”

“And if it doesn't go well?” Harry prompted.

Tonks shifted herself, looking uncomfortable. “I think it'll go well.”

“Nothing goes well around me,” Harry admitted.

Tonks stared at him for a moment, before leaning forward conspiratorially. “Listen, anyone awaiting this sort of thing should be in Azkaban. Technically speaking, he ought to have been there the moment he was deemed healthy enough to travel.” She looked around, as if the swingset had ears. “But that didn't happen, did it? He's still at St. Mungo's.”

“He's not hurt?” Harry had continued to read that he was still in hospital, but no one had told him more than that, and worry had been making him queasy.

Tonks shook her head. “He's fine, he ought to have been discharged to Azkaban a week ago – but it's a lot easier to ghost someone out of St. Mungo's than it is Azkaban, and if it comes to that, we're prepared.”

A little of the tension in his gut lifted. “But you don't think that'll happen.”
“No,” Tonks said, straightening up again. “But Kingsley – rightly – pointed out that the last time we left a Death Eater – which is what they’re assuming, Harry, don’t give me that look – in the custody of the Ministry, their soul was removed without authorisation. Between that and it happening at the Department of Mysteries, they can’t be wholly sure he’s fine – which he is, Emmeline Vance just blagged her way through a report about possible side effects of the death veil to give us some good cover.”

In the moment, Harry couldn't breathe. “Death veil?”

“The thing he got smacked into the arch of,” Tonks said, “But he's fine, really. Saw him this morning.”

Harry tried not to feel a prick of jealousy about that. He knew that while Sirius was the only real family he had left that actually wanted him, he was also Tonks's cousin – second cousin – whatever it was and had a family of his own too. He shouldn't begrudge that.

“Friday?” Harry asked, tentatively. It was only two days away.

“Friday,” Tonks confirmed. “I’d get packed up just in case. Something tells me you don't want him in a room with the Dursleys for too long.”

The idea of leaving them after only two and a half weeks was blissful, but the image of Sirius sitting in the Dursleys living room brought the first genuine smile he'd had in a week. After all, they still thought he was a violent mass murderer. It would almost be worth delaying it to see that. But he also knew Sirius had a tendency to fly off the handle when people were rude to him, and he knew the Dursleys wouldn't be polite. Getting absolved and getting arrested on the same day was probably not a great idea.

Sirius had been pacing along the room for what he thought was the better part of an hour when his brother arrived.

It wasn't a sure bet when he'd come and go. Kingsley had mentioned in passing that Emmeline was staying in HQ while the Ministry combed through her place after Mulciber left a gory mess where her parents were, and Sirius didn't imagine he'd like anyone staying too long in that house alone who didn't have the name Black bestowed at birth. Besides, he was self-aware enough to know that he was getting snappier. Being stuck in the same walls day in and out had been one thing when he was injured, but he was fine now, and this was all supposed to be over and done with by now. It didn't do him much good to go mental at people, but the thought that even now, with only hours between him and his potential freedom, he knew it could go badly. It shouldn't. It was being pushed back for a good reason, but that didn't help the unsteadiness to it all. Despite his faith in his old headmaster, there was still that voice in his head that told him it was of no use last time.

"They pushed it back ‘til tomorrow evening,” Sirius said, forgoing any greeting. It was a good thing, he kept telling himself. They were reinstating Dumbledore as Chief Warlock. He should have nothing to worry about. He may not be making the decision, but it certainly couldn’t hurt. "Fudge removing Dumbledore's being revoked tomorrow morning, Kingsley thought it'd be better to wait for that."

“The more credentials Dumbledore has back to his name, the better for your case,” Regulus agreed without missing a beat, “At least this ordeal is almost over.”

"Not to mention your own," Sirius pointed out, and Regulus nodded back with a grimace. He knew that despite the lack of actually discussing it, that had to be weighing on his mind. It was certainly
weighing on Sirius' own. But it wasn't a guarantee, and one way or another, he didn't want to break his word with Harry again. It was bad enough that one of them was stuck without magic, awaiting a decision that was beyond their control. "Listen, I don't know what's going to happen, but whatever happens, can you do me a favour tomorrow?"

“What favour might that be?” Regulus asked, watching his brother's continued pacing as he settled in a chair.

"Harry," Sirius said, grimly. "He's been stuck in the muggle world for weeks now. I'd feel a hell of a lot better if you could go and get him." Technically, he could have asked anyone from the Order to do it. But the Order were not safe right now either, as what happened with the Vances attested. For whatever else it was, Grimmauld Place was a stronghold, and even Harry couldn't get himself in that much trouble in a day, right? But he knew that not only was he a sitting duck relying on surveillance (which had failed last time) but that there was about to be a point of argument about where Harry himself belonged. He was clearly miserable stuck with the muggles. Sirius imagined it might be a bit like living with Narcissa, very prim, very proper, but instead of nothing muggle, it would nothing magical. He didn't like the thought of it. "Just in case."

Regulus nodded, slanting his mouth in thought. “He lives with his muggle aunt and uncle, right?”

Pursing his lips, Sirius nodded. "I've never been in the house or anything, but I know where it is. They're a funny lot, but they didn't do very well against a dementor. Muggles can't see them. Imagine what'll happen if a Death Eater shows up."

“A scenario that is far more likely than it once was…” Regulus crinkled his nose. “To answer your question, yes, I am willing to retrieve him. Shall I plan for earlier in the day?”

"Early as possible," Sirius replied, knowing that meant a fairly hour for him. It also meant less chance of someone trying to stop him. Sirius was in no mood to go asking permission when it came to his own godson. "Tonks said he was miserable, and I don't want to make him wait another day if this runs late. Or show up at his aunt and uncle’s in the late hours when they're already fussy."

“Are they generally less fussy in the morning?” Regulus asked, lifting his brow.

"Dunno, never met the husband." In truth, Harry didn't speak about his aunt and uncle very much. He'd mentioned they don't celebrate his birthday, which he'd been outraged by, and that they didn't like magic at all. "But I know if I'd shown up at Druella's at ten at night without an invitation and asked to see Evan, she'd have done her nut about the impropriety of it."

“Of course, though I imagine she would have also been very suspicious as to why you were asking after Evan in the first place,” Regulus said wryly.

"I was trying to draw a comparison and I couldn't think anyone I wouldn't have just walked in on," Sirius huffed. He’d never been one for being polite, even when he was trying to make an impression.

“Will I need to… do anything in particular, or merely show up, collect Harry, and leave? I suppose they aren't connected to the floo.”

At his brother's question, Sirius thought to himself that he’d never actively tried not to give a muggle the magic jitters before, but there was a first time for everything. "No floo, no owls, just an old fashioned knock on the door and asking to see him, then side-along out. It’ll be fine. They're appearance obsessed, and you're way more well-to-do than I am."
Regulus nodded thoughtfully. “That seems straightforward enough…”

"Yes, it does," Sirius replied, thinking it sounded too simple, the more he thought of it. Something would undoubtedly go wrong. "If you handle that, I'll remind Dumbledore he needs to get you sorted out."

Turning a look over to Sirius, Regulus responded, “I must admit I will feel a lot better when both of our concerns are resolved.”

Knowing Dumbledore was not an easy man to pin down, Sirius doubted he'd really had the chance to speak to him yet. "You decided on the other part of it?"

“The other part?” Regulus lifted his brow. “Do you mean joining…?”

"You were going to think about it last week, but it's been a hell of a week," Sirius pointed out.

“‘Yes, it most certainly has been,’ Regulus agreed with a heavy sigh. “I have given more thought to the idea and would like to pursue it. Though I have experienced some hesitations in the past year, I think participating in a more official capacity is the more practical and preferable option. There is more to gain than there is to lose.”

Sirius scrunched his face up at him. “You’re not going to use those exact words, are you?” he asked. It made it sound a lot more like he was auditioning for Quidditch than deciding to join in on vigilantism.

"It's clinical," Sirius complained. They were vigilantes, not Aurors. They were all there for complicated reasons - family, friends, experiences, occupational hazards, the joy of a good fight for the right reasons. "You're taking all the fun out of it."

“I'm taking the fun out of it?” Regulus echoed, raising his eyebrow with a little more exaggeration. “What fun am I taking out?”

"You're making vigilantism sound responsible and practical," Sirius complained. Yes, it was a practical option; yes, they were often responsible for helping people when the Ministry could not; and yes, it was a serious choice not to be jumped into without consideration (unless you're Sirius, but he had plenty of experience with jumping in without consideration, he could have made a sport out of it). But what was the point of joining a secret vigilante organisation if it sounded like you were preparing for a job interview? Not that either of them would know what one of those looked like, but he could imagine.

“‘That’s because I want to approach it responsibly and practically,’” Regulus said, as if the point was obvious, and with a little more conviction, continued, “I can take my personal stance against the Dark Lord by myself, and I don’t require the Order’s permission - nor even their support - to do that. However, the integration of efforts has been beneficial, and I am interested in being as effective as possible.”

"You're going to be boring about this, aren't you?” It wasn't too much of a surprise, he was boring about most things right up until he seemed to reach an unseen capacity and do something completely different. "Fine, yes, obviously I want to be effective. I must be rustier than I thought if I needed you to step in."

“Clearly,” Regulus said a little more dryly, and with a small touch of annoyance, subdued though it
was. “Boring isn’t the word I would use to describe my defection experiences, but call it what you will, I suppose.”

"I'm not talking about youlegging it," Sirius said, a little driven by the amusement that always came from irritating his brother just a little. "Just that you're making it sound very formal when it isn't. I realise your previous experience was a bit more grandiose, and you always default to horrifying politeness if you're feeling even more awkward than usual, but try not to look as if you're literally walking into a dragon's den equipped with only a stiff upper lip and noble purpose the whole time."

“What exactly am I supposed to look like, then?” Regulus propped an elbow on the arm of his chair and settled his chin atop his hand.

"I don't know, less..." Sirius couldn't put his finger on it, until he considered that Regulus didn't just look a little afraid of it, but may actually be a little afraid of it. Maybe afraid whether they'll say yes or no, both had their stresses. "Less like something bad is going to happen if you do ask. Something else."

“That isn’t very helpful,” Regulus said, punctuated with a drawn out sigh. “Honestly, something bad probably will happen if I do...but I recognise that something worse is likely to happen if I don’t. I have yet to find an option that avoids bad things entirely.”

"Unless you're hiding fantastic new developments in time turners, bad things will probably happen either way," Sirius admitted. Perhaps only peripherally linked to joining, but he supposed the point was made. It was a risk, and deep down, Sirius understood that, but there was still something about seeing him walk into a situation because of dictated circumstances rather than because he wanted to that gripped at him.

Except that wasn't true. He understood the choices before him and laid them out; Regulus had made the survival choice and the right choice, so why was this still bugging him? Was it that he feared he was going to view it as a mistake, even if it wasn't one? That he was going to wake up a month, a year from now and realise it wasn't right for him, pack a bag, and disappear again? It already happened once before, and despite the leaps and bounds, there were still boundaries of trust there, and he didn't know if there'd be a point where there wouldn't be. It was a bitter potion to swallow.

“I'm just trying to figure out what you still believe in.” And where that devotion lay was going to make a lot of difference for the Order. “And if it’s something you’re worried about now.”

“I believe in putting a permanent stop to the the Dark Lord and his plans, and ending the violent cycle we as a magical collective have fallen into once again,” Regulus said, his brow furrowing subtly. “I thought I had already established that. Is it still in question?”

“Then I'm just being stupid?” Sirius inquired. “You're not worried?”

“About the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters?” Regulus clarified, lifting his brow. “They want to kill me. Of course I find that to be a point of concern.”

“About the Order,” Sirius replied, simply. “I know you don’t want to feel used again.”

“I don't want to feel used again, no,” Regulus confirmed with his lips pressed to a line, "but if the current expectation is that one can withdraw without consequence, then I will expect the same to apply to myself, should it somehow prove to be more hindrance than help.” His voice was a little firmer as he added: “In this, I am trying to give them the benefit of the doubt, and a year of
observation has led me to believe our intentions are compatible, but I'm not a child anymore and have no intention of being bossed around for someone else's aim.”

"There, that wasn't too hard, was it?" Sirius said, with a brief smile. It may have been sensible, but it sounded a lot better than the resigned attitude of before. He'd sworn to himself he wouldn’t put him in that position again. "Not boring at all. Quite a feat for you."

“I assumed that was implied,” Regulus said, lifting his shoulder in a half-shrug, though he seemed contented enough with the remark, despite its playful jab.

"Given your history of misinterpreting implications, try being explicit,” Sirius said. He bit back a snort because this was a shared history of misinterpretation, particularly when it came to each other. If he'd ever thought to ask rather than assume a hell of a lot stuff, perhaps this all could have been packed in a decade and a half ago.

“I am trying to be. I suppose I am uncertain what is obvious and what is not,” Regulus admitted, shaking his head.

"I don't know that either," Sirius admitted in turn. Sometimes, when he thought about his brother more in the abstract, he still saw the teenager trying to figure it all out, and it was this that the new, more confident version had to contend with being compared to. "I'm just trying to figure out how your blood views are about to impact this, because it's bound to come up."

“I’m not going to attack Harry’s aunt and uncle, if that is the concern,” Regulus said, a little curtly.

"Not with the muggles," Sirius said, with a huff. "With the Order."

Regulus frowned and responded, a little defensively, “I think I've have proven myself quite polite on the matter.”

"You're always polite," Sirius pointed out. "I'm surprised you didn't leave a letter of resignation when you left the Death Eaters.”

Regulus made a thoughtful sound, tipping his head a little with an expression that wasn’t quite sure if he wanted to speak - and then - “Well, what I left could potentially be categorised as a letter of resignation, but it was not addressed to the Death Eaters, nor would I necessarily call it polite…”

What the hell did that mean? Did he leave some kind of note in the house? Or at the party, perhaps? No, not addressed to Death Eaters - their mum, perhaps? No, that wouldn't have made sense either. Voldemort? Did he have a PO Box? "Did it use a four letter word beginning with F and end with another ending with U?" Sirius asked.

“Not verbatim,” Regulus admitted, slanting his mouth slightly downward. “I left it in place of the...thing I took, so I don’t actually know if it was ever read, given the challenging process to get there and the Dark Lord’s apparent confidence in his hiding place…” A crinkling of his nose. “In the grand wisdom of adult hindsight, I recognise that I probably should not have left a taunting letter, but it did make me feel a little better, at the time.”

The mysterious object and the mysterious place with the inferi were not commonly referenced things for his brother, so it made Sirius snap to some kind of attention. Forgoing the usual joke about his being born an adult in a child's body and thus doubting the hindsight was linked to that, Sirius chose a more direct route. "You've never looked?” he asked, curiously.

Regulus’s expression pulled to a stiff frown. “I feel no need to go back there. If he finds it, then he finds it. More than likely, the Dark Lord already wants me dead for being alive at all, given that it
is not likely to be a precedence he wants set…” There was something almost like a steeling bravado in his tone, despite the quiet, even delivery. “Besides, I disguised it, so he might not notice, even if he checks.” A dawning thought seemed to flicker in his eyes, though whatever it was, he elaborated no further.

"And if he doesn't, Bellatrix certainly does,” Sirius replied grimly. How long had he thought about all of this that he'd had time to write his resignation, disguise his object, and never have any of it noticed? Was Regulus already planning it when he saw him at the funeral, and things had simply fallen into such decay between them that he'd never noticed? He tried to lighten his own threatening descent into melancholy, "If I'm embarrassed about having gotten myself saved by my little brother, she must be livid about being stopped."

“She has not yet descended upon the house and woken me in the middle of the night to murder me in full consciousness, though it could well be a case of fostering a false sense of security,” Regulus said tightly, shaking his head. “I received a letter back from Cissa, who did not sound as angry as she could have been, so perhaps there is some temporary mediation at play. Regardless, I do not expect it to last…”

"You haven't put one of your makeshift alarms on the bedroom door?" That he hadn't put one on years ago was more of a shock. Perhaps, in his own way, that was him saying he was alright with Sirius busting in with only the occasional jinx for his trouble.

“There is one for the threshold of the top floor landing, but not the bedroom,” Regulus specified with a nod. “When I originally charmed them, I was in my room more often than not, so it was intended to be more akin to a warning of potential invisible visitors than potential snooping. By the time I was spending more time elsewhere in the house, it did not feel quite so urgent.”

"You may want to prioritise it again." It was an odd choice, given the amount of times Sirius himself walked up and down those stairs which would have given the illusion of much more people than there were in reality. It was still better than nothing. The mention of Narcissa had him biting his tongue. He didn't know if her being more pleasant was a good sign or a lousy one. "Narcissa won't hold her choke chain for long."

“I know,” Regulus said with a heavy sigh. “Of course, by the time she triggered any alarm on my door, she could easily kill me with a single swish of a wand, so it would be of limited help...but the point stands that the landing is no longer as beneficial as the door itself.”

"Nah," Sirius replied, making a face at the thought. "This is Bellatrix. It won't be a single blow."

Regulus winced. “Being woken up to the Cruciatus isn’t really better.”

“Better than not waking at all,” Sirius replied, even if he wasn’t sure that was true. Somewhere in the same building were Frank and Alice, and it was with that chilling thought, he decided not to continue that line. A choice between the two seemed like no choice at all, with no hope left for them to recover after all this time. “Besides, you’re not on your own. Unless you’ve really annoyed her, I think Emme’d probably help you.”

Regulus lowered his chin in a thoughtful nod. “I suspect she would help, yes.”

“Besides,” Sirius added, “I don’t think Bellatrix is even considering it if you’re still talking to Narcissa. Too messy. She’ll wait for you to screw it up first.”

“It does not seem difficult to screw up this particular situation,” Regulus said, releasing a wry huff. “I don’t know how much she knows, but if she is holding her assault, then that will suit for now.”
"It's not unusual for them not to come to the house unless for a specific reason," Sirius pondered out loud. Despite the fact that once Harry had been targeted, James and Lily had moved around a great deal, even in hiding before they'd had to resort to the Fidelius, and Sirius had only ever had Death Eaters at his home once. It had become a long running joke about Emmeline that she held the record with three moves, but it seemed less funny now it was bound to be four. Sirius and Remus had been at their flat for well over a year when they'd been arrested, and it's not as if they were subtle. "It won't be a problem 'til it's a larger priority."

For a moment, Regulus took on a strange expression, but as quickly as it had surfaced, he nodded it off with a sigh. "Indeed."

"Alright?" Sirius asked.

Regulus nodded and turned an uncomfortable look to his brother, thumbing absently at his sleeve. "Just thinking."

Sirius let his frown deepen. He'd tripped some sort of alarm, but he wasn't sure what. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the slightest indication of Regulus engaging his childhood nervous tick and these days, that usually meant that Bellatrix was involved. It hadn't been the inferi, though that would have been understanding. It had been around th time he mentioned her specifically coming to the house. Perhaps he was more afraid than he was willing to let on. Sirius supposed he couldn't blame him for that. Besides, within a day or so, he'd be able to keep an eye on him himself so there'd be nothing to worry about. If it persisted, he could ask again. It seemed rude to grill him after he'd done something impressive and was about to do him a favour.

"I'd stop it if I were you," Sirius replied. "It looks painful."

Letting out a little huff - though it was not quite amused - Regulus responded, “Easier said than done, but I will make an effort.”

There was definitely something going unspoken - but what, Sirius couldn’t say yet.

The next morning came quick and bright. Though Regulus had technically resided in a muggle neighborhood throughout the duration of his youth - half of his life, almost exactly - the differences between Grimmauld Place and Privet Drive could not be overstated, and as his eyes raked down the line of perfectly manicured and utterly indistinguishable lots, he could see what Sirius meant about the prim and proper manner of Harry’s muggle aunt and uncle. Regulus quite liked propriety, appreciated the place of manners and orderliness, but the severity of the street’s likeness was a little more disconcerting than he would have expected.

Regulus had come to call early in the morning, just as Sirius had suggested, and as he strolled up to Number Four Privet Drive’s front door, he reminded himself that at least he would not have to go inside the house, and that these muggles were unlikely to want to talk to him, if they truly disliked magic so much: two truths that minimised some of the discomfort still prickling at the thought of meeting two muggle strangers, even if he confidently knew he did not wish for Harry’s reported misery to prolong. It seemed a bit base to know about magic and still hate it when magic could so clearly accomplish endless droves of wonderful things, but he supposed it was in line with the indications of historical magical-muggle relations. He had made it well into adulthood without any significant, direct interaction with a muggle, rendering them more a concept than perhaps they should have been when the Black ancestral home had always been so thickly surrounded, yet it had always felt like an argument of theory, more so than a direct reaction. A childhood tale of what
could be, a point of principle. A principle that would balk at him being here - one that would balk at quite a few things, as of late, though he could not bring himself to regret them. Even with the recent outings with Emmeline, there remained little in the way of actual contact, though the muggles in their midst had seemed harmless enough.

Uncomfortable though it felt, he supposed Harry’s aunt and uncle might be harmless enough too…

Taking a moment to smooth the crinkled look from his face and tipping his chin up with a certain self-assured dignity, Regulus rapped crisply on the door - three knocks, in quick succession.

Within a few moments, a portly man with a large, bushy mustache answered the door. He took a look over Regulus, seemingly coming to some kind of horrible conclusion as he began to go purple but remained speechless.

“I’ve come to collect Harry,” Regulus offered to what must have been Harry’s uncle, thinking he looked a bit strange, puffing up like that.

Something seemed to shift into place in the man's mind, as his mustache appeared to take on a life of his own from the heavy scowl. He took a half step back inside the property and bellowed, "BOY!" There was the sound of rapid footsteps, and on the stairs behind him, dressed in what was presumably muggle teenage fashion, Harry appeared looking more than a little confused. "You brought them here again?" His uncle hissed at him. "In broad daylight? Where everyone can see?"

Harry barely spared a look to his uncle, looking more at Regulus. "He's just standing on the doorstep."

"In those- in those-" His uncle stuttered out.

"They're just clothes," Harry said, finally descending the stairs. He looked at Regulus with a worried expression. "Did something happen?"

"Those are not clothes!" his uncle hissed back at him, cutting off any response and throwing his arm about for greater emphasis.

"Clothes made by magic are still-"

"DON'T USE THAT WORD!" Behind them came what sounded suspiciously like a woman gasping.

"The quicker you let him speak, the quicker he's not on the doorstep where one of the neighbours might see him, and the quicker you don't have to see me again," Harry pointed out, seemingly unphased by the volume or manner in the slightest.

Regulus's expression had visibly soured by the time the ruckus had calmed enough for him to respond, scrunching just slightly at the nose as he pointedly turned his attention to Harry.

“I suppose I must overlook your uncle's poor manners, then,” he began dryly, if blatantly. “To answer your question, there are no emergencies to speak of, but my brother’s inquiry will not conclude until this evening, so he asked me to retrieve you in his stead. I've come to take you back to the house, and if all goes well, Sirius will join us tonight.”

Like a flash, Harry moved between the two men. The building colour of blueberry seemed to stop and drain, as Harry’s uncle looked between Harry and Regulus. "What is he on about?" he addressed Harry after a silent moment of rusty cogs turning.
"The courts - our courts," Harry amended quickly, "They're checking if there was something wrong with Sirius's case, and if there was, they're letting him go."

"Go?"

"Yes, and if I go now, I won't have to come back, maybe never again," Harry said, before peering out past Regulus. "Or we can all keep standing here until Mrs. Whittaker comes out to water her flowers and sees us."

His uncle looked a strange mix of pale and thunderous, before he stomped off into the living room yelling at Harry to shut the door before they were seen and ‘no unnaturalness’ was to be performed under this roof.

(Harry rolled his eyes at this.)

"D'you want to come up for a minute?" Harry said, finally affixing his attention solely on Regulus. "Hedwig's eating and won't get into her cage ‘til she's done."

Regulus was still watching Harry's uncle with a pinched expression. Magic was perfectly natural - it was far more strange to get by without it - but clearly these muggles were not the sorts to take up such a debate. Prim and proper though they were said to be, apparently courtesy was a point they had missed, and it was with a soft, annoyed huff that he shook away the thought.

“I can come in for a minute, yes,” Regulus agreed as he stepped inside, though he had not been intending to. Entering while Harry packed was not so terrible as the prospect of having to interact with his unpleasant muggle family.

Half racing up the twisting stairs, Harry opened the room at the end of the hall to reveal something of a mess. There were sets of newspaper clippings haphazardly spread over, wrappers from sweets clearly from Hogsmeade, a closed trunk and on single desk table was Harry's owl, which barely looked up when he came back in.

Regulus glanced back down the stairs one last time before approaching Harry's room in suit. "Are they always so foul to interact with?"

"That was polite," Harry said, before looking a little shifty. "If you hadn't mentioned Sirius, they'd probably have tried to argue it, but they panic about him. It was all over the news when he escaped, and afterwards, I...conveniently forgot to tell them that he was innocent. It just stops them from trying to stop me from going to school or locking Hedwig out. He doesn't mind! I told him last year, and he thought it was funny."

Regulus arched an eyebrow, arms folding loosely across his chest. “I...am honestly not surprised that he would find that funny,” Regulus admitted, though the corner of his mouth was twitching upward. (In truth, he could see a bit of the humour in it, too, even if the more responsible part of him knew that there was value in a consistent story, especially when it came to interpretations.) “I am, however, a little bit surprised that they would need to be frightened into letting you go to school. I hope it is not too forward to say as much, but I don’t get the impression they are particularly fond of your presence.”

"They know I'm not allowed to do magic outside school," Harry explained, sitting down on his unmade bed with a shrug. "They thought maybe I'd stop being magical if I stopped being exposed to it. When it didn't work, at least they were worried about magic until they found out about underage magic laws. Then when they realised they weren't going to wake up as fruit bats, and I kept accidentally doing magic or there was the whole thing with Dobby - long story - they got
annoyed again. They don't want me here, but they're stuck with me, and it just makes it a lot more bearable if they think someone will notice and be angry about it if I disappear."

“I suppose we are doing everyone a favour, then,” Regulus said, crinkling his nose with distaste as he shook his head. (Dreadful though it sounded, it made sense that the Ministry would monitor Harry, despite having magical biological parents - there were no adults to mask it here, of course. In truth, Regulus had not put much thought to it...) 

Harry looked awkwardly towards Hedwig. "Are you done yet?" She gave a snappish hoot in response, and he just sighed."I would have waited. I know things are pretty bad out there."

“They are quite bad, yes.” Regulus’s mouth turned down in a frown, “However, our home is fortified to stave off unwanted intruders.” Whether the Fidelius would mask himself and Sirius consistently was still yet to be seen; it was ironic that they were perhaps the only ones not guaranteed to be safe in their own house, but it was the best combination of protection that any of them could hope for, at least for the moment…

"Did you get one of the Ministry leaflets?" Harry asked, rummaging a bit to find one in the clutter.

“I haven’t received any leaflets, no,” Regulus replied, watching quietly until at last Harry pulled out the leaflet in question and handed it over. Curious, he began to skim the text: Seven points detailing safe behaviour in light of the Death Eaters’ return, but it was the final point that gave him an internal jolt, washing a prickling shiver over his skin. Inferi had not been noticeably utilised in the previous war (or perhaps more accurately, in the previous half of the resurfacing war), and he had harboured some degree of hope that they would not extend beyond the walls of that terrible cave. Unconfirmed though the indicated sightings might be, he steeled himself to the thought of it.

A little more stiffly, Regulus handed the leaflet back. “At least they are spreading useful information now.”

"I saw they'd replaced Fudge, that's a start," Harry agreed, dropping it once again to the floor as Hedwig finally consented to be put in her cage. "Maybe that's who we'll get stuck with for Defense this year. At least it wouldn't be worse than Umbridge."

“That would be exceedingly ironic," Regulus said wryly, and with the progression of the conversation, felt his mind start to calm once again, before it could fully wind up. “You could practice the ancient art of wishful thinking, in conjunction with the equally ancient rites of sticking your heads in the sand.”

"And still learn more than last year," Harry commented, diving under the bed to pull out what appeared to be his invisibility cloak. "Besides, if the pattern holds, we shouldn't get a Death Eater until next year, so anything's possible."

“You have had more than your fair share of Death Eater professors, from the sound of it,” Regulus said, shaking his head.

“I’ve had someone else’s fair share too,” Harry nodded, looking around the room once more. "I'm ready."

Regulus mirrored the nod. “Let’s be off, then.”

Upon being directed back to his room at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, Harry had immediately begun to unpack, driven, perhaps by some desperate sense of freedom - or at least, Regulus postulated that he would feel that way, himself, were he stuck with those unpleasant
muggles for any extended period of time. Regulus had not even managed to locate Emmeline before Harry was out and ready, once again, requesting a quick trip to Diagon Alley for owl supplies, which we apparently running short from his brief return to the muggle world. Though Regulus did not doubt Harry’s capacity to competently travel by himself, he had not required anyone to directly tell him that Harry was far from safe, moving about in magical areas that could have Death Eaters, whether known or unknown, and Regulus would not be the one to fall negligent.

They arrived by floo just minutes later, greeted with the casual throngs of Diagon Alley’s thinly dispersed Friday morning crowd. “Take your time, should you need it,” Regulus was saying as they started walking toward the Owl Emporium.

“I won’t be long.” Harry promised, before something caught his eye, and he took a few steps away from the path to Eeylops to peer around.

Regulus followed Harry’s diversion with his eyes, curious as to why he branched off from his destination when he was, in fact, the one who had requested to come in the first place; but when his gaze clicked into place, he realised, quite immediately, what had brought about the distraction.

Fine, tailored robes - pale blonde hair - he saw his cousin and her son right away, and some startled, hopeful emotion caught in his throat. Looking between them and his current charge, he recalled the tells of animosity between them and shifted, slightly, to Harry's side.

“Eeylops is over there,” Regulus said with implication in his tone and a gesture toward the shop. “I will meet you inside momentarily.”

Harry looked at him, to where he was looking, and then back to the shop. "Okay," he said, evenly.

For a moment, Regulus stood in place and watched Harry striding back to Eeylops Owl Emporium, but when he again turned to find the Malfoys, he saw that Draco had disappeared into the crowd, leaving his cousin navigating through the masses with the sort of stiff, painted on expression that made him wonder if perhaps she was not holding up so well to Lucius’s absence. (Not just his absence - his time in custody.)

Again, his chest began to thunder, anticipation and anxiety zapping one after another, and he thought how easy it would be to turn and disappear into the shops, right behind Harry, and avoid what could be a terrible, horrible conversation - or what could, conversely, be an unrivaled comfort. Andromeda’s report of similar circumstances had not resolved positively, from the sound of it, but he was not Andromeda, and that situation was not the same. (‘I've never come back from the dead to see her,’ Andromeda had said herself, and although it had seemed like something of a jest, he could not help but selfishly hope it would mean something.)

She was nearly through the door of a shop full of charmed decor by the time he had gained cooperation from his own voice.

“Cissa?”

Immediately she froze, as if the word had been some petrifying incantation, and when at last she turned to look at him with half-misty eyes, he felt a bundle of nerves knotting up in his shoulders. The stone-hold of the rest of her face was a testament to her self-control, though he could see her hand shaking, slightly, and imagined that she was resisting the way it usually flew up to her mouth when she was given a shock.

She wouldn’t like standing here. He didn’t like standing here either, instead taking a subtle step
back and tipping his head toward a smaller alley offshootting from the main street towards Knockturn. It looked far more questionable than he would have liked, but standing about in plain sight was not an option, and the decor shop would be far too quiet and easily overheard for his liking. For a moment, he was not certain if she was going to follow him, but after a few agonising seconds, she, too, had stepped off of the main street, looking all at once as if she was held together by thread - lacing, tightly wound thread, pulling taut at her frame and tiny muscles in her face.

“I did not think Bella would lie about it - but it really is you,” she said thickly, looking for a moment as if she might hug him, but holding herself in place no less. “You’ve grown.” The absurdity of it cracked a small, uncertain smile on his face, and he could see her mouth flickering in turn, though he could not tell if it was tugging up to a smile or down to a frown. For a beat, he could not find any words to say, but it mattered little, because Narcissa soon found more to offer. “Sixteen years, Regulus,” she began again with a little more press to the tone, low but intense as she took a punctuating step forward. “Where have you been?”

A question he had many answers to - none of which would please her - and there was a certain intensity in her manner that led him to tread ever more lightly. “Somewhere safe,” he answered honestly, and that was one of the few responses that rang (at least mostly) true for the extent of his absence.

“How?” she asked, and he thought there was something like franticness to the question, though it was hard to say. “How are you alive?”

“There is no single answer to that,” he admitted, and in truth, he was not sure if it was much more than luck interacting with determination and at least a modicum of sense, but he knew little of anyone else’s attempts to mark a comparison with. “Certainly not one I could effectively verbalise here and now, or in few words.”

She took on an odd expression, then, looking as if she was going to press the point again, but then her face sharpened to something a little more keen. “Bella said you attacked her.” He found her tone was still more searching than accusatory, even now, pointedly though it hung between them.

“I stunned her because she was going to kill Sirius,” he corrected. The unpleasant - if small - sneer on her face was a familiar one, but somehow, it no longer felt so natural a reaction to the mention of his brother, prompting him to add: “Which I consider to be undesirable.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve fallen in with him.”

Regulus could not decide if scolding was the word he would use to describe her tone, but as he might have expected, it was not an approving one. In truth, he was not sure how else to interpret the fact that he had been attendance at the Department of Mysteries without prior notice by the Death Eaters, but he was certain he could come up with some passable explanations, given a few minutes - and if he could, Cissa certainly could too.

His response must have come too slowly, because Narcissa was speaking again, just a beat later. “He cast you aside. He cast all of us aside. You cannot possibly trust that.”

“He’s my brother,” Regulus countered, his tone gentle but firm as he met her eyes, heart still thudding as the ice thinned beneath his feet, “He’s family. You are family. Bella is family.” Andromeda was family, awkward-footed though their interactions might remain, but he suspected it might be more damaging than helpful to trigger that association immediately. “Draco is family.”

Where hard lines had been stiffening his cousin’s expression, at the mention of her son, she looked suddenly as if she might crumble to tears. A frown tugged on his own mouth, and as he shifted
forward, she lifted a hand to her mouth with a pressing grip, as if to steady herself, and he felt a tiny prickle of dread. Draco had appeared fine when he had seen him just a few minutes before - but not all problems were visible, and her reaction was deeply unsettling. (He had expected it to be a more positive reaction…)

“Why did you...join?” she asked quietly after a beat as her hand lowered again, and it was in that moment that he realised she had never asked him before, not even once in those two years that he’d been part of the Death Eaters.

With a question like that, he could effortlessly line the answer with thorns, could sling blame at how trapped he had felt, but it was prickling loneliness, not simmering anger, that crept over him.

“I wanted to please you all - to make you proud, to make a difference on some grander scale,” he started, hearing his own voice thickening at the edges, “To fulfill my perceived responsibilities and make people forget the things that were going wrong. I regretted it… but there was little to be done, once it was set in motion.”

Whatever answer she had been expecting, the one he gave did little to soften her expression, instead chipping at the restraint around her eyes - too bright and too wet. “You were just a child,” she said, though he almost thought she seemed to be saying it more to herself than to him. “Children should not be dragged into wars.”

“No, they shouldn’t,” he agreed with a deepening frown. “I worry for Draco.”

She clenched her eyes, then, sending a few stray tears down her cheeks and a choking sound he knew he ought to pretend he didn’t hear. “You’re going to make it worse,” she began miserably, “if you keep acting this way. Mixing with traitors, defying the Dark Lord - you’re not the only one it affects, and you know that. I don’t understand why you are doing this.”

Regulus winced, his frame stiffening at the accusation, though he could not deny the truth to it. Steeling himself, he countered, “I do know, and it makes me all the more certain that no one - no one who would threaten my family as a result of my actions is worth my loyalty. Family comes first.”

“Then put us first,” she said, her tone beseeching and perhaps a little desperate. In that moment, her manner seemed to shift to some echo long past and freshly painful to suffer - an argument that time could not dull. “Come home. We can fix this; I know we can. If we approach it right, if you are properly contrite-”

“We can fix this,” he echoed, his voice sobering and his face pulling to a pinch. (Come home.) “But not like that. I can’t go back, Cissa - I can’t do it again.”

She looked even more miserable, as he knew she would, but however strangely distressed she looked to the eye, her next words struck a staggering punch: “You’re- You’re being selfish.”

For a moment, he bristled, unable to breathe, it seemed, though they had been nothing more than words hanging in the mid-morning air. (You’re being selfish - TRAITOR - Come home -)

“I’m doing the right thing,” he insisted, as much to himself as to Narcissa.

“Abandoning your family is not the right thing,” she said, though she seemed to be running on momentum, the way the words tumbled, “You are the heir to this family, and we need you to-”

“-I’m the patriarch,” he corrected, a little numbly, thinking of Sirius.
For a second, Narcissa seemed taken aback by the interruption, staring at him blinkingly before continuing with renewed fervor, “I- I suppose you are. The patriarch, then, which is all the more reason for you to lead the family properly instead of running around with vigilantes that are going to get us all killed.”

“The vigilantes aren’t the ones getting us killed, and you know it, Cissa,” he said a little more earnestly, his tone once again focusing to a point.

“Don’t-” she started, and for a second, he thought she might let loose another wash of tears, but she didn't. “Lucius had been convicted because of them,” she said, more bitterly.

“I wish he wasn't, for your sake and for his and for Draco's, but Lucius was participating in an attack on the Ministry instead of sitting home safely with you.” He saw a little bit of anger flicker in her eyes, so he added, “It is kneeling to the Dark Lord and giving him our lives that is, in turn, robbing us of our lives.”

“I just want...” she started with a stagger in her tone. “I can't- I can't talk about this right now.”

Regulus was starting to feel like perhaps he couldn’t either as the prickling chill of rejection stung repeatedly in his chest. “Cissa- I know I’m not making much sense. I know it sounds as though I’m lost, as though I truly am a traitor, but I promise you, I have never for a moment stopped caring about this family above all others, and that will not change, no matter what wars are waged. All I ask is for time to explain - to show you I have not completely lost my mind - and that you try not to hate me as we navigate this mess of a situation.”

Narcissa’s eyes were still wet as she stared at him for a beat - and another - then lowered her chin in what he thought might be a nod, though it was all a bit ambiguous. “I must go,” she said, then hesitated for a moment before turning stiffly toward the mouth of the alley.

“Cissa-”

Again, she stilled - a pause - then spoke:

“I don't want you to get hurt, but Draco- he's still a child, my child, my only child, and this is...”

“Too much?” he supplied quietly, feeling his insides twist with dread at the look on her face. Steeling himself, he continued, “I want to help you. I want to fix it. We are better than this,” he said, and when he met Narcissa's eyes, he was surprised to see them void of argument. “I do not want Draco to be pulled into the same mistakes I once was. We've lost enough family - to death, to disownment…. Whatever the tradition might be, I'm not going to let the Dark Lord dictate who can or cannot be part of my family. Turning from him does not mean I want to turn from you. I just don't know what that looks like yet.”

After another stretch of miserable hesitation, Narcissa nodded - a quiet uncertainty they tread upon with care - and though her arms lifted slightly as if to initiate an embrace, she instead stepped backwards, quietly excusing herself with an insistence that she needed to find Draco.

As she turned the corner out of sight, Regulus felt cold despite the swelling summer, supposing that the mess of a conversation had been some manner of acceptance. He wanted to talk longer, though he knew they couldn't under these circumstances, out in the streets, alley or not. There was too much to be said - too much of a delicate nature - but he was left fearing her decision more than he had prior to discussion.

Selfish, she had called him - a word he had once slung at Sirius, himself, which perhaps made it
worse. He knew he wasn't really being selfish - or perhaps he was, but in a way that could not be avoided without compromising his sense of morality further than he already had - yet it nicked at his mind and in his chest.

Just as she had sought out her son again, he knew he ought to find his own charge for the day. Leaving Harry alone had probably been terribly irresponsible, even for a few minutes, but hopefully no Death Eaters had popped in for an owl this morning. Soon, he and Harry would be back at this house - and with luck, by nightfall, so too would Sirius...

It was a little after one in the afternoon when a harried looking Kingsley appeared through his door. Sirius opened his mouth to ask the question that had been driving him to jitters for two days now when he realised that the door had only shut; not been locked. Not that this meant anything: if this was going to be a run job, then they'd need to do that to give Kingsley some plausible deniability. Adrenaline began to force itself through him, judging by the sudden pounding of his heart in his throat.

But Kingsley smiled, tight but genuine. "Congratulations."

Suddenly, it all rushed out, and Sirius wanted nothing more than to just sit there for a minute. "You sure?"

Kingsley nodded. "Arrest order has been voided. You'll have to come down and sign a few things, pick up anything you had on you at the time, but we can do it now."

The exit was a blur. They took the floo to the Ministry; not the usual method, but things were being more tightly monitored after the break in. Everything was scheduled. They'd met Dedalus, who greeted both with his usual bubbly enthusiasm for everything, and as soon as he'd signed his parts as case lead, Kingsley had to shoot off. "I have another assignment," he'd offered, by way of explanation. They couldn't talk about it there. They'd then sat and done enough paperwork that his hand was cramping, but Dedalus had wanted to read everything thoroughly.

"But what does it mean?" Sirius asked, unsure of exactly what the difference between an inquiry result and his own record being tried was.

"Oh, well, it means they found Crouch posthumously guilty of tampering with cases, and all of the cases he was involved in were under review," Dedalus said, sounding far more serious than he'd ever really known him to be. "Since it was you involved, you just went first, and since they had limited magical testimony and the wand revealed no capable spell cast recently, the decision was overturned. It's just this really, really polite way of them doing it without making themselves admit they were wrong, and pinning it on someone else."

Sirius hadn't known what to do with that. It was the right decision made for the wrong reasons, but he was needed, and that was what mattered right now.

By around seven, they finally made it through everything, and it was beginning to feel real. Even more so when he had to sign again ("I don't think I signed this much parchment when I bought my flat," he'd complained to Dedalus, who seemed to at least see the humour in it) for a small bag that he didn't recognise. Inside it were things he hadn't seen in a long time, what he supposed he had on him when he'd been taken in the first time. The half-busted pocket watch that Fabian had cracked during bloody July, his wallet, his flat key (like he'd ever used it), his wand. It had been a very long time since he'd had the wand he'd been given in Ollivander's two and a half decades ago. He'd expected it to feel different, because it was his own, and it always had before, but he guessed that he wasn't the same person he was when he'd been twenty-one. Of course it would feel different.
"What now?"

Dedalus shrugged. "Whatever you like!"

If someone had told him fifteen years ago that 'whatever you like' would translate to returning to Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, Sirius would have told them they were *barking*. The last time he'd been here before everything with the Order was three days after he'd left home: he'd gone back to retrieve his bike from down the street and stopped for some melodramatic reason to look at the place before driving it back to James's.

It felt different. Not just the passage of time, but he supposed the more he thought of it as Regulus's, the easier it got. He wondered if his uncle had felt a similar way. It had been his childhood home, but he'd never been fond of it - too many nosy portraits, too many stairs, too enclosed - but given that his sister was every bit the old prick her father had been, maybe not. It was never going to feel like a home, it hadn't since before he was a teenager, but it got easier to think of it less as an ancestral rock full of rhetoric and ghosts and more in terms of Order HQ, of his brother, and even of Harry.

Still, just walking down the main square past the park, physically taking the steps and just opening the door felt different than it had the year before, not just because of that, but because he didn't have to stay there if he didn't want to. While it would never be a long term choice, he found he minded it less in the short term: it was safer for Harry; Remus (and for the moment, Emmeline) was crashing here; and despite the echoes and ghosts of it all, it felt less oppressive to know the door opened just fine. He opened it once again, and shut it again gently for good measure. There was no stirring behind the ominous curtains.

He made it as far as the first landing before he ran into anyone. This was undoubtedly because he'd had no idea what time - or even if - he'd be returning tonight, so it's not as if they knew to listen. Still, he imagined Regulus's alarm had alerted him if he had it handy, and he would get company from him soon enough. He could ask him about the redecorating. Sirius never thought he'd see the day *Regulus* would change something about the house. Unless...

"Did you take the mount down?" he asked, realising it was Emmeline coming out of the drawing room carrying precariously balanced books that she just about managed to hold onto by running into a wall and smushing them against a portrait of one of Cygnus's who was making quiet, squawking noises despite having books shoved at him.

"Don't *do* that!" Emmeline said, before seemingly processing his question. "The heads?" Sirius nodded. "No, I think Regulus did, why?"

Sirius couldn't help the smirk. "No reason. I think your eyes are too big for your stomach, those are going to topple and set my mother off in a minute."

"I'm fine," Emmeline said, despite her progressively weird shape to keep them in a stack in her hands.

Regulus emerged from the drawing room just a few seconds later, and - seeming to notice Emmeline's precarious tower of books - shifted his own stack to one arm, took out his wand, and tapped some silent spell on the side of hers. Whatever spell it was had caught the topmost book in its slide, freezing them all in some oblong structure, though Regulus gave no further comment to it. (For all her previous objections, she didn't seem to mind too much.) Instead, he looked to Sirius and slipped his wand away again.
“Welcome back,” Regulus said when he had resettled his own books. “I take it from your relaxed demeanor that it went well?”

It was the most peculiar thing to watch. It was one thing for the house to be overrun by swots - not an unusual thing, even in blood relatives. It was another to see a relative ease where Sirius had expected a discomfort. He supposed he hadn't realised quite the extent at which Regulus had become familiar with the Order and made himself comfortable in their presence. It would make things easier at the meeting, so he'd hardly complain.

Sirius nodded. "It turns out it all goes very quickly and with maximum paperwork once they make a decision. Everything go okay with the muggles?"

“They were dreadful, but Harry has been safely fetched,” Regulus replied simply, crinkling his nose only briefly. “I have not seen him since supper, but he should be around here somewhere.”

Not surprising, from Harry's descriptions, but it was of no consequence now. Harry was here, he was safe and probably upstairs somewhere. As opposed to what looked like a two-person Order research party without the snacks going on down here. "Am I interrupting?" he asked, half-joking.

Regulus glanced at Emmeline, then back again. “Technically, this is an interruption by definition, but it is not an unwelcome one. I’m glad the absolution was successful.”

"Well done," Emmeline agreed, shifting the books in her arms. "We're just doing a little extra work before tomorrow."

Tomorrow as in his first Order meeting in months, where he was going to have to not only catch up and figure out what his own next steps would be, but to bring up Regulus as a membership candidate. He believed it wouldn't be too much of a problem; some wariness aside, they seemed fine with him. Regulus wasn't an objectionable person by definition, after all. Pedantic, precise, and often petulant, but not objectionable beyond the Death Eater youth.

"I'll let you get back to your book mountains then," Sirius said. It kept them out of trouble at least, and he wanted to find Harry.

Tipping his head in an acknowledging nod, Regulus slipped past towards the staircase leading downstairs, followed in suit by Emmeline.

Sirius eventually found Harry in the third place he looked. He was sitting with Buckbeak, who seemed quite content with the attention he was getting. He made a promise to himself to make sure Buckbeak got sorted out next. Regulus too, of course, but as he'd never actually been arrested or sentenced to execution, Buckbeak took precedence. Harry was still looking a bit peaky, but he was also getting taller. Even from the last time he'd seen him in person half a year ago, he seemed to have stretched an enormous amount.

When Harry noticed the door open, he startled and rushed him, leaving a very indignant hippogriff in his wake. “You're back,” Harry said into his shoulder, before letting go and standing back. The worry etched into his face gave Sirius a pang of guilt; he should have tried harder to make sure someone let Harry know what was going on. Harry wasn't as tactile as his father had been; James had always been full of boundless energy, and Sirius had spent a considerable amount of his teen years being knocked over from it, so having him initiate a gripping hug probably showed more than anything he'd been scared.

“It looks like it,” Sirius agreed, giving him a pat on his shoulder. “I didn't realise no one had said
anything until Tonks mentioned it, or I'd have said something sooner.”

“It's alright,” Harry said, despite looking as if it was very much not alright. “Is that it, then? You're free?”

“As much as anyone else is around here,” Sirius confirmed. “How's your summer going?”

“Not too bad,” Harry replied.

“Really?” Sirius asked, skeptical. “No more late night mental invasions?”

Harry shook his head. “Not since the Department of Mysteries.” Behind him, Buckbeak made a noise of annoyance and Harry stepped back to resume an absent-minded feather petting.

That raised the question Sirius had wanted to ask. “What happened there?” Sirius asked, crouching into one of the decorative chairs at the side. “Remus said you'd had another dream, one about me?”

Harry looked all the more embarrassed now, and he'd have spared him the line of inquiry if he could, but he wanted to understand what had happened. “Voldemort planted it in my head. When I fire-called, Kreacher said you weren't there, so I thought it was like Mr. Weasley...”

Sirius winced at that. “No, just a walk. I shouldn't have, but...” He could offer no real explanation for the crushing claustrophobia that had been gripping him only three weeks before. The idea of never again experiencing that made him giddy again. “How did you manage to get to the Ministry?”

“Thestrals,” Harry replied, as if that were a perfectly normal thing to do.

“Thestrals,” Sirius repeated.

“It was Luna's idea,” Harry said, a touch of defensiveness seeping in his tone.

“I heard you had some company,” Sirius said, more from what he'd gotten from Regulus, Kingsley, and Tonks. Most of the people he knew and expected – as if Ron and Hermione would have let him go by himself. Ginny and Neville had been a little more of a surprise, but he was fond of the youngest Weasley, she had a lot of fire in her and wasn't afraid to show it. Neville, he hadn't seen up close since he was a baby, his escapades at Hogwarts notwithstanding, but it stood to reason. Alice and Frank wouldn't have either. Luna was the only unfamiliar name. “Your DA members?”

Harry hesitated before nodding, “They insisted on coming with me.”

“I would have too,” Sirius said, feeling an appreciation for the kids that made up the group. Still, when he'd gotten there, he'd only seen Harry and Neville. He'd found out later that Ron had run afoul of some brains, and Hermione and Ginny had been injured earlier in the fight. He knew the scant details of what happened after Bellatrix knocked him out – that she had dueled with Kingsley, that Dumbledore had shown up and corralled the Death Eaters, except for Bellatrix, who Harry and Neville had given chase to. Then Voldemort himself had shown up, gotten into a bit of a fight, then attempted to use Legilimency against Harry before he was fought off. “Have you felt anything from Voldemort since then?”

Harry shook his head, “Nothing.”

“Do you think you severed it?” Sirius asked.

“I don't know,” Harry said. “It wasn't like the dreams. It was like he was able to talk through me,
but it hurt. I couldn't tell where I ended and he began.”

That was a disturbing thought if ever he'd heard one. “But you fought it,” Sirius said.

“I guess.” Harry frowned deeply. “I just kept thinking about seeing Ron and Hermione and you again, and something snapped, and he was just gone.”

That sounded worryingly impermanent. “But you're alright?”

Harry even smiled at that, “I'm not the one who's been in the hospital for two weeks.”

“You know that was just a precaution, after what happened with Crouch,” Sirius tried to assure him. “I was fine in a few days.”

“Tonks told me,” Harry confirmed. Someone really should have told him long before Tonks did.

“That'll be Dumbledore for you,” Sirius said, with a soft shrug. “I didn't see him today, though.”

“I haven't seen him since that morning,” Harry replied, swallowing audibly. “I, er, I yelled at him.”

Sirius couldn't help but laugh at that. He was acting so contrite – how many times had he managed to lose his temper with his professors, even once or twice around the headmaster? He was sure he wasn't the only one. “Dumbledore's a big boy,” he smiled, despite Harry's apparent confusion at his laughter. “I'm sure you're not the first teenager to yell at him.”

“He didn't seem mad about it,” Harry admitted. “We just talked about what happened, and the prophecy, and why he didn't want to be around me.”

Annoyance flared suddenly and unexpectedly. “Didn't want to be around you?”

“He said that he suspected that Voldemort would try and take control and didn't want to give him an incentive,” Harry explained, though he perhaps didn't agree that this was a good enough reason either. However, before he could address that, Harry went off on a tangent. “Did you know about the thing with my mother's blood when you asked me to stay with you?”

“No, I didn’t,” Sirius replied, honestly. It was something he hadn't been sure if Harry himself was aware of, but it seemed now he was. Perhaps he didn't want to stay here, after all. Had he misread things that badly?

“Dumbledore said that I needed to call it home, with the Dursleys, or else the protection won't work,” Harry said, dully.

Not misread, then. Simply misinterpreted.

“I didn't know about it then, but I do now, and if you're worried about the offer no longer being on the table because of it, you're wrong,” Sirius replied, as evenly as he could.

“But Dumbledore said-”

“Did this charm protect you at the graveyard?” Sirius interrupted, causing Harry's eyes to snap to him. He shook his head slowly. “Did it protect you in the Department of Mysteries?” More sure now, he shook his head again. “Then the protection is only there when you are there, and while that may have been a good idea if you were there all the time – and I stress the may have been – I don't think it's worth the cost.” He thought of this house, of his own tumultus teenage years, and steeled himself to continue in light of the remaining confusion on Harry's face. “If you're miserable
there, if you're relying on the 'convicted mass murderer' threat just to get through it, then is the cost of calling it home and having a single safe haven worth it? I can't stress the importance of having a place you can feel safe at home, but right now, it's only safe. I think giving you a place you can call home that feels like a real home has value too.” Harry was still staring at him, so he sighed and continued. “Having a safe place to hide is important, yes, I agree with Dumbledore on that front – but you are invisible in this house. You already have that protection here, a place to come to, should you need to be safe. Unless you want to go back -”

“I don't,” Harry replied, quickly.

“-Then you already have a place where you're safe, Voldemort be damned.” Sirius said, with a pronounced shrug. “He'd have to get it out of Dumbledore himself, and if I'd had the sense to let Dumbledore do it back when he offered for your parents, maybe they'd still be here. You have a safe place to return to – here - you deserve to have somewhere to feel at home, too. You're old enough to make that decision for yourself.”

There was a beat of silence before Harry was reminded to resume his attention to Buckbeak. “You're not staying here?” he asked.

“It's not my house,” Sirius pointed out, with some pride. “If that's worrying you, it shouldn't. Whatever my brother may have felt about your father, he's fond of you, and he knows that regardless of everything else, you have to be my priority. St. Mungo's can piss off, you are family.” He let the words sink in for a moment, beforeshrugging. “Besides, we got to get out before Emmeline decides to propose to stay in the house. I think the library has swayed her.”

Harry smiled weakly.

“It's still HQ,” Sirius reasoned. “And if we're going with people who've managed to hide themselves from Voldemort for the longest time, Regulus got the gold medal.”

“Not anymore,” Harry replied.

“No,” Sirius allowed. “But he chose that. He could have decided not to go after you and Neville, but he knew Bellatrix was dangerous and placed that above himself. He has the capacity for great selflessness, and if I didn't trust him, I wouldn't have asked him to get you today. He can be a bit thick sometimes, but he’s got a good heart when he remembers to listen to it.” He reached over to pat Buckbeak, who turned his head from him in apparent annoyance but didn't nip him. “But whatever you choose, it's not a decision you have to make right now. There's a lot to do.”

“What about the prophecy?” Harry asked.

Something almost forgotten in all of this, Sirius had to admit. He had filed away the knowledge from his brother that Harry was safe and the prophecy retrieved, so he had put it out of his mind. “What about it?”

“Do you know what it means?” Harry stopped, looking at him intently now. “Because I don't think I do have any great power...and I don't know how to kill him, and there's a bit of him in me that could have happened with Neville.”

“It could have,” Sirius agreed.

“But it didn't,” Harry said, flopping down beside the hippogriff suddenly, “Does that mean there's something wrong with me?”

With a heart tearing accuracy, he heard almost the same words reflect themselves - It just...feels
like there’s something wrong with me, Regulus had said to him only a week or so before, in response to his own difficulties living up to the path before him and being unsure if it was a path he wanted at all. Watching his godson try to grapple with a responsibility he shouldn't have, one he wouldn't have if that old bat had kept her mouth shut about prophecies, was more painful yet again. He wanted to reassure Harry, but he didn't fully understand what the hell was inside him. He needed to bring it up with Dumbledore tomorrow, and possibly with what looked like a reforming Ravenclaw rebellion.

Sirius stood up, offering Harry a hand to get up himself. “There is nothing wrong with you that can't be cured by hot chocolate and seeing your friends as soon as possible,” Sirius announced. “Why don't you go owl them? See if there's something you want to do. Maybe Diagon or something.”

“I was there today,” Harry said, taking his hand and pulling himself up.

Sirius hadn't expected a full outing had occurred. He supposed even Regulus could be swayed to go somewhere if it looked like there would be new books he could peruse in the vicinity. He’d certainly done it to get him to go somewhere plenty in their youth. “It doesn't have to be Diagon,” he commented.

“Actually, I saw something a bit weird,” When he looked up, Harry was frowning to himself. There was no end of weird things in Knockturn that might have crawled their way into Diagon. “I saw Draco Malfoy.”

“Is that unusual?” Sirius hadn't considered seeing another student outside school would be. Surely they would be frequent visitors.

“Well, no,” Harry admitted. “But he was with one of the other Slytherins, and he was showing them something.”

“In Diagon?” Sirius asked. That could be anything as well.

“No,” Harry said, “On his arm.”

What would be on his arm that - Shit.

That was just what they all needed, another set of kids from Hogwarts signing up to Voldemort's idiotic crusade. He didn't feel any particularly strong connection to the child - Narcissa was harmless, but they had never been close - but he knew that would hit Regulus hard. He loved her dearly, and keeping her son from making his mistakes had been a huge motivation for him. But it seemed he was already too late. Surely, he hadn't seen, or he'd be sulking in his bedroom already.

“I thought I told Regulus to keep an eye on you,” Sirius said, forcing a lighter tone.

“He did,” Harry said, looking a bit shifty. “He just said he'd be a couple of minutes, and I saw Malfoy, so-”

“You stalked him?” Sirius asked.

“He was acting suspiciously!” Harry insisted, loudly.

“He's a Malfoy,” Sirius snorted. Even among the most pureblood company, they were weird. “Is there a point where he doesn't act suspiciously?”

Harry deflated. “So you don't think it was anything?”
No, he definitely thought it was something, but he wanted to verify it before he got to admitting there was yet another Death Eater at Hogwarts. “Leave it with me, I'll mention it at the meeting tomorrow,” Sirius said.

Harry didn’t look all too happy about it, but seemed to not want to press it.

“Come on, he'd have you here all night,” Sirius said, looking at Buckbeak. “I'll go see if the swots are willing to break from their books long enough to consume hot chocolate, but I'm not holding my breath.”
On Saturday night, the Order of the Phoenix filed into its headquarters for its first full meeting in months.

Well, this was not completely true. Sirius, for one, actually lived there for the moment, thus didn't so much have to ‘file in’ as ‘file downstairs.’ Emmeline, who was currently staying there while looked for an alternative to her crime scene home, was still upstairs, nose deep in charms research she declined to discuss. Harry was not a member, and despite his grumpy insistence that, as the person who was likely to end up killing Voldemort, he ought to be, even Sirius knew it would be best to wait 'til he was seventeen. With any luck - not that they'd ever had much of that - it'd be over before that. Regulus was also elsewhere, and also not a member, but that could change tonight.

The first person through the door had been McGonagall. He'd heard about her being in the hospital, but she was clearly back to health and ready to get back into the action. She'd given him a tin of biscuits – chocolate shortbread that brought on the sense memory of sitting in her office – and ushered herself downstairs. Molly and Arthur came next, clearly in the midst of some sort of disagreement but refusing to show it publicly. Molly had asked if Bill had arrived yet, and when he hadn't, had gone back to talking to Arthur in pointed sentences. Sirius supposed when you'd been married that long, you just understood that sort of thing. Next in was Kingsley, dressed in unusually muggle clothes and waving the question away with a 'Later' at Sirius' curious look. Tonks followed minutes later, looking drab and colourless but also strangely nervous.

"Everyone here yet?" she asked, taking one of the shortbreads he'd left on the side table.

"Nah, it's still early," Sirius replied.

Seemingly deflated again – what the hell was going on with her – she disappeared down the back just as Moody showed up. He inquired if Sirius had gotten his wand (he had), if there'd been any trouble on his end (there hadn't), and who'd made the biscuits (McGonagall, which was sufficient enough even for Mad-Eye to take one). Dedalus popped in right after, and after inquiring if he was the last, practically beamed and headed downstairs.

However, it was upstairs that caught his attention. He heard something fall over and wondered if perhaps Harry'd run afoul of something in the house. He popped his head in on Emmeline, “Watch the door, will you?”

“'It's just the Order coming in,” she said in her Research voice, which meant she wasn't really listening.

“Or it's a Death Eater coming in since they're wondering why half the people on their hit list are coming into a pureblood stronghold,” Sirius replied.

She looked up finally, blinked twice, and said, “I'll go watch the door.”

It didn't take him long to realise it was Remus coming in by floo. They'd known he'd be short on time; he was undercover up north, and they didn't like magic, so floo seemed a better idea than apparition, so the drawing room had been temporarily connected by one of Arthur's friends in
magical transportation. He did look a bit worse for wear; it couldn't be easy on him, living in a way he'd always been afraid he'd have to, one day. Sirius pulled him into a tight hug and was pleased to find it returned.

“Everyone's heading downstairs,” Sirius said, pulling away from him. He still looked on with a little trepidation, but it couldn't be helped. No one was going to judge him for something he couldn't control here, or Sirius would end up smacking heads, same as he always did.

When he came back down the stairs, Hestia and Emmeline were talking quietly. Hestia gave her a quick hug and disappeared down the hall before Sirius could say hello. “Alright?”

Emmeline nodded, “I'm just getting a little tired of the question.”

Sirius could respect that. “Okay.”

Of course the next person in was Sturgis, who immediately inquired if Emmeline was doing alright. Sirius snorted despite himself, and Emmeline, ever the polite one of the McKinnon-Evans-Vance-Macdonald friendship, answered politely and directed him downstairs. Arabella followed, looking him over and declaring he needed a haircut before disappearing herself. Elphias, cordial as ever, soon joined.

Snape arrived with his usual glide in like he owned the bloody place. To Sirius' surprise, it was not him he seemed to look sourly at, but Emmeline. “Vance,” he sneered.

“Severus,” Emmeline replied, evenly.

He then pushed past them both, getting Sirius on the arm in a way that had to be deliberate.

“Alright, I know why he's a prick to me, but he's usually at least polite to you,” Sirius commented. Emmeline shrugged in response. Nothing about Snape made bloody sense, so he supposed this was just one more thing to add to him being a prat.

Finally, Bill arrived, and he and Emmeline both went downstairs. It wasn't the first time they'd been waiting on Dung, nor probably the last. He showed up only a few minutes late, wearing what Sirius was sure was actually a dress rather than robes and tapping his nose as he came in.

Then, as always, Dumbledore arrived last. He looked Sirius up and down, before nodding to himself. “You look well,” he said, peering over his glasses.

“Good as new,” Sirius said.

“And Harry?” His eyes flickered to the landing above. “I take it he is here.”

Sirius steeled himself. “He is.”

“I imagine that's a conversation we will need to have,” Dumbledore said, thoughtfully. “But not one for tonight. Lemon drop?”

Somewhat startled by that, as he had been expecting to have to hash it out, Sirius nodded and took the yellow sweet. He instantly felt his cheeks retract, and in case he got the wrong impression: “Really sour,” he said, around the sweet.

“Yes, from your face, I did guess that,” Dumbledore replied. “I thought perhaps if everyone were looking at each other that way, perhaps the animosity between you and Severus would not be as noticeable.”
Sirius almost choked on the sweet, but his tone and face both indicated it was a joke rather than a true chastisement.

Dumbledore indicated the hallway, “Shall we?”

“My friends,” Dumbledore addressed the now full group in the kitchen. “This is our first time meeting as a whole in some time, Hagrid notwithstanding.”

“Where is he?” Bill asked.

“With his brother,” Dumbledore replied. “Driving away the horrors of the last year at Hogwarts has been no easy task. However, Dolores Umbridge has now been returned to the Ministry.”

“They can't keep her on after what she did!” Molly exclaimed. “Have you seen poor Harry's hand?”

Sirius snapped to attention. “What do you mean?” The sudden silence in the room indicated there was something everyone seemed to know that he didn't. Irritation rising in him, Sirius again asked, “What about Harry's hand?”

“Oh, you haven't noticed,” Snape piped up, sounding entirely too amused. “What sort of godfather doesn't notice a bloody scar? Perhaps he should have been left where he was.”

Sirius reared to snap, but at the same time, Remus told him to sit down, and Dumbledore said Snape's name in a way that made his hair stand on end. Still, if something was wrong with Harry, he had a right to know. More to the point, why had Harry himself not told him?

“Excuse me a minute,” Sirius said.

“Sirius-” Remus began.

“Take only a minute,” Dumbledore said, with a tone of finality. Sirius fled from the room. It was as close to permission as he was going to get.

Sirius found Harry holed away in the room he'd been using with Ron. He looked at Sirius expectantly, considering he'd just taken the stairs two at a time to rush up here and was looking him over.

“Harry-” Sirius started, then finding himself unsure of how to continue. He walked over, looking down at his hands and catching a glimpse of redness, just by his oversized sleeves. He reached over, taking Harry's hand and turning it over. “What is that?”

“It's nothing,” Harry said, giving a tug against his arm, but Sirius was having none of it. He pulled his sleeve up— it looked like writing, Harry's writing, but it was scar red— but before he could read it, Harry said, “Don’t-” tried to pull his hand away, and pulled the sleeve over it.

Inside Sirius' head, a flash memory went off (It had been too hot, it was the middle of July, and he'd rolled the sleeves on his shirt up, but his mother had been telling him off every time she saw it, it wasn't dignified, he was embarrassing her, she took his wrist firmly enough it'd hurt, and pulled them down again, “Don't,” he'd complained, when she fastened them magically so he wouldn't do it again, because he was uncomfortable, and embarrassed, and-) and he instantly let go. This was why he would never inflict himself on having children - he never wanted them to feel as if they were just objects to be pulled about, dressed up, paraded, and robbed of autonomy; and sometimes, he couldn't recognise that in himself until it was already happening.
“I’m sorry,” he said, as sincerely as he could. “I just want to know what that is.”

“It’s not anything,” Harry said. “It was just Umbridge.”

That didn't make any sense at all. “Umbridge wrote on you?” It wasn't Umbridge's handwriting, and it didn't look much like it'd been inked on. “Harry, please?”

He watched as Harry went through several blotchy emotions without meeting his eye, before finding some sort of strength and lifting the jumper (he really needed some clothes that actually fit him, Sirius noted mentally). It was Harry's writing, alright. His stomach lurched, because that was not ink, that was scarring, what in the hell-

*I must not tell lies.*

Cold fury curdled in his stomach.

“Why didn't you say anything?” Sirius asked, quietly.

“I told you,” Harry said. “She made me do lines.”

“On *yourself*?” Sirius asked, with utter horror.

“No, but when I wrote it on paper, it'd come on my hand,” Harry muttered.

“You should have told me,” Sirius whispered, putting his finger on it lightly. At least he didn't wince. He must have at least treated it quickly.

“You would've come up,” Harry replied, not looking at him.

“Of course I would have!” Sirius said, fiercely, before he realised that this was the problem. Even now, it seemed like Harry was afraid of something happening to him far more than he was afraid of something happening to himself. It made his heart ache, and he vowed silently that he'd try to make it up to him, even if it took him the rest of his life. “Harry-” he started, then deflated. “I had to hear about it from Snape.”

It had the desired effect – Harry both smiled and looked embarrassed. “Sorry,” he shuffled. “Is the meeting over?”

Sirius shook his head. “No, and I better get back to it. I'll be up soon.”

“It is now that we must come to a different business all together, and discuss those who have requested to join our number.”

Sirius took a deep breath, aware that this may be something he was going to have to fight about. However, he was beaten to the punch by Arthur speaking.

“Both Fred and George have asked to have their names put forward,” he said quietly before Molly interrupted.

“They're too young!” Molly replied. “They're barely out of school!”

“They're eighteen,” Arthur replied, in a resigned tone that said perhaps he wasn't too happy about the idea either. “And this is their choice.”

“They're certainly innovative,” Kingsley said, in a pondering tone. “Assuming half of what is
supposed to be coming out of that shop actually works.”

“It works,” Arthur confirmed, and if Sirius were not mistaken, there was a gleam of pride about that.

“They managed to listen into part of the meetings last year,” Sirius reminded them. “That takes cleverness.”

“And a complete disregard for the rules of secrecy,” Emmeline pointed out.

“Where is it you work again?” Sirius challenged.

Emmeline rolled her eyes. “I don’t doubt that they’re bright, nor talented. Just if they have the maturity to handle this. It takes a toll.”

“They wind people up, but they’re loyal to a fault,” Bill said. “They just want to help. Give them a productive way to help, and they’ll do that instead. They’re better when they’re focussed on something.”

In his experience, Sirius had to agree. Once they’d realised that Regulus had been putting up alarms, they’d been men possessed trying to trigger them all to see what they would do.

“If what you want is to play dangerous jokes,” Snape muttered.

“Many a Death Eater was taken down by a prank,” Sirius replied, coldly. It was true; when they had all stayed together, the four of them (he shoved down the anger for the moment and focussed on Remus, James, and himself) had decked out the safe houses in a variety of jokes and pranks that Death Eaters had a tendency to run into and get caught, just as surely as any Slytherin had when they’d been at school. Possibly because it was mostly the same people.

“We will vote,” Dumbledore said, placing the container for each of them to place an answer into. “As we have agreed, we will extend them an invitation, should they choose to accept it.”

There were a few murmurs, and even Moody rolled his eye, but they seemed to accept it.

Now or never, Sirius thought to himself. He cleared his throat, “I think by now, everyone knows what I’m about to say.” Dumbledore nodded in assent. “When I first raised the issue of working with him almost a year ago, I couldn’t have said for sure whether it was the right decision. But since then, most of you have gotten to form your own opinions of Regulus, and whether you believe he ought to be allowed entrance in the Order. So this time, I’m asking, and I do so feeling confident that it’s the right decision.”

“What’s changed?” Kingsley asked.

“I believe he has,” Sirius replied, ignoring a sound of derision from the greasiest corner of the room with great difficulty. “He has gone hunting for things to help bring Voldemort down; he has worked with a few of you to that end, and with Harry. He chose to join the foray at the Department of Mysteries knowing that it would cost him his secrecy, and when lives were in danger, faced not only Bellatrix Lestrange, the woman I’ve always feared would hold the sway to get him back in line, but Voldemort himself, to get Neville and Harry to safety. He tried to help with the Brockdale Bridge, and did help in Mulciber’s arrest. Every choice he has made has been in service of trying to take down Voldemort and protect the magical world, which has always been our mandate.”
“It's not his present that worries us,” Sturgis said, quietly. “It's his past.”

Sirius nodded, accepting that. “He's not claiming he didn't join the Death Eaters, nor do things that would – should – have gotten him a one way ticket to Azkaban. But he was also fifteen years old when he took that title, and-”

“FIFTEEN?” Molly squawked, horror clouding her face.

“Are you sure?” Sturgis asked, looking a little taken aback himself.

“I'm sure,” Sirius replied. “It was the year after I left, and he had a fool idea that he could just fix everything by trying to be what everyone wanted. What Bellatrix wanted was a Death Eater.”

“This is no longer an issue?” Kingsley inquired.

“It's something he's learned to deal with, and tries to combat,” Sirius said, as truthfully as he could. “We all have our weaknesses, but given the choice to collapse under the pressure, he rose to the occasion as a seventeen-year-old, and again, a few weeks ago. He has learned strength I didn't realise he had. He's trying to make up for his mistakes. I say we let him.”

“How touching,” Snape commented, with an eye roll.

“And it also gives him a nice way out of those consequences and a neat hiding place,” Mad-Eye said, in a hard voice.

“We're none of us angels, are we?” Sirius said, a little more barb to his tone. “We've all made mistakes, and some of them large enough that it would get us all in the shit if we were caught. Some of us already paid that price.” Unconsciously, his eyes drifted to Sturgis, who looked away from him. “If you want to be pragmatic about it, having a Death Eater piss off and come back without dying shows it can be done. He won't be the only one wanting out of that situation, and if we can deprive Voldemort of more of his followers, it sounds like a good deal to me.”

“You've probably spent more time with him than anyone else,” Hestia said, looking towards Emmeline. “What do you think?”

Emmeline looked down at the floor for a silent moment before she nodded. “I've changed my mind,” she said. “I can't say who he was before, only who he is now. Obsessive, a little reckless, but bright, willing to listen, and above all else, compassionate. He shows true remorse for what happened before and actively tries to be better. I don't believe we can ask more of him. If he wants to be here, to me, he has a place.”

“What makes you sure he's not playing some elaborate game?” Mad-Eye said.

“I'm not sure,” Emmeline said, openly. “But I don't believe he's faking what is clearly signs of trauma and distress. While I believe that these actions should have consequences, and they have, I don't believe they are all he can be judged by. We are all here for the same reason: to stop Voldemort. I believe him when he says the same.”

Kingsley still looked troubled. “I accept that about his past, but he clearly still holds some belief in pureblood elitism. I fear that this makes him susceptible.”

“He doesn't treat me differently,” Tonks replied, quietly.

“But he also hasn't gone out of his way to say differently,” Kingsley pointed out. “There's a difference between manners and beliefs.”
Tonks nodded at that.

“I don't think it's pureblood that's causing him pause, but his own,” Sirius said, suddenly very aware that very few people in the Order had experience of a childhood like his own. “Legacy was always everything. You've all seen that blasted tapestry; it's a measure of immortality and belonging, and something to feel special about. I don't think it's that he truly thinks any blood is less than another, but more he's a bit pretentious about his own family tree.”

“The problem isn't that he thinks purebloods are better than any other blood,” Bill asked, “but that his own is special? Because that might be even worse.”

“No, and I think he knows that it's not really his blood that gives him merit,” Sirius said. Damn it, this was so hard to explain without context. “But it's a difficult thing to admit, that you're not as special as you think you are.”

“He broke away from the Death Eaters,” Emmeline said, and to his surprise, he found her glancing at Snape of all people. “It's plenty special.”

“It is,” Sirius agreed, glaring daggers at Snape to make sure he knew he was not included in that statement. He'd only fled when it looked like they were losing. “It's going to take time to get all the shit out of his head. Even I have been known to screw it up once in a while.”

“Really?” Tonks asked.

Sirius looked to Remus to confirm it, but he shied away. He'd been uncharacteristically silent the whole night, actually. “I once used that word on Dorcas while drunk off my ass at eighteen.” He grinned when he said it. “She hit me hard enough she almost knocked out a tooth, but she knew it was just something I was trying to rewrite in my head.” There was a soft murmur among the old guard, which even Dung seemed to wake from his half-slumber to grin about. “It takes time, and it takes challenging it, and it takes support. I know he's my brother, but I'd be the first one to tell you if I thought he was going to screw this up.”

“Albus?” McGonagall said.

“He was instrumental in helping verify some of the more obscure things about Voldemort,” Dumbledore replied, “but the decision, as always, lies with all of you as much as with me.” Once again, the pot was put into the room. “I suggest you cast your votes.”

Regulus was in the drawing room when the Order meeting ended, his attention flicking downward as the rustles and chatter rose from the ground floor. A sort of nervousness buzzed around him - nervousness born from the uncertainty of closed door conversations - and though his interactions with the individual Order members had been, for the most part, positive, he had little comparison point by which to judge how their opinions shook out when he was not physically present. Sirius had been there, and Emmeline, and Dumbledore, as well as Lupin and Tonks…

…and Severus, though Regulus wondered - uncomfortably - if Severus would be a vote in favour or a vote against, in a matter like this. His old friend had never been easy to read, but Severus seemed more a challenge than ever, on that front. For a member of the Order, he did not seem to like the organization very much.

Just a few minutes later, Regulus heard footsteps approaching, pattering a fresh drumming of nerves in his chest as he folded over the most recent letter from Julien, smoothing it against the side table. As he lifted his eyes to the doorway, he saw that it was his brother, stepping inside.
Sirius shut the door behind him, not a common thing for him to do in most rooms, let alone a more socially-inclined place like the drawing room. It seems they, too, were about to have a closed door conversation. He sat down before he spoke. "You have an extended invitation," Sirius said, "Normally, this would call for being pulled into the charm, but since you're already here, it's a bit anticlimactic."

Slowly, Regulus let loose a sigh, breathing out some of the wrangled anxiety bunched up in his mind. They had said yes - most of them, at least - and though he did not like to show how hurtful it would have felt for the Order to shut the door in his face now, he could not help the cooling wash of relief. With a nod, Regulus responded, "A bit… but truthfully, with all of the excitement lately, I think I am quite alright with that."

"Yes," Sirius said, frowning despite the affirmation. "So was it simply Narcissa's son, or the woman herself, that caused you and Harry to linger in Diagon yesterday?"

"Harry said he needed owl supplies for Hedwig, so I took him," Regulus explained, supposing that Harry must have mentioned their outing. "I did take the opportunity to speak with Narcissa briefly, as Andromeda recommended, but we weren't there for long, and I sent Harry straight into Eeylops."

Sirius gave a bark of laughter, "And you think he actually went straight to Eeylops?"

Crinkling his nose, Regulus responded a little defensively, "I watched him walk to the shop, but I did not follow him inside. He said he had things to buy."

Sirius shook his head, but he didn't seem particularly annoyed about it. "He must have doubled back the moment you weren't looking. Impressive, but I'd have done the same thing, of course. Did you manage to speak to Narcissa about her son?"

"We did not discuss him specifically," Regulus said, thinking back to his cousin and her varying degrees of distress. They had both expressed their concerns for Draco, in regards to the resurfacing war, but nothing at length. "The conversation was quite short, and mostly focused on my situation in particular. Why?"

Sirius clenched his jaw, then ran a hand over his face. "Because Harry saw him showing one of his friends something on his arm that he seemed to think was worthy of boasting about," he said, quietly.

Immediately, Regulus deflated, rubbing a hand over his face in a subconscious mirror of his brother, mouth falling to a sudden, deepening frown. In his mind's eye, he could see despair darkening Narcissa's face, grey eyes wet as a thunderstorm.

'I don't want you to get hurt, but Draco-

(If Draco had joined, then his danger-)

'Why...did you join?'

She had looked so upset, but Regulus had thought perhaps it was just distress for her husband; mere weeks had passed, but without a word from the boy himself, Regulus could imagine all too well the motivations a teenager in his position might feel, and dread turned hot in his stomach.

"I was afraid that would happen," Regulus admitted, uncertain if he was more angry with the Dark Lord, or with himself for not prioritising an intervention sooner when he saw this coming a year prior. "She was very distressed, but I assumed it was a continued distress on behalf of Lucius, and..."
fear for how my and Lucius's behaviour as of late might affect their situation in a general sense, but I did not realise it had already escalated to such an extent…”

"I know," Sirius agreed. "But it doesn't change anything. The quicker Voldemort goes down, the less chance of that kid ruining his life and ending up like his father."

Miserably, Regulus nodded, and though it was simple enough to say, ruin could befall a teenage Death Eater all too quickly, especially if there was something to prove. ('You're going to make it worse.') He grimaced. "I suppose that is one means of motivation."

"What else can you do?" Sirius reasoned, before a completely situationally inappropriate smile spread across his face. "Short of going over there, dragging him out despite both Narcissa and her sister, knocking him out, and waiting the war out."

“I am still puzzling out options,” Regulus answered with a thoughtful frown. “I had hoped to outpace the Mark… and perhaps if I had acted more quickly…” He shook his head.

"He wouldn't have listened," Sirius said, sounding extremely sure. "I'm not saying the similarities aren't disturbing: a sixteen-year-old with a family name viewed as tarnished, wishing to return it to good standing and trying to protect what remains of his family. But he is not you - you need more information before you start planning exit strategies for a boy you've never met."

“Well, technically-” Regulus paused the thought, and though he recalled his brief conversation with Draco within the walls of Hogwarts, he was not certain if he ought to admit as much. The interaction had not suggested Draco particularly wanted a way out, but Draco would not know what was coming… “I just don't like the idea of leaving him to it."

"He'll be at Hogwarts in a month and a half," Sirius said, apparently not latching onto to the ‘technically’. "It should buy a little time, especially if Harry decides he wants to keep stalking him. It just means trying to work a little more quickly. I don't want to rush Harry into anything he isn't ready for, but I also don't want circumstances to do it for me, and he’s already had to fight Voldemort more than once."

Regulus nodded, sighing heavily. "More quickly would be preferable, yes."

"Speaking of," Sirius said, sitting forward with his elbows on his knees. "Don't do that again. If Harry wants to go somewhere, fine, but someone in the Order must always know where he is if he isn't here or at school. I don't fancy you going up against Bellatrix again any time soon, and I don't know when the next attack will come, or if Voldemort will show up himself again."

Regulus lifted his brow. “Not that I don't think he should be kept safe, and I imagine well that the Dark Lord is offended that the Killing Curse didn't work - but doesn't that seem a little bit excessive?”

"No." Sirius left no room at all for discussion on that. "Harry was marked for death the moment he was born. Back when Voldemort was powerful last time, by the time Harry was a year old, the attacks were coming every few weeks. That could've been Wormtail, but I take no risks here. Now that he's back to the Boy Who Lived in the press, it could start again."

Regulus's brow further thoughtfully. “What do you mean, ‘marked for death the moment he was born’?”

Sirius sighed heavily and lifted his eyes to the door before looking back. "Maybe not from birth, but from that first attack, we knew." He swallowed thickly. "Voldemort's downfall was foreseen in
1980. The record of the prophecy could only be retrieved from the Department of Mysteries by the subject of the prophecy itself - Harry. She saw everything - the scar, the fights James and Lily had against him, and...that it must be by his hand, or he'll survive."

A look of dawning realisation tugged on Regulus features. Prophecy. “So the prophecy we whisked away from the Department of Mysteries detailed Harry as the one who must kill the Dark Lord, or the Dark Lord would inevitably come back again?” That did not seem right - the horcruxes were the thing keeping the Dark Lord ‘alive,’ were they not? Though Regulus supposed, technically, Harry had been the one to kill him as a baby, too. Perhaps the Dark Lord merely wanted to protect against the possibility of this boy successfully killing him multiple times… Normally, this would seem paranoid, even by Regulus’s own standards, but he supposed if a baby could manage to kill him once, perhaps paranoia was not the correct word for it. “If all of you were aware of the prophecy from the start, why was having the physical record important? Was there something else to it?”

"It's a long story," Sirius admitted, fidgeting as he often did when he was uncomfortable. "When the prophecy was made, it listed a set of details, not names. Voldemort heard about the prophecy, but only part of it. He knew that it would be a baby born at the end of July, whose parents had fought him three times and lived. Only James and Lily, and Frank and Alice could claim that and had a baby born at the end of July. All he knew was that either Harry or Neville would have, to quote, the power to vanquish him. He stacked his odds on Harry being the greater threat, but he still has never heard the full prophecy, and as you can imagine, he wants to. The record wasn't made by us. I didn't hear it directly; I was told by James, who was told by Dumbledore, who was present when it happened. The record was by the Ministry, so Voldemort had to figure out a way to get it out. That's what the fight was about."

“Then we know the full extent of the prophecy now?”

“Dumbledore didn't play it for everyone to listen to, no. Harry's heard it, now." Sirius winced at the thought of it, perhaps not keen on even that. "I don't like that it makes it sound as if this is something he alone can do. I didn't think it could be harder to think of than when he was small enough to fit in the crook of my arm, but seeing him now...He's fought so much already - the thing attaching itself to his Defense teacher, the diary, in the graveyard, and then Voldemort possessing him in the Department of Mysteries. Whatever it is that's inside him, whatever powers were given to him that night, I don't care. I just want him to survive this, and that means that you always, always take back up."

Regulus fought a shudder - Whatever it is that's inside him - and steeled his expression to any reaction. It was, perhaps, executed a little too stonily, but the fresh wave of dread was not something he wanted to draw Sirius’s attention to more readily than it already was. Though the prospect of a horcrux lodging into baby Harry Potter was still theoretical at best, he could not help the plaguing suspicion that it might well be true. With the chaos of so many other concerns, he had buried the unpleasant thought, but if it was true, there had to be some sort of implications...perhaps implications that the prophecy might hint at, if an informed ear were to hear them.

With a steadying breath, Regulus nodded. “I apologise for the lightness of security. I did not realise his situation was quite so dire and targeted.”
"I know. I'm not upset with you. I just couldn't explain without drawing Order information into it, and didn't expect Harry to wander." Sirius nodded, and seemed to settle himself from the tightness he'd been holding. "You should come downstairs. Molly's decided to cook, and now that they're allowed to, I'm positive the resident swots will have a thousand things they'll want to ask your opinion on in regards to their Order-related research. Assuming the shuffling I heard a few minutes ago wasn't Remus legging it again, that is."

Though the thought of the Dark Lord's fragmented soul lodging itself into Harry's head was not fully brushed from Regulus's mind, he felt some measure of a lightening smile on his face. "I would like that. The research, that is, not Remus legging it. I'm sure I can muster an opinion or two."

"Yeah, I thought you might." Sirius snorted, obviously amused. He stood up with a shake, perhaps trying to get the pervasive heaviness of the conversation away from him. "Come on. Catch enough of them, and you can try and figure out who voted yes and who voted no, I know you're dying to know."

At the corner, Regulus's mouth quirked up. "You're right. I am, a bit. What was the ratio of yes to no?" he asked as he, too, stood from his chair.

"Go do your own dirty work," Sirius replied, waving him off. "I want to go check on Harry. I came running up earlier, and I think I upset him."

Regulus thought to himself that it would be annoying to try to pre-verify his accuracy if he did not know the ratio, but he supposed he could manage. He could not speak to Harry's degree of upset, so instead, he said, "Alright, then. I shall see what I can deduce."

Downstairs, a portion of the Order remained in the dining room. Regulus could hear their voices before he could see their faces, though no voice carried so much as to bother his mother's portrait as he slipped past. A strange nervousness (anxiety? embarrassment?) pattered in his chest, though he filtered the feeling off of his face before stepping through the still-open door.

Severus was the first person he noticed to be missing, just as he always was, following an Order meeting, but Regulus felt a stab of hurt, nonetheless. Hogwarts was closed for the summer, and no burning call had snaked up his own arm, so the likelihood of some pressing engagement was low. It had not occurred to Regulus that perhaps he could have asked Severus for his thoughts on the Order, from the perspective of a Death Eater gone spy, but Regulus felt so certain that joining was his best option that asking for (what was certain to be) a negative option had not even crossed his mind. There was no face to study, but Regulus wondered again if Severus had voted to admit or reject.

About half of the Order's numbers remained, from the look of it. Hestia, Sturgis, Dedalus, and the three attending Weasleys were chatting amongst themselves in smaller pairings and bunches - and Emmeline, of course, though the current living arrangement supported her lingering tendencies even more thoroughly than in the past.

Perhaps, then, it was natural that she was the first person to notice him, breaking away from her conversation with Sturgis to walk over. She smiled warmly. "Excited or nervous?"

Some measure of tension melted from Regulus's face at her approach as a small, slanting smile lightened his own expression. "I haven't decided yet."

"Just ask your questions when you have them. We won't bite," Emmeline promised. "We may be vigilantes flouting the letter of the law, but we're not rude."
“It has been a mostly amicable experience, thus far,” he said, though his experiences with Auror Moody and ‘Dung’ were not exceedingly positive, and interactions with Severus were confusing at best, the majority of the members had been somewhere between neutral and pleasant, which was sufficient for him, at least as things were. “And I expect there will be no shortage of questions.”

“Is there anything burning that I can help with now?” Emmeline asked.

Regulus thought of Harry's scar, of the horcruxes and the prophecy. Strangely, he found himself curious what insight Emmeline might have on something like the horcruxes - whether from the realm of an Unspeakable, or merely the extent of her own thoughts - but surrounded by lingering members of the Order did not feel like the time or place. “The most pressing might be a question for Dumbledore,” Regulus responded, tipping his head. “For the moment, I suppose it’s a matter of settling into the idea.”

“He has Defense interviews next week, so he should be around after that,” Emmeline replied, giving her head a shake at him. “But come join in, if you want - actually, you’ve just reminded me of something. Sturgis!”

Sturgis turned around mid-chew and put the back of his hand to his face, “Mhmph?”

Emmeline apparently spoke that particular language. “Do you still have that workshop in Peckham?”

Sturgis nodded and swallowed at the same time. He shot a look in Arthur Weasley’s direction, then back again.

“Any chance under all that junk you’ve still got Benjy’s camera?” Emmeline asked.

“Probably?” he said.

“Can I have it, if you do?” Emmeline replied.

“Sure?” Sturgis asked more than answered.

“Excellent,” Emmeline brightened at the idea. “Next time we go space-hunting, we can take our own pictures. Possibly also one or two for posterity to prove you’ve tried camping.”

“I’m not so certain that camping is something I want proof of,” Regulus quipped back wryly, though his voice was coloured with amusement as they shifted back toward the group.

"Perhaps there's an outdoorsy person hiding within you," Emmeline replied, with fake sincerity. "You just need camping to bring it out."

"Who's going camping?" Bill piped up, drawing attention to the two of them.

"I thought it'd be a good way to see the Northern Lights," Emmeline said, with a bit of defensiveness tinging her tone. "And he's never been."

"You hate camping," Sturgis frowned. "You said if you wanted to sleep in an insect ridden, foul smelling, noisy place without drinkable water, you'd go back to living in Knockturn."

"When I was twenty!" Emmeline huffed.

"Sounds exciting." Bill smiled.

Emmeline seemed to take that as a cue to smile back. "It's just some stargazing. You don't see them
properly in the city."

"So you'd rather go to a remote area up north to watch the stars?" Hestia raised her eyebrows, looking as if she was trying to fight a laugh. "How secluded."

Emmeline looked daggers at her. "That is the point of getting away from the city."

"Indeed. One must find a remote spot for something like the Northern Lights," Regulus leveled, thinking that Hestia did look quite a bit like she was teasing them, even without acknowledgment of Emmeline's sudden scowl. Though he could feel a little fluster within himself (secluded was an accurate assessment), his manner was mild and matter-of-fact as he added, "If the extensive, unnatural lighting was not enough of a barrier, there is the persistent fog and the comparative distance."

"Aye," Sturgis said, interrupting whatever conversation Emmeline and Hestia seemed to be having with their eyebrows. "That'll be the dementors."

The statement seemed to sober the room. "Then it's true," Hestia said, glumly. "They are no longer guarding Azkaban."

Bill shook his head, "No, Tonks said tonight it's why the Aurors spread so thin."

With a soured expression, Regulus felt cold dread trickling in little streams. No dementors guarding Azkaban meant that the Death Eaters sent there were significantly less contained - and however much he had wished better for Narcissa and her son, in regards to losing Lucius, that was not what Regulus had in mind. "That is...very unfortunate."

"That's what the fog's about," Sturgis made a face of disdain. "Breeding dementors."

Bill looked a little disturbed. "I think I'll see Mum and Dad home, just in case."

"Good idea," Hestia replied. "Poor Tonks and Kingsley."

"Poor anyone who don't have a workable patronus," Bill sighed. "Mum has terrible trouble with her concentration, she worries."

Hestia nodded. "How is yours coming along, Regulus? Remus mentioned he'd done a little tutoring."

“I believe it is going well,” Regulus answered with a nod of acknowledgment, chilling though it was to imagine a dementor breeding ground without a corporeal patronus at his disposal. (A situation he might have found himself in, had this occurred a year prior. He did not much like the thought.) “We covered the corporeal patronus at the beginning of the year, and more recently, the mechanics of the patronus as a means of communication.”

"And yet, you're only now joining the Order," Bill said, with a smile. "It's like you did all the extracurriculars first."

"Are you sure you're not a Ravenclaw?" Sturgis asked.

"He's definitely a Slytherin," Emmeline replied for him, "Everything from the ornaments to the bedroom furnishings."

Hestia went pink and coughed, "Bedroom?"
"Oh, Merlin." Emmeline rolled her eyes.

“She is implying nothing inappropriate,” Regulus clarified, smothering a rush of embarrassment, thinking that it was probably best to put distance between themselves and the comment but unable to stop himself from turning his glance to Emmeline to ask: “Though I can’t recall discussing bedroom decor, so how do even know that?”

"Were you being nosy again?" Hestia asked, clearly not put off by the comments at all.

"No! Well, yes, usually, I am, but not in this case. There’s a sign on the door, and it seemed a bit rude to ignore," Emmeline said, with enough long-windedness to show her fluster before she turned her attention back to him. "I know yours the same way I know Sirius’s is red and gold - he said so. We’ve been friends since we were at school together. I think I’ve heard all of the Sirius Black Rants About His Childhood, Purism, and the General Terribleness of Slytherins monologues at least thrice. I imagine of all of us who are still here, only Remus has me beat."

After the briefest thoughtful pause, Regulus granted a nod. Though he probably ought to be more offended, somehow it just seemed obvious, when put that way. “I can believe that.”

"Some of us have some respect for personal boundaries." Emmeline looked towards Hestia. "Honestly, Hes. No wonder Tonks ran; you’re turning into a bigger gossip than Rosmerta."

“Tonks?” Regulus lifted his brow. Aesthetic and glum demeanor aside, he hadn’t noticed a change in her attendance from the outside. In light of Emmeline’s comment, he wondered if perhaps Tonks did not like Hestia’s teasing, though she did not seem particularly delicate in that respect.

Emmeline soon sated his curiosity, leaning over to whisper quietly, "She has a little crush, and it's making her gloomy."

"I think it's sweet." Hestia smiled, clearly taking no notice at all. "Maybe a quick fling would do them some good. It's not as if she proposed."

"I suppose that's a step up. Everyone was getting married at the drop of a hat last time," Emmeline replied, with a shrug. "It was like they couldn't wait, in case they didn't make it."

"Most of them were right," Sturgis replied, soberingly.

"Never mind killing them, you just killed the celebratory mood," Emmeline replied. "You'd think it was you lot planning a funeral, not me, and I'm hexing anyone who asks me how I am."

Bill broke the silence. "What are we celebrating?"

"New recruits, new beginnings, and the research parties to come." Emmeline did a toast movement with her glass.

At that, Regulus offered a little smile, and for all the anxieties that had bundled, for at least a moment he had forgotten to care what the acceptance ratio had been, instead settling into the clinking ‘cheers’ to follow.

Sirius was surprised to find Harry asleep with his face smushed up against the window and his glasses askew. In the moment, Sirius was struck by how much like James he looked, and he had to try and shake it off. This wasn't the time for his chest to ache; they were celebrating. He thought about waking him and moving him, but he supposed Harry was comfortable how he was, and he could check on him before they all went up. It seemed Remus had indeed left without saying
goodbye. Not at all usual for him. Maybe he was more spooked by Greyback than Sirius had originally thought.

At the bottom of the stairs, he came face to face with Molly and steeled himself for a barrage. Instead, she merely asked after Harry and asked if he was still planning on going to Burrow. Sirius wasn't sure, as they hadn't talked about it, but he was sure he'd want to see Ron either way and promised he'd remind Harry to owl about it tomorrow, as he was asleep now. He then found Bill and Regulus being absorbed by the Ravenclaw collective and chatting quietly. He was surprised to find his younger brother looked neither out of place nor particularly uncomfortable. He had thought perhaps he'd get on well with that group, but seeing him chat, seeing him the day before just automatically helping Emme with her books, or seeing him amused and showing it openly - it was strange. In a good way.

It just made him wonder how much he'd managed to miss in the last two and a half weeks.

"What am I missing?" Sirius asked, looking at them.

"Just talking about quickie marriages," Emmeline explained, taking a drink of what looked worryingly like water.

In a stark moment, Sirius thought of Tonks in horror. "Why, who's pregnant?"

"No one," Bill replied. "But I am getting married. We just haven't announced it."

Racking his brain to remember who he'd said he was going out with, back when they were snowball fighting. "To Fleur Delacour?"

Bill nodded in assent.

"Congratulations," Sirius said, "She's terrifying."

“That’s Sirius Black for ‘she’s lovely’,” Emmeline translated, which was true and wasn’t. The girl was a Triwizard champion; she was formidable; and if she was working at Gringotts, she must be bright, too.

Regulus then turned his attention to Sirius in turn. “How is Harry?”

Pleased that he thought to ask, Sirius smiled. “He’s fine. He’s tired, but it’s been a long year for him. Not to mention he ended up having to deal with Voldemort setting up camp in his head through his OWL exams, and he's heart set on the Auror programme.”

“OWLs are no joke,” Hestia replied with a shudder. “One of the girls in my year ended up with a T.”

“I think our father would have asked for a paternity check if we’d gotten below an E,” Sirius chuckled.

Regulus’s mouth turned up a little at the corner. “You have to admit, it would have been a cause for alarm.”

"Yes, the two family trademarks of either being academic or bit of a slag." Sirius nodded with a fake solemnity. Even Andromeda had still been a teenager when she fell pregnant with Tonks, not to mention their uncle, grandfather, great-great-great grandfather, and the list did tend to go on.

"That explains it," Sturgis said, which meant someone needed to get him away from the bubbly
"I don't know which you're implying I am, but either way, I'm offended." Honestly, he wasn't sure what was worse - being a musky library dweller or not understanding what contraception was.

Sturgis shrugged. "Just what people said, reputation-wise."

"If I've ever had a reputation for swottish behaviour, I'll eat my own wand," Sirius grumbled, because he had been careful not to, thanks very much. "And Merlin only knows where people would have gotten the idea I can't keep my clothes on."

"Probably the streaking," Emmeline made an extremely uncomplimentary face. Beside her, Regulus's expression went a little bit judgemental, flicking a glance over.

"It was once, twenty years ago."

"I imagine they'll be quick," Emmeline shrugged. "People wander about down there and touch things they shouldn't. That a group of OWL students-"

"-and Ginny and Luna," Bill interjected.

"Luna's the only one I don't know," Sirius interrupted, recalling his conversation earlier with Harry.

"Luna Lovegood. She's in Ginny's year," Bill replied. "A bit odd, but they're fond of her."

"Her father does the Quibbler," Emmeline said. "That's where the article Harry did was originally posted before the Prophet picked it up. Don't read the rest of it. I love unravelling a good conspiracy as much as anyone, but I like to think I ground it in reality. Besides, we've already established Regulus is the musical person in your family and thus has a much better chance of secretly being Stubby Boardman than you do."

Sirius half-choked on his drink at the image, bending over and coughing to stop himself from outright laughing.

"That would have been one way to fabricate a cover," Regulus said wryly, shaking his head.

"Bill?" Arthur's voice came from behind.

"I better see them home." Bill waved his goodbyes, glancing around at the group of them.

"We ought to pack up as well," Hestia said. "Going about in the dark doesn't seem like a great idea. Research on Friday?"

"Friday," Emmeline confirmed.

"I'll walk down with you," Sturgis offered. Privately, Sirius thought Hestia would probably be more formidable in a fight, but he supposed people could change in over a decade. Sturgis had been part of Harry's guard. "See you."
With the dwindling number as people began to head out into the night, Sirius managed to calm his own budding anxiety about Remus leaving without saying a word with distraction. "Did you figure out what Snape had his bloomers in a bunch over?" he asked Emmeline.

Emmeline shook her head, "It's not as if we really socialise, but I can't think of anything I've done specifically."

Lifting his eyebrows, Regulus looked between them. “Did something happen?”

"Snape usually saves his jeers for me," Sirius sighed, dramatically before leaning into the shudder. "No, I can't even pretend that."

Emmeline pointedly ignored him. "He was just being a little more-"

"- of a prick-" Sirius interrupted.

"- sharp than usual with me," Emmeline said. "But so help me if it's because he was friends with Mulciber at school, he can be as sharp as he likes about it. He deserved to get the book thrown at him."

Expression souring to a frown, Regulus nodded - slight but firm. “It needed to happen. Pardon my bluntness, but he had already committed two murders under that roof and presumably intended you to be a third, so it isn’t fair for Severus to treat you sharply over it.” The frown slanted downward a little further.

"I understand the difficulty in letting go of friends despite what they've done," Emmeline said, though her expression hardened. "But the problem with that is that Mulciber was always like that! I hear that voice, and I instantly know I want to take points away. What's an appropriate number of points for murdering two innocent people?"

"McGonagall and Flitwick did give points to the DA from the battle," Sirius replied. He couldn't answer that question. First and foremost because he refused to climb into Snape's head, but also because there came a time to let people go. Preferably into several pieces. "Though with Umbridge, I think the Gryffindor streak has broken. Still won Quidditch; apparently, Ginny’s a decent seeker."

"If we're devolving into sport, I'm going to retire," Emmeline said, and to Sirius's shock, she actually patted his brother on his left arm. "I'll get the books in the morning."

“That suits just as well,” Regulus agreed with another brisk nod, punctuated with a slight smile, “Parting with these treasured tomes will be a challenge, but I shall search myself for methods of coping in the interim."

“Do they involve pelting me with questions?” Emmeline asked, with a put upon huff.

Is she - flirting?

“Probably,“ Regulus granted.

"I can think of worse ways to spend my time."

Head duck, teasing, extraneous smiling - she is, she's flirting! Sirius opened his mouth, perhaps to say some version of 'what the fuck,' but instead he just blinked at her with his mouth gaping like a guppy. Not only did she not wind him up about it, but she didn't seem to really notice. What the hell happened when he was in St. Mungo's?
"Uh, Emme?"

She looked back at him, "Yes?"

He had no idea how to even start with this. Something in his brain had short-circuited, so instead he just said, "Sleep well."

Emmeline smiled and nodded, "Thank you."

When she looked back to his brother, Regulus managed a small smile and an acknowledging nod of his own before adding a mild, “Goodnight.”

Even as the house fell silent at the departure of the remaining Order members, Regulus could not wholly shift his mind from what Sirius and Emmeline had said about Severus, indicating a greater degree of unpleasant behaviour than usual. At the back of his mind, a small bundle of guilt pricked sharply, recalling those hours following Mulciber’s capture. Regulus had thought of Avery, still an active Death Eater if the Department of Mysteries was an accurate representation of the situation, but he had not thought to concern himself too thoroughly with how Snape might feel about it. Snape had never acted particularly sentimental about any of them - maybe towards Evan, if anyone - but there was a solidarity Regulus remembered all too well.

Regulus had breached that code, and suddenly, he was markedly less motivated to start an uncomfortable conversation with Severus. Did his old friend realise the roles that had been played? Did he blame Emmeline alone for daring to survive an attack and aim to see that assailant locked away for murdering her parents? Or was she merely the only one available to scowl at, inappropriate though it was?

(Did Severus even know Regulus had alerted the Aurors?)

Stepping into the drawing room, Regulus was slightly surprised to notice his brother had come along too, but he did not wait to see what subject Sirius had in mind before he spoke: “Not that it makes much difference in the grand scheme of things, but is Severus aware that I was present for Mulciber’s arrest too?” Even as he spoke, he was striding over to the far bookcase, plucking one from the shelf, though it was not one of the texts nicked from the Ministry - rather, a replacement for those that would soon be gone.

“Dunno, I missed a bit of it when I went to check up on Harry - which may have been by design, since it was him that told me to - so you'll have to ask Emmeline. Not that you seem to have much of a problem with that.” Sirius's voice came from behind him, along with the usual noise of him fiddling with something. “Were you in here earlier?”

“We had a conversation in here not even an hour ago,” Regulus said dryly. When he glanced back over his shoulder, he could see Sirius was standing by one of the side tables and holding a piece of parchment. With a small jolt of surprise, Regulus realised that he must have left the letter from Julien, distracted as he was with the Order’s dismissal.

Sirius either refused to acknowledge or was too distracted to engage the jibe. "This is yours?"

“Most likely,” Regulus said a little uncomfortably as he tucked the book and walked over.

"Rian?” Sirius asked.

Cringling his expression, Regulus felt that discomfort settle more firmly, feeling the temptation to lie about it but brushing it off almost as quickly as it had come. Logically speaking, there was no
reason to lie, separate though the two experiences remained - not unless he wanted to run back, but
the longer Regulus's had stayed in England, the less that felt like an option. "It seemed prudent to
use a different name. 'Regulus' is what one might call 'distinctive' for anyone looking."

"And Julien is a...friend?" Sirius said the word, as if were some sort of absurd concept.
Leveling a look, Regulus responded in a slightly deadpan tone, "Yes. I do have those."

"Don't give me that tone; you don't talk about it," Sirius replied, a hint of defense slipping into his
tone. "Does this mean you're planning on disappearing again?"

Pressing his lips to a line, Regulus shook his head with a little more certainty. "You shouldn't read
other people's letters - but no, I'm not planning on disappearing."

"We've established my manners are terrible," Sirius said. He put the parchment down again,
though. "Are you sure?"

Regulus took the parchment without missing a beat, folding it neatly and sticking it in his pocket
this time. "I'm sure. The circumstances are quite different now."
"The stakes are higher," Sirius said, with a slight frown. "It's not that I don't want you to have a way
out, if everything goes south. Nor do I want you to die, or something worse. I'm all too familiar
with the consequences of trying to do the right thing."

"As am I," Regulus responded with a thin smile. "But it is the high stakes that makes following
through so important."

Sirius shrugged forcefully, as he looked back down at where the letter had been. "So are you," he
half mumbled, letting it sit in the air.

Embarrassingly sentimental though the comment might be, Regulus felt a warm rush of fondness
and the comforting steel of security. For months, consistency had been built like a bridge, plank
after plank, and what was initially so strange had begun to feel familiar again - a brother in manner
and interaction, rather than in blood alone. When Regulus had left as a terrified teenager, Sirius had
felt no more like home than the family he was suddenly running from. His self-designated task had
been his singular focus - for which seeking help had been unimaginable - and though options might
show themselves in hindsight, he had felt so trapped in the lonely, gaping uncertainty about
whether his brother cared that much about him at all.

The past year had made that perception almost unrecognisable, and he scarcely knew how to
express it.

"You are too," Regulus began after the stretch of silence, "If there’s a chance that we can end the
war properly, this time, and restore some semblance of family at the same time, then I plan to
pursue it."

"I think you're soft in the head if you believe you can fix fractures this bad," Sirius huffed, but
surprisingly, there was just a calm acceptance behind the words. "But I'm just letting you know
right now if you disappear again, I'm not going to believe it. I'm just going to assume something's
wrong, and knowing me, probably do something stupid, reckless, and unwarranted. So if you get
scared, or it's too much, or you just decide that you were happier elsewhere, it's fine, but don't just
poof into thin air again."

With a sobered half-smile - pressed to a slanting line - Regulus nodded. "I will give proper notice
next time, should the circumstances call for it." For a beat, Regulus paused, and though it was not
quite the same as what Sirius was referring to, he thought of Julien’s letter and the nudging prospect of retrieving the venom in person to minimise the likelihood of interception. It was not as desperate, nor urgent, as it had been at the time of his initial request, now that Dumbledore was once again headmaster over the castle, and thus the hidden chamber within it...but he could not shake the fact that there could be quite a few horcruxes left, and there was no guarantee of the harvestable venom until he set eyes on it himself. (This...this, he knew.)

“But...speaking of leaving and the notice that goes along with it...” Regulus began, a little vaguely. France and England were so carefully separated in his mind - and for the sake of those in France, it was best to by and large keep it that way - but although there were some secrets that must be maintained and protected...he felt that perhaps there were some that could be shared, in moderation, if only to feel a little less torn in two. “I have need to retrieve something in person, so I must take a brief trip to France in the next week or so.” An awkward pause, and then, “Should you like to stretch your free, non-convicted legs, you are welcome to come. You needn’t feel obligated, as I know you presently have Harry to look after... but the invitation is open, nonetheless.”

Sirius looked at him blankly, before snapping his fingers. "That's what that accent is. Are you," he did a double take, "Are you telling me you just went to one of the houses over and figured no one would go back? Correctly, I'm assuming, but that...that's pretty funny. Your French has always been better than mine, unless you needed to swear." None of this was an answer, but was perhaps more him working through his own reaction to being asked. "But how did you get the portkey? Unless you took the boat."

“I didn’t take the boat,” Regulus responded, a little too quickly. (It had been a train, with someone else’s ticket…) “Transportation was a matter of questionable legality, but I have been very law-abiding since then.”

Sirius smirked suddenly, "'Til now."

"With a bunch of vigilantes having secret meetings in my house, my plausible deniability was probably shaky at best, anyway,” Regulus quipped back as his mouth flickered up to a more subtle mirror of his brother’s expression.

"If anyone could have talked your way out of it," Sirius said, with a solemn nod. "I would have the utmost faith in you."

“I appreciate your confidence in my persuasive capabilities,” Regulus said lightly, though a very different matter of persuasion rose to the surface as he thought of his own looming legal ‘situation.’ With Sirius cleared, Regulus supposed that was the next order of business, but as much as he wanted to get it over with, anxiety prickled more readily, the closer it drew. “Though I would rather have no need to use them.”

"Your persuasive abilities are annoyingly good," Sirius replied. "I find myself knocking more times than I care to admit, and Mum, Grandfather, several tutors and professors, and even Remus have yet to the manage the same. If you can work that miracle, I think you'll be fine." He indicated the no longer visible letter. "What did you ask your friend for?"

For a moment, Regulus was paused in silence, the venom and the horcruxes pattering against the walls of his mind. His brother was not known for his discretion, and the last thing he needed was for the acquisition of basilisk venom to come up in conversation, even amongst the Order. He did not suspect treachery of any in their numbers - not even Severus, though he was the most vulnerable, if the Dark Lord were to successfully root around in his mind. Occlumency was not infallible...
“That answer depends upon your willingness to maintain informational discretion,” Regulus eventually settled.

"I know we like to joke that I run my mouth - and I do - but I'm fully capable of keeping my mouth shut these days." Sirius winced. "I'm not fifteen anymore. Save for confirming to the one person who already knew what your boggart was that it was that, and for a good reason, and in private, I don't imagine you've heard a peep about anything you've said all year."

Regulus nodded, and surprising though it was, Sirius was right about that fact. “Basilisk venom,” he revealed after only a few more seconds of hesitation, “which should not be discussed inside or outside of the Order, for the moment, with the exception of Dumbledore. The matter is a delicate one, and what might seem like a harmless comment could ripple in problematic ways. Containment seems to be the best option.”

"Oh, you want to smuggle a dangerous, regulated substance into the country." Sirius shrugged, looking a little more chipper at the idea. "You should have just said so."

Regulus’s mouth flattened. “Well...yes. I suppose so.”


“Don’t make me regret it,” Regulus said, though his mouth flickered a little with some baffling mixture of anxiety and happiness.

“What are you doing?”

From the kitchen doorway, Sirius could see both Emmeline and Harry at the kitchen table. Harry froze mid-chew, while Emmeline barely looked up from the *Prophet*. (Merlin alive, there's two of them.) She wiggled her toast around in the general direction of the door. “Eating breakfast,” Emmeline said, finally looking up. “Not everyone can subsist on bluster and bull-headedness alone, so we do this wonderfully civilised thing called breakfast.”

“I thought Ravenclaw's were meant to be witty,” Sirius said, looking more at Harry. “Alright, Harry?”

“Fibe,” which Sirius took to mean 'fine, but with his mouth full'.

Taking stock of him, there was little denying Harry looked better. He had put on a little weight, as it seemed to yo-yo every time he went back to his aunt and uncle's. Having realised that the only thing he had in his size that wasn't falling apart was Christmas jumpers that had no place in July, he'd cleared time in his oh so busy schedule to take him shopping in the arcade. He showed a preference for muggle clothing in the holidays, much as Sirius himself had at his age, so Madame Malkin's could wait. Besides, he was hitting his growth spurt, and they'd need to get something he'd actually fit into in three months. It was a peculiar and mundane experience all at once; though they did go to Diagon and Hogsmeade for the occasional outfit or school related robes, most of their clothing growing up had simply seemed to appear tailored to need. When he'd indulged in a muggle wardrobe, he'd relied mostly on Lily and second-hand shops in Camden. Neither felt much like that had.

Away from the wizarding world, they were anonymous.

If he was honest with himself, Sirius didn't like the idea of leaving Harry alone, having retrieved him less than a week ago via proxy. However, being stuck around adults in this old, crumbling ruin
was something he wouldn't wish on any teenager. Despite being seemingly contented to read, play chess, or listen to the wireless, Sirius knew from experience that boredom would set in quickly.

When Dumbledore's letter arrived, it had broken things up. He wanted help with a matter which he hadn't openly disclosed, though Emmeline had relayed that he'd been interviewing for Defense, and then suddenly stopped. Since Regulus had decided to return to France (of course it was France, it was obvious the more he thought about it and blamed the imprisonment for clouding his mind), and invited him to go with him despite his secrecy and desire for privacy, it had seemed like a good time to take Molly up on her offer for Harry to go there for a bit. Despite the more lax precautions, knowing that both Hermione and Ron would be there was an intense draw for Harry, and Sirius knew if given the chance, he'd have taken it to spend it with his friends.

They'd be back in a few days. He was already ruminating on ideas for birthdays, since Harry and Regulus were only a week and a half apart. He had a truly terrible idea, that could either go really well or be utterly disasterous, so he hadn't decided if he'd raise it yet. Then they'd have OWL results. It already felt as if their summer would trickle through his fingers if he let it.

"Are you sure you'll be alright here alone?" Sirius double-checked. More like double-checked for the fiftieth time.

"I'm not alone," Emmeline pointed out Harry.

"And you're okay with that," again, he checked.

Emmeline rolled her eyes. "I think I can handle nine hours alone with a teenage boy in a multi-story house and a house-elf."

"Kreacher could suffocate you in your sleep," Sirius pointed out. "You can't stop him."

"I usually find being polite helps," Emmeline sighed.

"I'll remember that next time I have to duel," Sirius replied. "I'll politely ask if we can abstain."

"Perhaps no one's tried it," Emmeline said, taking a drink with a wince. "You can always hex politely afterwards."

Sirius snorted. "Hex politely?"

"You were in dueling club," Emmeline reminded him. "You know the etiquette."

"Knowledge and action are two different things," Sirius said.

"Speaking of, are you packed for your mysterious adventure?" Emmeline asked, as Harry nicked the *Prophet* from where she had abandoned it.

"Mostly," Sirius waved her off.

"Mostly," Emmeline replied. "Aren't you leaving any moment?"

"It's a few days, I don't need to bring the kitchen sink with me," Sirius groused, for he knew a similar conversation was likely coming with Regulus. Unless he'd bought an extremely engaging book for the train, then he'd probably sit in total silence for the next several hours. He really needed to get that personal music box back, assuming it was still in his flat. Despite it being almost a week, he still hadn't been. Perhaps he was avoiding it, but he didn't want to pull on that thread too hard.
“What about you?” Emmeline asked Harry. “Everything ready?”

Caught like a deer in the road, Harry looked up from whatever he was reading. He looked between them and then said, “Mostly.”

Emmeline made a noise of disgust, while Sirius and Harry locked eyes and he couldn't help himself from laughing. There were no organisation skills in the Potter genes. Never had been. Just look at the hair. Harry, to his credit, grinned as well as he reached for the marmalade.

“I don't know how Lily managed a road trip with you lot,” Emmeline muttered.

“There was a road trip?” There was always something heartbreaking about the way Harry seemed to snap to attention whenever his parents were mentioned. Still, Sirius had plenty of stories, some of them he probably would never tell their kid, but most, he could.

“It was an adventure,” Sirius replied with a wink. “I'll tell you about it when we get back.”

“Where is Regulus?” Emmeline asked, “I could use some common sense back up.”

“Obsessively packing and repacking, if his Hogwarts habits haven't changed,” Sirius sighed. In truth, part of the reason he wanted to travel light was that they were leaving such a mess behind that they'd be thrown back in the deep end the moment they got back. There was a new Minister, the trial inquiries, the Death Eaters, the mysterious inferi, Dumbledore's task, the press, figuring out where Harry would live, figuring out where Sirius himself wanted to live, dealing with what he was strongly thinking was an unfortunate crush on Emmeline's part given Regulus's lack of budging on the blood issue, dealing with Tonks's mood, dealing with Remus's issues with Greyback and the way he was obviously struggling, OWLs, birthdays, Death Eaters, not having a good reason to go with Emme to her own parents’ funeral, the prophecy, Voldemort, Narcissa – the list went on and on. Taking a few deep breaths outside of that sounded blissful.

Hearing a noise upstairs, Sirius called, “You ready to go?”

A few seconds later, Regulus was strolling down the stairs, packed and ready. “Yes. Are you?”

"Yeah, mostly," Sirius said, as Emmeline once again snorted. He shot her a dirty look. "I just need to grab a couple of things."

“You should do that, then. We’re leaving soon,” Regulus countered, then turned a look past him to Harry and Emmeline. “Good morning.”

"At last, someone with sense," Emmeline said, while Harry once again gave greeting with his mouthful.

Sirius left them to it. He had been trying to stay more in his own room, even if it was still difficult at times. He thought about tearing it all down and starting again, but the desire to preserve something important drove him not to. It had been important to him once; it might be again, one day.

There was a familiar sense memory that crept up from over twenty years ago. It was a little different, he was tossing a shoulder bag on the bed and grabbing a few things instead of his trunk. He didn't have his winter clothes packed, nor school books or a bubbling excitement to see the Tower again, even if Regulus's mood would sour considerably upon reaching King's Cross. That was different too. Against all hope, he had been given a second chance to do everything he wanted - to be a proper godfather to Harry, a better sibling, a better friend, a less volatile investment for the Order. Now, as they left once again for the train, it wouldn't be Hogwarts, but a window into the
world Regulus had built for himself without oversight or prying eyes. It was still an adventure, one he'd been invited to and welcomed on.

It was with this giddying thought, Sirius shut the bedroom door and legged it down the stairs. It was time for something new.

Chapter End Notes

As we wrap up the first arc of this story, we would like to take a moment to thank all of the commenters for the ongoing support. Thank you so much for taking a moment out of your busy lives to send a comment our way, especially those who take the extra time to do so on a regular basis (though we appreciate every one of you, and all of our non-commenting readers, too.) We're very passionate about sharing this story with all of you, but the encouragement, feedback, and opinions are hugely motivating, and that back-and-forth has been hugely valuable, throughout this process so far.

To offer a brief reminder, now that this arc of the main story is wrapping up, we will be separating the main story and the side stories into two separate series, so if you are interested in getting alerts for (or bookmarking) both, be sure to do so with side story series, as well, because that won't carry over automatically. Furthermore, as a reminder, this particular chaptered fic will be given a subtitle, after the fact, but it is obviously still the same story.

The story is definitely NOT over, and will be continuing very soon, so stay tuned. The next arc, as we briefly mentioned in the previous note, will focus more heavily on the horcruxes and the escalation of the way, as we move more into the AU world we've set the foundation for in this arc.

Lastly, I (tonberrys) finally wrote that "Regulus, on blood supremacy" meta I've been talking about for a million years now, so for those who have been interested in an analysis on that, here is the link to that meta. I decided to wait until this arc finished because the last batch of chapters have been challenging those opinions more than they were, earlier in the story. For those interested, enjoy!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!