On the dark verge of life

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Summary

The infernal Dark Lord is no longer seething in the shadows and the Dark side is winning. The Order is trying to get a kid to fight for them but Harry Potter, the dashing boy-hero, can't seem to keep his hands off the man he is supposed to vanquish. Sirius Black—fresh out of prison—would just like to catch a bloody break. He certainly didn't break out of Azkaban to see his young godson snog the malevolent overlord, but maybe getting into Malfoy's pants will balance it out.

Notes

This is a multi-chapter story spinning away (and spreading its wings) from my one-shot more commonly known as 'Feels like the road to Hell'. This diverges from the one-shot...a lot. But I used it as a sort of template. Same pairings, even some re-used plot points (maybe even plot holes) and mostly situated on the same level of weird. This one is pretty much a crack-ish attempt of a "Voldemort Wins, Everyone is fucking happy about it" trope that I enjoy. The one-shot does not require prior reading because... frankly, it's pretty shite.

Yes, there will be some male loving, so...I'm not going to apologise. If this does not float your boat, tickle your fancy, turn your crank, isn't your cup of tea (or coffee) -- then why are
you here? * begs you not to leave*

I have a fire extinguisher, so all flames will be drowned in foam. Feedback, however, will keep me warm during these cold winter nights. Seriously, I can't afford a blanket.

Disclaimer: Nothing is owned by me. Just the lame jokes. Please do not sue me for those.
Sirius Black enjoys his newfound freedom; the clean air and the starlit sky that he has missed so much while killing time in Azkaban. One can only stay sane long enough to realise that there is no way out, but that requires any sort of sanity from the start and Sirius doubts that he has any. He had had a brilliant mind in his youth - clever and sharp for a Gryffindor, but there had been darkness there as well, skulking in the spaces of his mind and clinging to him.

He has loved the shadows from an early age, but having been sorted into the house of lions and making unlikely friends with Mudbloods and blood traitors, Sirius had to conceal parts of himself. The choice between staying true to himself or forcing his magic to be something it could never be had not been a hard one. Of course, it had required trickery and an illusion he had been able to maintain with the help of a different sort of friends who shared his fondness for the dark.

Looking back is not something Blacks do; they do not feel regret. However, there is something contrasting about Sirius that makes him stand out from the family. His ability to act like a reckless child had not caused much fuss among his peers. James and Lily Potter had been his friends, even though such a thing had seemed impossible. The death of the Potters had delivered a cruel blow, and yet a ray of light had pierced through the thick veil of sorrow; little Harry with Lily's eyes and the ability to thaw the blocks of ice that surrounded Black's heart. Everything he has done has been for his own benefit - but also for Harry's because that boy had been the only reasons to stop him from yielding to the vile ways of the Dementors.

It is getting harder and harder to pretend that he is a good man with good intentions. In fact, Sirius finds it ridiculous that no one has figured out his true loyalties. He is a far cry from a gracious and sensible wizard. Pretending is hard work, especially if you don't have the patience to even tie your shoelaces. When he isn't in his old home, he is in a place that offers something vastly different from Dumbledore's lectures about the necessity of light in such dark times.

His comings and goings are being monitored by the Order, but catching Sirius is like trying to hold smoke in the palm of one's hand - after a while they stopped following him. Instead of visiting a brothel in Knockturn Alley, as the Order has assumed for a while now, Sirius visits a house hidden away from curious eyes. A manor where the Dark Lord lives and plots.

It is a dangerous sanctuary that often offers pain in return for disobedience and a thrill in exchange for servitude; anything and everything that makes Sirius' magic purr like a sated cat. This time is no different, but there is a new mission at hand and for some strange reason, Sirius wants in. He usually keeps away from active Death Eater entertainment, but he's terribly bored.

"Tell me again why we're being sent to the Ministry with our party clothes on?"

Rabastan Lestrange secures his wand and makes sure that it won't fall out from its holster during a fight. He regards Sirius with a dry comment, "Would you prefer wearing nothing at all?"
Sirius Black only laughs. He wouldn't object to it; in fact, he frequently suggests it. Rodolphus walks to his brother's side and says, "We have our orders."

"My first group mission," Sirius smirks. "And I get to team up with my favourite Death Eaters. Must be my lucky day."

"Makes me wonder what we did to deserve it," Rabastan mutters.

"Cheer up, Rab," Sirius says as he throws his arm around the other's shoulder with a smile playing on his lips. "At least you don't have to get in bed with my mental cousin after the mission. Heavily into blood play, that one."

Rodolphus' cheeks are tinted with red as the Animagus laughs and saunters away in a boisterous stride. Rabastan eyes his brother and shrugs, not really interested in getting into that particular conversation. They have a mission to finish.

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The Ministry is silent and not a soul is around. Working hours are long over as a group of masked wizards appear out of the shadows. They are there to retrieve a little glass orb that their Lord is obsessing over but Sirius doesn't really care why he needs it. No one ever asks why the Dark Lord wants something. It is simply not done.

After walking around for a bit, Sirius feels a bit fed up. The special room that contains those fancy orbs is a maze of dark corridors lined with high shelves that go up towards the ceiling - if there even is a ceiling. Sirius starts whistling a tune and wanders off, leaving the more seasoned Death Eaters to their task. He rounds a corner and spies a figure in the back. Masked or not, Sirius immediately knows who it is.

"You should have plaited your hair before coming. It will give you away."

Even the wizard's mask is superior. Sirius has stared long enough to admit that it is tasteful with a touch of elegant details. The ends of blond strands stick out from under the black hood like a beacon in a dark night.

"Someone should have put a leash on you, Black."

Sirius huffs a laugh. "I'm not really into collars and leashes but there was this one witch who liked whips and the occasional spank."

Removing his mask, Lucius Malfoy sneers, "Cease talking, Black. I have no interest in hearing about your disgusting habits."

"You're such a toff, Malfoy," Sirius mocks. "Doesn't cousin Cissy tie you to the bed every once in a while? I image she has to, considering your preferences. Everyone knows that you're as bent as they come."

"It is a shame that I'm not allowed to kill you. The Dark Lord seems to think that you serve a purpose. I imagine every faction needs a clown in their midst."

Sirius grins and strolls closer, putting some sway into his hips. Technically, it is still working hours
for the Death Eaters and they are there to do a mission for the Dark Lord, but Sirius has never liked rules that constrict him in any way. Malfoy is an egotistical arse, but a very fine piece of arse; something Sirius is highly aware of whenever he is in the man's company. Sure, the wizard is conceited and a number of other things that make him a bit unlikeable but Sirius doesn't really care because just looking at the blond wizard makes his trousers tight. He isn't planning on anything lasting, just some mutual pleasure until he has the wizard out of his system.

As he invades the wizard's personal space, Sirius tries to play it cool and use a bit of charm - he is a charming bloke after all - but he doesn't get very far. Truth be told, he can't even get a word out, seeing as Lucius turns and walks away, not giving the dark-haired man a backward glance. Heaving a sigh, Sirius leans against the massive case with crystal balls. He is back to being bored out of his mind and that is never a good thing. He's been there for an hour already or possibly longer because it feels like it. Wandering around aimlessly is about the only thing he can do. Since there is nothing better to occupy his time with, he follows the same path the wizard had taken.

There is a door that leads to somewhere but no one is hanging about and Sirius doesn't see or hear anyone. That door takes him to a weird room, seemingly empty aside from the walls that are covered with mirrors. The walls are actually made of mirrors and it is slightly creeping the man out as he steps inside. He takes a look around and sticks his head around the small partition that separates the main mirror room from another smaller space. It is filled with useless junk and old furniture. It's obviously just a mysterious storage room.

"Is stalking another habit of yours?"

Sirius whips his head around and spots Lucius, mask discarded and his fingers threaded through his long hair. He is trying to braid it like the other wizard had suggested. Fancy that.

Sirius blurts out, "Let me do it."

Lucius raises a brow but remains silent.

"Otherwise you'll look like a little girl who doesn't know how to braid her hair," Sirius replies, trying to make a joke to cover up his blunder. He waves towards the few usable pieces of furniture in the room that happen to be a row of benches. It is suspiciously convenient but Sirius doesn't care enough to raise a question. He sees that Lucius isn't moving and says, "I won't cut it off or put anything sticky in it; we're not in Hogwarts. Gryffindor honour and all that; I promise."

It is frustrating to plait it and Lucius has no other choice than to let Black do it. It's not like he knows any hair braiding spells. Because he's not a bloody girl. He sits and says, "I still find you infuriating, Black, and this does not change it."

"Afraid I'll tell someone you let me near your hair?" Sirius smirks and makes quick work of the tangle that has made a nest in the blond strands. The silky feeling only adds to the list of reasons why Sirius needs to shag the wizard.

Lucius drawls, "Just get it done."

"I should make pigtails and then charm them to stay forever." Sirius laughs and gives a particularly sharp yank. He's having a lot of fun with it.

Hissing in displeasure, the fair-haired Slytherin says, "I will find a way to make your life miserable, Black."

"Fine." Sirius huffs. He then asks, "Why'd you want to plait it anyway?"
"As much as I loathe to admit it, you made a fair point," Lucius says, but he does insert as much loathing as possible into the words.

"I make fair points all the time, you're just too self-important to listen," Sirius says jokingly as he runs his fingers through the soft tresses.

The wizard turns around and asks with annoyance, "What are you doing, Black? Braids don't magically appear. Get your fingers out of my hair if you are not doing anything productive back there."

"I have the perfect response for that but it involves something other than your hair."

"I beg your pardon?" Lucius offers a confused reply.

Sirius grins. "I could be doing something very productive back here, but like I said, hair isn't involved. I mean...unless you're into the whole hair-pulling kink."

Lucius knows that he should feel offended but instead, he snorts derisively. "That might work in Azkaban, Black, but not with me."

Sirius makes a curious noise. "Believe it or not, but Azkaban doesn't offer many prospects when it comes to that."

"Shocking," Lucius comments wryly.

"So if I were to suggest that I think you'd look wonderful spread out under me - would that get me further than my last attempt? In theory of course."

"Black, you do recall that I don't like you and if my memory serves me right, you don't like me either."

"True, but we don't have to like each other. I want to shag you, not take you out on a bloody date."

"You are a childish imbecile. We are not well-suited Sirius sighs with annoyance. "Who cares! My cock thinks we're compatible and that's all that matters to me. You don't have to know my astrological birth chart to have sex. Unless you're into that sort of thing."

"Are you always this zealous?" Lucius asks with a deepening frown.

"I've been hard ever since we got here; what do you think?" Sirius smirks and adds, "I'll give you a wild ride, Malfoy."

Lucius stands, grabs his mask and says, "We have a job to do here, Black - and I wouldn't sleep with you even if you were the only possible option. I'd rather abstain."

Before Sirius can open his mouth, Lucius is gone. With a curse, Sirius slumps down and stares at his reflection in the mirror. That was a spectacular cock-up, but he still has his head attached to his neck and he counts that as a small victory. As he stands to leave, the door is yanked open and someone familiar steps inside - someone who most definitely isn't Malfoy.

"Harry? What -"

Harry Potter, boy saviour extraordinaire, is looking extremely uncomfortable as he stumbles on his feet and goes white as a ghost. In that moment, he is a little boy who has been caught doing
something inappropriate. Which he is.

"Um, hello...fancy seeing you here, Siri."

Sirius blinks more than necessary and grabs the boy's sleeve, yanking him inside and slamming the door shut with a thump that most likely echoes throughout the Ministry. Concern and distress are the most prominent emotions on the man's face, but he is also confused as to why the teen is there in the first place. He slams his hand against the door with enough force to make it creak. "Don't Siri me, Harry James! What in Merlin's name are you doing here? How did you even get here? From Hogwarts!"

Harry snorts despite the situation and snipes back, pointing his finger accusingly at Sirius, "What are you doing here?"

"None of your business. I asked you first," Sirius states. Then he demands. "Well, start explaining!"

Harry sighs. "I guess now is as good a time as any. I'm not exactly what most would call a light wizard; as a matter of fact, I would rather not be associated with the Light at all. What I'm trying to say is that...well...I'm pretty much a dark wizard. Or maybe leaning towards the dark; I think I haven't fully decided yet."

The older wizard takes a few steps back or rather staggers. He is doing a perfect imitation of a fish as he gawks and tries to form words.

Harry continues guiltily. "Team Voldemort and all that."

Sirius finally speaks but it is nothing like Harry had expected from his godfather. The dark-haired man lets out a groan. A very relieved groan that he finishes off with a big grin. "Praise Loki! You don't know how happy that makes me, kid."

Black looks extremely pleased and keeps grinning, confusing Harry further.

"Yeah... This is not what I was expecting. At all." Harry grimaces, very much puzzled. "You're not angry with me? No urge to shake me and demand that I stop speaking rubbish? You don't want to check me for curses? Nothing?"

"Why would I want to do that, Bambi? It's the best conversation we've had since I last saw you. I couldn't be more fucking relieved. Means I can stop telling you how I think all dark wizards are scum." Sirius says with a happy smile but that soon turns into a frown. He crosses his arms, waiting. "But I still want to know why you're here? And it better be good."

Harry looks a bit embarrassed, biting his lip as he always does when he is nervous. "Probably best if I explain later; it's a long story. Let's just say that I had to come to be sure of some things and to retrieve something. Besides, we don't have much time."

"Fine, but you are telling me the detailed version later."

That seems to satisfy Harry and the teen gives a nod. "I ran into Lucius on my way here; he seemed royally pissed, didn't even say hello. What did you do?" Harry smirks, changing the subject and asking the older man with a slightly teasing tone, "And since when do you hang out with Death Eaters?"

The older wizard raises a brow. "Since when do you know Malfoy? Or is that also included in this long story you'll tell me later?"
"Something like that." Harry opens the door and tells his godfather before they leave the room, "Granger and Weasel followed me here, so be warned that you might run into them."

"We're going to have a long chat about this, Harry."

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The endlessly long corridors are dark; the only sources of light are the eerie crystal balls lining the shelves and the Lumos spells cast by the teenagers. Hermione and Luna have been separated from the rest, aimlessly running the long length of the narrow path between shelves. They had all arrived together in a crossroad of corridors, but then Luna had disappeared. The girl had actually vanished into the shadows.

Ron Weasley comes running and bumps into Neville, but the dark-haired Gryffindor starts walking the opposite direction and Ron finds himself alone with Hermione, utterly confused and dripping with anger.

"Where's Potter?"

Hermione looks around with wild eyes, panting for breath. She shakes her head. "I don't know. He was right behind me and Luna, but now she's gone too and Harry's not here. I don't know where we are or who else is here. I think I saw someone; dark figures."

Ron's sharp intake of breath makes Hermione twist her head around and she instantly steps closer to Ron. Both have their wands drawn, but they do not manage a single spell. From the shadows, Luna giggles to herself, knowing that the two aren't as brave without Harry there to guide them. She skips down the narrow path and meets up with Neville. Taking the boy's hand, she pulls him into another corridor, leaving Ron and Hermione there to face the music.

Masked Death Eaters surround the two Gryffindors; each pathway is blocked and there is nowhere to run. Hooded figures advance the two teens.

Hermione hisses out in sheer terror. "What do we do, Ron?"

The redhead's frantic eyes give her the answer. He doesn't know. He just hopes for Harry to get there and save them. Ron's only other thought is that they shouldn't have followed Potter into the Ministry. It had been a serious mistake. Befriending Potter had been a mistake.

One of the masked figures steps forward, approaching the teens with predatory steps. Ron starts to back away but there is a wand pointed at the back of his head. Hermione is trembling beside him and her head cranes from side to side. They hear laughter; low and chilling. Then a figure steps out from the shadows.

"What do we have here then?" A voice croons; a malicious voice that belongs to a witch most have heard of. Another low chuckle escapes her as she walks into the light without a mask or a hood covering her face. Bellatrix Lestrange is a notorious witch and a mask will not hide her identity for long. She likes it as such.

Ron's wand clatters as he lets it slip from his weak fingers. Hermione would have nagged him for being so clumsy, but she isn't faring much better than the boy. Her own hands are shaking, her wand hanging flaccid between her fingers. Bellatrix laughs some more; the sound so ominous that Weasley
would have likely pissed himself had it not been for the Stunner sent his way. With Ron knocked out cold, Hermione Granger feels fear like no other and promptly shoots out a spell, hoping to make a run for it. Only the spell is flicked away with a smooth wave of a wrist and soon enough Hermione finds herself being dragged down the illuminated corridor, one strong hand in her hair yanking her along as she struggles. Bellatrix pulls her behind her like a bag of trash she's looking to dispose of.

As Ron comes around, immediately finding himself unable to move, the Death Eaters have disappeared. Only a few have stayed; Bellatrix and another two who wear masks and cloaks. Luna Lovegood and the Longbottom boy are standing in the back with one masked Death Eater. Thinking that they have been captured as well, Ron tries to look around. When he doesn't see Harry, he curses mentally. He is supposed to save them, so where is he?

Bellatrix is pressing her wand into Hermione's neck, yanking her head back by her bushy hair. Someone hauls Weasley up and forces him to his knees. McNair isn't one for gentleness and roughly jabs his knee into the redhead's back, laughing as the boy cries out and hisses in pain. While the girl is quiet, only silently sobbing and keeping her eyes closed, Ron thinks it wise to start screaming slurs and spitting insults.

When Harry appears, a flash of triumph enters Ron's eyes, but it is soon dimmed by Harry's casual demeanour and the lack of manacles around his limbs. He isn't being escorted by Death Eaters - if anything, the masked figures walk behind him, almost like guards. Harry's face doesn't show anything. He spots Luna and Neville standing behind Dolohov, both offering Harry reassuring smiles as he passes them.

Weasley's face is now twisted in a harsh grimace. Ron isn't as slow as Harry had believed and figures out why the Boy Who Lived isn't already bound and gagged, ready to be taken to Voldemort. He spits out, "Traitor! I knew you weren't right in the head, but you've gone completely mental. You're one of them, aren't you?"

Sirius enters the scene and takes in the sight of the restrained teens and Harry standing there without a care in the world. As Ron starts mouthing off, Sirius wants to throw a few hexes at the offensive kid but Harry stops him with a single glance. He will handle it himself. It is a lesson Ron Weasley needs to learn.

"You won't be remembering any of this, but just so you know, I really can't stand you. You're nothing more than a petty little child, forever whining like the snivelling pig that you are."

Ron sneers. "You're the whiny baby here, Potter! You're only good for one thing and that's killing You-Know-Who; we only need you for that. What's the matter? Is the job too hard for you? Do you want to go cry to your mummy about it? Expect you don't even have one, do you, Potter? You don't have anyone."

Instead of blowing up like Ron expects, Harry starts laughing. He crouches before the redhead and with a smile on his face, he backhands Ron, making the boy's head snap to the side with force. Sirius has never seen Harry act like that. The young wizard is self-assured and a little bit vicious; something hard glints in his green eyes. A feeling of pride washes over Sirius as he watches Harry.

"What did Dumbledore promise you?"

Ron's face is pinched tight and he just glares.

"Let me rephrase the question. Did he promise you money or eternal glory as Harry Potter's best mate? Were you actually stupid enough to believe that you would gain from this? You dull, greedy bastard."
"Harry!" Hermione screams in horror.

Bellatrix cackles and yanks Hermione's hair roughly enough to make the girl scream out in pain. The witch clucks her tongue, "Quiet, Mudblood. Don't interrupt; it's rude."

"Please, please..." Hermione begs in the background but Bellatrix doesn't particularly listen or care. She likes causing pain.

"I do have to give you some credit, Ronald. You were entirely correct about one thing," Harry says with a smile that does nothing to warm Ron's insides. He whispers into the redhead's ear, "I am one of them and have been since the end of our second year."

Ron's frozen look is priceless.

"Oh yes, I have immensely enjoyed this charade for years. Ever since I met the Dark Lord, I have had a place to call my own. I've met wizards and witches more worthy of friendship than you and Granger combined. I haven't been anyone's pawn for years now and you know what, Ron? It feels bloody amazing."

Harry leaves the redhead to his spewing, giving a nod to McNair, who takes great pleasure in kicking Ron's knees out from under him. Face pressed against the cold stone, Ron sees Harry walking away.

As for the green-eyed wizard - he sees no reason to dally and doesn't spare a glance for Granger. Harry feels a dark presence in his mind; the equally soothing and stinging sensation of having the Dark Lord caress his thoughts with his own. He feels Voldemort's displeasure through their connection, yet he isn't outright mad. Annoyed seems more accurate. Tom Riddle's smooth voice rings in Harry's mind. *I'm waiting for you. Finish it.*

"This has been greatly entertaining, but I'm supposed to be somewhere else and those two need to get back to Hogwarts before anyone discovers that there are a couple of students missing. I would hate to make Dumbledore suspicious; it's not the right time."

"Does that mean I don't get to kill the Mudblood?" Bellatrix pouts.

Harry sighs. "Not yet, but soon. She's yours to play with, Bella, but you have to be a little more patient."

There is a look of defeat in the witch's eyes. She releases the girl and blows out a puff of air, making a single messy strand of black fly from her face. "All right, if you say so, little Lord," she says, keeping the disappointment to a minimum.

"Who is good with memory spells?"

"Dolohov is the best out of us, so better let him do it," says one of the Lestrange brothers who had flanked Harry earlier. Flicking a finger towards the other two students, he asks, "What about those two?"

Harry shakes his head. "Completely trustworthy. They are allies and I trust them with my life. Harm them and I will end you."

Rabastan gives a small bob of his head. "As you wish."

Dolohov erases most of the night from Hermione's mind and does the same with Ron, leaving them with a vague recollection of getting out of bed that morning and doing usual school things, but
nothing incriminating. Casting a strong sleeping charm on them both - one that would keep them asleep until morning - Dolohov asks, "What am I supposed to do with them now?"

"You know, I didn't really think that far." Harry shrugs and scratches his nape. "Any ideas?"

Sirius makes a displeased noise and says, "I can take them back to Hogwarts, leave them by Hagrid's hut or something. When they wake up in the morning, they'll be wonderfully confused. It'll be hilarious."

Harry grins. Trust Sirius to always have pranks on his mind.

"I'm always cleaning up after you, Pup. It started with dirty nappies, you know. Next thing I know, I'll be getting rid of dead bodies."

Harry flushes red and clears his throat, but he doesn't miss the hidden smirks that everyone has on their faces. Luna steps forward with Neville in tow and says, "We better go as well. Take care, Harry."

Neville gives Harry a pat on the shoulder and follows the eccentric blonde witch, who is already helping Sirius with the two unconscious Gryffindors.

"The Dark Lord has summoned us. Time to go," Bellatrix gives a happy trill. "Are you heading back to Hogwarts as well, little Lord?"

"No, I'm coming with you this time."

Harry hears Sirius exclaim from a distance. "We are having that talk now, Harry James Potter!"

The teen motions Bella to wait for him as he walks over to Sirius. The Animagus is not looking happy when he speaks, "Something you want to tell me, Harry?"

"Look, this isn't the time or the place, but trust me on this. Voldemort isn't my enemy, not anymore at least. I'm not a Death Eater, I don't wear his Mark nor am I blindly following him; we have an understanding, Siri. He won't hurt me."

"Against my better judgement, I trust you, but you are keeping something from me."

"I'll explain everything, I promise. Assuming you know the location, come back to Riddle Manor when you're done with this and we can talk then."

Sirius is about to protest but Harry is already walking towards Bellatrix who has dutifully waited for the teen. Luna smiles mysteriously and states, "Harry will feel better once he gets home."

The Animagus doesn't really understand the blonde witch and doesn't think much of it.

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Having dropped off the students as close to the castle as he could manage, Sirius leaves for Riddle Manor. He immediately hears voices - rowdy laughing and distinctive cackling and grunts. The Death Eaters are having a social gathering, right in the middle of the Dark Lord's drawing room. Hoping there is firewhisky, the dark-haired wizard rounds the corner and walks right in.
He notices Rodolphus and Rabastan laughing, already on their way to getting properly drunk, but that is no surprise. Bellatrix is throwing knives into a painting, loudly hooting each time she hits her target. The people in the painting are less pleased.

Dolohov and McNair are playing cards; a wizarding game with cards the catch fire if someone cheats, and by the looks of it, both have charred fingers. There are others but Sirius doesn't care all that much about them; it's not like he interacts with random followers or the Dark Lord's bootlicking lackeys. The Carrows, Rowe and Gibbon, Goyle, Crabbe; a number of people he doesn't have anything to talk about.

Sirius passes all of them and slumps into the sofa, joining the Lestrange brothers. "Oi, tossers! Pass the firewhisky, would you?"

A bottle is handed to the Animagus by Rabastan who downs his own goblet. The noise lessens and everyone promptly shut up. Sirius cranes his neck to see what is going on. The Dark Lord is standing in the doorway, not amused in the least.

Although he has the appearance of a young man, the Dark Lord can look plenty menacing and scare his loyal subjects into submission. They all bow as Tom glides into the room. "The mission was a success," the wizard says and inclines his head in recognition of his servants and their triumphant assignment. It is not often that the Dark Lord offers any sort of praise, but he is actually satisfied this time.

Sirius lifts the bottle and grins, instead of bowing. The Animagus is constantly thinking up ways to annoy the big man in charge, but all it has earned him is a few well-aimed hexes. The Dark Lord is clearly not amused, but he doesn't throw a hex at the man; instead, he holds his gaze on the wizard and orders, "Black, come with me."

"If you wanted to get me alone, all you had to do was ask, Tommy." Sirius smiles, making no moves to get up.

The Dark Lord turns on his heel and barks. "Now, Black!"

"No need to get your knickers in a twist," the wizard sighs and gets to his feet. He hands the bottle back to Rabastan and warns, "This better be full when I get back, Rab or it's your arse. Something tells me I'm going to need it."

Sirius strolls out of the drawing room with bravado reserved for members of the Black Family who think they own the very ground they walk upon. The Gryffindor catches up with Tom as the wizard leads Sirius into his personal study. With one last sharp look, Tom disappears.

Sirius leisurely walks inside, taking a curious look around; he has not seen the inside of the Dark Lord's secret hideout before. It is grand, if not a bit over the top. Eying a ridiculous painting above the fireplace, Sirius hears an instantly recognisable voice. His pup is there and that does surprise Sirius somewhat. Harry gives Sirius a small smile as he starts talking, "I promised you the long version; no better time than the present, right?"

"I'm all ears," the Animagus says.

Harry moves to the small settee and sits down, waiting for his godfather to join him. When the older wizard settles next to his godson, the teen says, "I guess you already figured out that I'm not Dumbledore's golden boy."

"It was pretty self-explanatory."
Harry snorts but continues, "I haven't been their precious Saviour since my second year, ever since what happened in the Chamber of Secrets. When Tom came back, I just knew, Siri. I felt a connection with him; I could feel him in my mind and I liked it. You have to understand that he didn't do anything to me; he didn't curse me. He just wanted to be my friend. He wanted to teach me. I wasn't forced into anything. Trust me, I'm very much willing and he respects my decisions, just like I respect what he does and wants to accomplice."

"Okay-" Sirius begins, "let me get this straight. You and Voldemort are allies and he no longer wants to kill you. Correct?"

"We have an understanding."

"What sort of understanding?" Sirius questions. "Give it to me plain and simple."

Harry seems fidgety and reluctant. He has to get this all out before he loses all his courage. "Well, we're sort of...together. You know, as in exploring the possibility of a stable and healthy relationship between two consenting wizards."

Sirius frowns at first, but then his eyes narrow. He isn't stupid, even though insolence and recklessness often comes off as idiocy. "You want to repeat that?" He isn't angry - doesn't seem furious at all - but there is something in his voice, a protective edge perhaps.

"Give me a break, Siri. I've had him in my head for years; he's been a constant in my life just as long and I can't help myself around him. Tom isn't insane anymore, at least not insane enough to mindlessly kill or torture. He's trying to find a diplomatic way to take over the wizarding world; without slaughtering a bunch of people he doesn't like."

The Animagus jumps up from his seat, ready to deliver a rant; his face is changing from confused to outraged to frowning. "He's a bloody pervert, that's what he is! I'm going to rip off his cock."

Before the wizard can bound out of the room, Harry catches him by the arm and sighs, working his best puppy-dog eyes. "Siri, calm down. Please, just hear me out before you set out to murder anyone."

"You're not even sixteen, Harry. You're still a child!"

With some quivering of the lips, Harry pushes further. "I will be sixteen soon enough. Don't be angry with me, please."

"I'm not angry with you, Bambi," the dog Animagus sighs, falling prey to Harry's perfect manipulation. Pulling Harry into a loose hug, Sirius groans. "Couldn't you pick someone else? There's plenty of good-looking wizards and witches around."

When Harry snorts and shakes his head, the Animagus breathes out. "I'm not sure how I feel about spending the holidays with him."

"I know you don't like this, but I do. Quite a lot actually and it's important to me that you at least try to accept this."

Sirius exhales loudly. "I can try, but if he hurts you, I'll wring his wiry Dark Lord neck."

"Siri?" Harry inquires, "Are you a Death Eater?"

With a wide grin, the older wizard pulls Harry back on to the sofa. He states, "Have you seen the mark he gives his followers? It's bloody hideous."
"Tonight in the Ministry - I know why Tom sent his Death Eaters there, but I can't figure out why you were there."

"I'm a Black and despite whatever nonsense Dumbledore likes to spew, it's not all that easy to escape one's blood or heritage; at least Blacks never do. The Dark Arts are in my blood and being a Gryffindor didn't change that. I was born a dark wizard and while it was necessary to pretend otherwise, I refuse to be anything but my true self. I'm not a marked follower, but I'm affiliated with them and sometimes, when I'm particularly bored, I like to join in on the fun. Bella vouched for me and I've been passing information ever since Dumbledore made me stay with the Order."

Harry laughs. "So all this time you've been leading Dumbledore by the nose and he has no idea that the Order's headquarters are located in the house of a Dark Lord supporter."

"They're not an exceptionally bright lot," Sirius smirks. "They believe whatever that old fart tells them. Pathetic really."

"Were you affiliated with the Dark before Azkaban?"

Sirius gives a nod. "Recruited right under Dumbledore's nose, end of my sixth year I believe it was. All those times I disappeared, James thought I was sneaking off with girls, but in truth, I was sneaking off to meetings."

Harry can relate and recalls his own secret meetings.

With a small smile playing on his lips, the older wizard asks. "I think you promised to explain everything, so what I want to know is whether you know about the prophecy and what's your deal with Malfoy?"

"Tom told me about the prophecy. I've known for years, but not fully until tonight. The prophecy is now completely worthless because Tom gave me his word that he will not harm me. We won't kill each other, so the whole prophecy is a load of rubbish that neither of us takes seriously. He suspects that it might not even be a real prophecy, but a fake one Trelawney made to entice Dumbledore. She was looking for a job and Dumbledore hired her based on this one prophecy she made in a local pub owned by Dumbledore's own brother. If that wasn't a convenient set-up, I don't know what qualifies as one," Harry explains to his godfather. The crystal ball - fake or not - is not going to dictate his life nor his relationship with Tom Riddle. Sirius seems to be satisfied and Harry goes on, "As for Malfoy...well, I'm not his best mate, but Lucius is Tom's right-hand man, so naturally, I have spent time in his company and he has been my babysitter too many times to count. And then there's his prat of a son."

"What's that git done now?"

"That git is one of my best mates now. He's an arrogant snob, not to mention a spoiled arse, but he's sort of lovable if you get to know him. The haughtiness is adorable."

Sirius shrugs. "I'll take your word for it."

"I have to get back to Hogwarts soon. I'd rather not make Dumbledore suspicious and I should probably find out if that bitch Umbridge got trampled by centaurs," Harry says and adds when he sees Black lift an inquisitive brow, "Another long story."

"Your friend Luna said they'll cover for you. She's a bit...odd, isn't she?"

Harry explains. "Luna is Luna; she's one of a kind and that's one of the things I love about her."
Sirius hums in agreement, not really forming a solid opinion on the blonde witch. Instead, something else is on his mind. "Why didn't you tell me that you fancied blokes? You know you can talk to me about all sort of things."

"Never really thought about it, to be honest."

"Do you need me to give you the sex talk? Not that you have any business knowing that stuff before you're thirty. Wouldn't want the bastard Dark Lord to get any ideas."

Harry goes rosy in the face, his cheeks tinted pink with mortification when he says, "I'm good; no need to sit me down or anything."

"I could tell you loads of stuff, but I don't want you to get any ideas."

"Believe me, I have been told about your playboy days. Repeatedly, in fact."

"Malicious lies." Sirius puffs out. "Though I always thought I was a right catch. That was before Azkaban, mind you."

Harry snorts. "If you're fishing for compliments, there is no need. You're still young, handsome in a devilish sort of way and age won't become a problem anytime soon. You were a mess when you escaped but you're doing better now, aren't you?"

"I like to think so," Black muses, but he doesn't seem certain. "I'm not getting any younger that's for sure and dying alone sounds horrible. I can't even remember the last time I got laid. Makes a bloke wonder, you know."

"Not something I want to think about, Siri," Harry says pointedly, stopping whatever the man is planning to say next. "Let's just go join the others. I want to say goodbye to Tom before I have to leave."

"No snogging," Sirius warns with a glare. "I don't care that he's the Dark Lord, he will watch where he puts his hands or I will curse them off."

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Despite his godfather's warning, Harry can't help himself and that causes the older wizard to grumble as he brings the bottle of whisky to his lips. The trail of fire going down his throat doesn't ease the feeling of resentment that burns in Black's gut. Not only is his godson smiling and positively glowing, the Dark Lord is touching Harry. A bit too inappropriately.

Sirius had promised to behave, but he all but lunges forward when the Slytherin bastard leans in and kisses Harry. Bloody kisses him! On the cheek, but still - it is fucking way out of line.

However, he is stopped by a smooth voice that makes all sorts of places tingle. Sirius turns around and a slow smirk forms on his lips. Malfoy is standing there, his slender fingers cradling a glass of amber liquid. He looks positively bored; there is an air of subtle vanity around him that makes Sirius fill up with righteous anger because the haughty wizard isn't supposed to be so tempting. Nothing in his expression tells Sirius that his comments will be welcomed, but he doesn't care much for that anyway. Catching the blond's eyes, Sirius curses under his breath. Damn that sexy Slytherin!
"Suppose you'd let the Dark Lord snog your underage son," Sirius snaps disdainfully. The blonde's expression cracks a bit and Sirius adds with triumph. "No? Didn't think so."

"Don't be an obtuse, Black," Lucius drawls, tilting his head slightly. Mostly to infuriate the Animagus. "The Dark Lord won't take advantage of the boy, not while he's still so young. And they are hardly snogging."

Sirius glances back and sees that Harry is no longer in the man's embrace and that they are just talking quietly, Tom's face softening somewhat. He allows the matter to drop for the time being. Facing the wizard again, Sirius asks teasingly, wanting to get some type of reaction, "What would you know about snogging?"

Lucius sips his drink, not letting the Animagus affect him with his taunts. They both spot Harry sharing one last innocent kiss with the Dark Lord before sending Sirius a smile.

"Look at them! It's bloody disgusting."

"Such hostility coming from you, Black." Lucius snidely points out.

Sirius mutters with a bad taste in his mouth, "That's my godson, Malfoy. He's still a child and he's letting that evil Slytherin stick his hand down his pants. I never want to see Voldemort snog anyone, let alone my barely legal godson." Sirius takes another swig of the Firewhisky and grimaces. "I'll curse his cock off."

Wrapping his arms around the teen, Tom places a kiss on the teen's temple in an almost affectionate manner. Then Tom leaves with Harry, making Sirius groan. "Time to get drunk," Sirius exclaims and walks towards the Lestrange brothers, wholeheartedly committed to getting properly sloshed. He casts a look over his shoulder and smirks when he sees Lucius sneer at his back. It really is fun to annoy the high and mighty.

Bellatrix is in the process of pulling her knives from another painting when Severus Snape appears and descends upon the gathered flock. He has managed to get away undetected. Umbridge is missing and so is Dumbledore, but he hardly cares for the old man's strange habits. He is supposedly a spy and right now he's spying...or whatever double-triple-quadruple spies do in the shadows.

He passes Bellatrix and raises a brow at her idea of fun.

Sirius groans like a dying animal. "Who invited Snivellus?"

Snape tries to murder Black with his hard gaze, but that only fuels Sirius' amusement. The Potion Master grits out. "For you to be here...someone must have left the kennel door open. Tut, tut."

Snape slithers into the room like a snake and passes the offensive Animagus without a glance. He joins Lucius, who has a slight smirk on his lips, and the two depart together. That does make Sirius' eye twitch. Rabastan sees it and grins. "You okay there, mutt?"

"Methinks someone is a bit resentful. Does the big bad dog want to hump Lucy's leg?" Rodolphus jokes with a lecherous grin. He then snorts. "Your funeral, dog."

Sirius only scowls, but then he hisses out, "It's Snivellus! He only gets off on potions and torture. He wouldn't know what to do with an actual person."

"He and Cissy have a thing." Rodolphus hums, taking a mouthful of his drink. Both Rabastan and Sirius look flabbergasted and Rodolphus smirks. "What? Don't tell me you didn't know? It's bloody obvious if you ask me."
"She's married." Rabastan frowns.

"That doesn't really mean anything other than a paper in the Ministry. Abraxas Malfoy was a miserable old sod who forced those two to wed, didn't even care if they wanted it or not." Rodolphus tells his brother. "Everyone knows that the marriage is no great love story."

"Of course she didn't want to marry. Cissy almost blew up the house when she found out that her father had practically sold her to the Malfoys as a broodmare," Sirius pipes in, recalling the witch's temper. "And anyone with a pair of working eyes can tell that Malfoy is bent six ways to Sunday."

"Thought about that a lot have you?" Rodolphus asks with a raised brow.

Sirius' grin is broad and full of mischief. "My wrist is sore and all."

"Idiotic dog."

"I believe we're not drunk enough for this conversation."

Black dips the bottle in agreement, letting the bitter liquid blaze down his throat. He asks disgust lacing is tone. "I don't know what Cissy could possibly see in that greasy bat."

"You're asking us?" Rabastan laughs. "Do we look like insipid women?"

"Are you saying my cousin is an insipid woman?" Sirius barks out. It is a poorly hidden secret that Sirius is actually very fond of his cousin and mighty protective over Narcissa.

"We wouldn't dare call her anything but fiery and beautiful," Rodolphus says with a smirk.

With a snort, Rabastan adds, "Maybe Snape's just really great in bed."

"Look at my face," Sirius grumbles with smouldering anger. "Does it say I want to know anything about Snivellus and his skills in the sack? No, it says, shut the fuck up about Snivellus."

"The quiet ones are always wild in the sack," Rodolphus remarks.

"Stop talking about it!" Black growls.

Rodolphus nudge Sirius' shoulder and says. "It's not about the size of the wand but how you use it."

Rabastan starts laughing, holding his sides as he tries to muffle the cackles that rake through him. Sirius is nowhere near as amused and stomps off, leaving the brothers alone.

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"Must you be everywhere, Black?"

Sirius has decided to visit his cousin and ask her about the rumour Rodolphus had started. The ridiculous notion of Narcissa actually wanting Snape - it makes Sirius a little ill. He knows the layout of Malfoy Manor well enough, but he has managed to get lost, ending up in one of the many dark corridors. That's where Lucius finds him.

Sirius turns around and smirks. "Don't you enjoy my company?"
"I would enjoy seeing your head impaled on a spike," Lucius offers coldly and then asks, "Why are you in my house?"

"Visiting my dear cousin of course. I am allowed, aren't I?"

Lucius walks past the wizard, saying, "Unfortunately."

Sirius doesn't stay put and tags along, irritating the blond wizard further with his stalking. After a little while, Lucius snaps and scoffs with annoyance. "What? What is it that you want, Black? Stop following me around like a lost dog. Narcissa is in the family parlour."

"Do you treat all your house guests like that?"

"No, just unwanted ones. Like you." Lucius snaps and starts walking away. Sirius isn't one to give up so easily and keeps trailing after the blond who disappears into a room at the end of the corridor. Sirius pushes the door open and realises that it is a study. It is classy and entirely too snobbish-looking for his tastes. Lucius is fixing himself a drink. He seems agitated but rightfully so. "Are you suffering from deafness as well as stupidity?"

"You should offer me a drink before insulting me; it's only well-mannered." Not really expecting one, Sirius is surprised when Lucius pours him a glass of honey-toned alcohol and holds it out for him.

"Did you know that Snivellus fancies your wife?" Sirius goes straight to the point. Again, he expects Lucius to react differently than he actually does. The Slytherin isn't all that bothered, making Sirius annoyed. It is like talking to a block of ice.

Lucius moves to his desk, looking too casual for Sirius' tastes. It is terribly enticing. "Severus has been a friend of this family for many years and never has he taken advantage of that friendship."

"Rodolphus said that Snivellus is after Cissy." Sirius points out. "As in wants to shag her."

"Don't be so dramatic, Black," Lucius' lips turn into a faint smile. "As a member of an old pure-blood family, you ought to know that taking lovers is nothing uncommon. After an heir was produced, Cissy was free to do as she pleased and she is still doing whatever pleases her."

Sirius knows that there is nothing unusual about having lovers on the side, but his cousin never seemed the type to have affairs. "So you're saying that she's been doing Snape."

Lucius tells the other wizard, "As I said before, Severus is a dear friend of this family. He's a part of this family."

"Don't tell me you're having freaky threesomes because I might just lose my dinner."

"You presume too much, Black and in any case, it is none of your business."

Sirius finishes his drink. The firewhisky he had consumed earlier wasn't half as strong. He watches as the blond wizard toys with the rim of his glass, the soft light in the room making his silken hair glow. Sirius knows that he is a bit drunk already, even though he doesn't let it show. He doesn't particularly care about consequences and what will come after. Right now, he wants to touch the tempting wizard.

Getting up, Sirius places the empty glass on the table, the clinking noise echoing in the study. He approaches Lucius with a leer and the position the man is in allows Sirius to cage Lucius between the desk and his body. With both hands planted on the desk, Black presses himself between the wizard's
"You seem to be labouring under the delusion that I would be desperate enough," Lucius retorts but even though his voice is cold, the rest of him isn't nearly as frozen. Sirius can feel that the press of his body is making Lucius respond in kind. "Get off me, Black."

"I would probably get off, but we're wearing too many clothes for that. Don't be coy with me, Lucius; I can bloody well see that you want me."

"Are you always this conceited?" Lucius asks, but he isn't moving away from the wizard's hold.

Sirius snorts, pressing himself even closer. "Pretty much always."

And with that he slants his mouth on the blond's, coaxing Lucius to open for him. The momentary shock ebbs away and Sirius mentally grins when he slips his tongue into the man's hot mouth and brings one of his hands behind the wizard's neck, holding him in place. But Sirius' glee is short-lived when Lucius jams his knee into the other's crotch. Sirius pulls away because it fucking hurt.

Lucius is smirking when he speaks. Not at all kindly. "Teaches you to ask before taking."

Even that isn't enough to dissuade the Animagus and he says, "Had I known you were this vicious, I would've gotten you drunk first." The wizard points out with a smile, "And I recall asking."

Before Lucius can move away from the desk, Sirius grabs his arm and pulls the other wizard against his chest, wrapping one arm around his waist and locking him in place. "I'm not about to attack you, that's not something I'm into. Unless you want me to."

"And what, pray tell, are you doing this very moment?" the blond wizard snaps but he isn't exactly struggling.

"I'm trying to get into your pants, Malfoy... and by the feel of it, you're not opposed to the idea," Sirius harps at the blond and makes his point by sidling his leg between Malfoy's thighs, pressing close. He then pulls away and holds up his hands in mock defeat, giving Lucius a way out. "But I'll back off if you, in fact, didn't enjoy it. I'm not suicidal, even though it's a frequent belief."

It is a gamble; a long shot that most likely is not going to end in the man's favour, but Sirius wants the blond to be willing. He isn't about to force himself on Lucius, though he can swear that Lucius is interested but just playing hard to get. He can see that the wizard is thinking about it, can see the man's mind working and processing the idea. There is an unpleasant silence that doesn't speak in Sirius' favour and the wizard turns to leave, but he is stopped by the blond.

"Wait." Lucius sighs but it sounds pained and maybe a tad bit like a whine. He is wearing an expression that all Malfoys are fitted with upon coming into the world; a mix between a haughty glare and boredom. But Lucius is anything but bored, Sirius knows. He is trying to make it look as if he isn't ready to drop to his knees.

Before turning to face the wizard, Sirius smirks; a fleeting flash of teeth before he slips into an effortless blank expression. He raises his brow as to ask what the blond wants and Sirius takes great pleasure in seeing Malfoy scowl like an irritable child.

"Fine, yes...I would very much like to continue. Happy now?" the wizard grumbles, reminding Sirius of a petulant brat. A bit like Harry when he gets annoyed.

Black looks far too smug and states, "You just can't resist me, can you?"
"You think far too much of yourself; it's unflattering," the blond replies. He fixes himself another drink and speaks, "I can't believe I'm wasting my best whisky on you, Black. You better appreciate it before you toss it back like water."

Accepting another glass, Sirius leers openly and says, "Trust me, I'm appreciating it, and the view from here. You're a fabulous piece of arse."

"And you are an uncouth mongrel." Malfoy suddenly appears furious.

"Oh for the love of - It was a compliment! You should feel thrilled, not snipe at me like I'd just insulted your mother. Honestly, I'd sell my mother for a piece of you. For a Dark Lord henchman, you're fucking dense." As he insults the blonde further, Sirius can see the storm raging in silver orbs. He gets up and makes his way over to the angry wizard. Taking the glass from his grasp, Sirius boldly steers Lucius towards the loveseat that is fixed near the huge French windows.

Realising that he has somewhat fucked up, Black slouches into the soft cushions and groans. "There's no filter between my brain and mouth; stuff just comes out."

"A gag ought to fix that problem," Lucius still sounds annoyed as he speaks.

"You know, you're not the first person to suggest it. I'd just find a way to annoy you without words."

Lucius settles next to Sirius, although stiffly, and remains silent, seemingly ignoring the other wizard.

"Admit it." Sirius grins. "You don't hate me at all, do you? If you say you have always fancied me, I might have a heart attack."

Lucius ignores the ex-convict, but his cold demeanour is starting to thaw. He can admit, only to himself, that Sirius is somewhat amusing.

"I was livid when that twat Cygnus announced that betrothal contract he all but forced Cissy into. Not only was she too good for any Malfoy, I didn't like the idea of calling you cousin Lucius. Couldn't bloody well wank to a family member."

Lucius raises a brow.

"For a horny teenager, I had some ethics that I wanted to uphold."

"You're still a horny teenager."

"True." Sirius muses and then wiggles his eyebrows. "Though less of a teenager, but randier."

"Spare me of any stories."

"Only if you tell me the truth about Snivellus. There hasn't been any shagging, right?"

"I'm not interested in incest. Severus is like a brother." Lucius' expression contorts into a disgusted grimace.

"Thank Merlin." Sirius exhales and smirks. He tugs the blond wizard forward, forcing Lucius to straddle Sirius. With a soft yank, Black brings him closer, nose to nose, and then kisses Lucius as he had done before. His hands roam the expanse of the blond's back to his hips and then over his thighs. Coming up for air, Sirius says with a glare, "If you're planning on kicking me in the bollocks again, just know that I'll be very much pissed off. I can't very well shag you if you damage my most precious parts."
Lucius snorts almost disbelievingly. "Sure of yourself, are you? As if-"

Sirius catches the wizard's lips in another kiss, swiftly ending whatever Lucius wants to say. With a confident smile, Sirius states the facts as he sees them. "I'm going to fuck you nice and hard and you'll love it. Got it?"

Sirius being Sirius - and not all that worried about proper decorum - slides his fingers down to the other's stomach and grabs a hold of his shirt. He rips it open, buttons flying everywhere and he has the audacity to laugh at the horrified look on Malfoy's face. Shirt forgotten, Sirius suppresses a low growl. Malfoy is fucking fit; not too powerfully built, but he is sinewy and strong and bloody hot. Pushing the restricting garments off, Sirius can't help himself and lets out a rumbling moan, "Bloody hell, you should be naked all the time."

"Not very practical."

"Fuck that." Sirius pants out and slides his fingers into Malfoy's hair, wanting another taste of him. Sirius says between kisses, "Love your mouth."

The position they are in is angled awkwardly and there isn't enough space to let hands wander free. Sirius manoeuvres the blond in his lap and with one arm holding him up and the other supporting his smooth rise from the loveseat, Sirius manages to walk them to the man's desk. Wiping everything off with a single swipe of his hand, Sirius lifts Lucius on his own desk and slots himself back between the wizard's spread legs.

Grabbing the dark-haired wizard's jaw and keeping him in place, Lucius chides, "I will not be taken on a desk."

"By all means, take us to your royal bedchambers, Lord Malfoy, so I can fuck you on silk sheets."

The crack of Apparation is sudden, but Sirius doesn't miss the fierce glare aimed his way before they are transported to another room. Presumably the Master bedroom.

Sirius doesn't have time to take in the colour of the curtains or the Persian rugs; the wizard's aim is to bury himself in Malfoy and claim him. His first move is forcing Lucius up against a wall with a thump, seeing as he is still connected to Sirius. Something shatters, a vase perhaps, but that is not important. However, getting rid of clothes is highly important and Sirius can't divest himself of his own items of clothing fast enough.

Unexpectedly enough, the frosty and otherwise aloof wizard is actually pretty eager and Sirius immediately likes it a lot. Lucius pushes away from him and wrenches the wizard's arm until he can shove him on the bed.

"Impatient, are we?" Sirius grins, his expression hungry.

The ring of silver in the blond's eyes is barely visible; they are almost black with need. Untamed and wicked. Sirius isn't one for sitting on his arse and reaches out to pull Malfoy closer. Even though Sirius doesn't like Malfoy's attitude most of the time, he is in heaven now.

Lucius has a sinful mouth and the wizard seems to pick up on the fact that Sirius likes his pleasure with a bit of pain. Clothes get removed the old-fashioned way; by roughly yanking and tearing and pulling. Sirius feels both his mood and lust rise as he rakes his eyes up and down the Slytherin's body. He really has a very fine arse and Sirius is very eager to get into it - but something else is making Sirius even more aroused. He can see that the Lucius effortlessly lets him gain control. However, that doesn't mean he is less in control or less arrogant; if anything, he is more bossy than
normal. Sirius is pretty sure he has the scratch marks to prove his point.

Sirius loves the smell of Lucius. It's as clean as night air during a storm and sweet like spring itself. Burying his nose in the silk-like hair, Sirius inhales deeply and brings his hands down the smooth skin on Lucius' back. His fingers dance down the lean muscle and curves, and they dip lower.

The blond wizard lets Sirius haul him up to rest against his thighs and he wraps his legs around the Black's hips. Bare skin slides against bare skin, muscles straining under it as Sirius pins Lucius to the bed with his whole body and boldly slants his lips over the other's, seeking entrance. His arms sneak to capture Lucius' wrists and he locks them together above the wizard's head while trailing his lips down inch after inch. He needs to worship every part of the blond wizard. He wants to adore the body he has been so willingly offered.

"Make it worth my while, Black."

Sirius snorts. "You say the sweetest things, Malfoy."

Since the blond is normally a prick to Sirius and the dark-haired wizard has a pretty solid memory, he doesn't care if he is being gentle or not. He slides his hand down Malfoy's legs and hooks his fingers under his knees, hauling him closer.

The soft light illuminating the room is warm like the sunset and cloaks Lucius in a golden light, his pale skin glowing with it. He doesn't let Sirius loiter and pulls him in with a narrowed look, a sliver of desire in hooded eyes. He lets out a breathless gasp as Sirius compels him to spread his legs open and guides a finger to his opening.

Lucius hisses out in pain; like a furious feline and Sirius finds sadistic delight in that. "Sweet Morgana, you're not a virgin, are you?" Sirius asks, half-growling and half-smirking, and attempts to loosen the blond up for more to come. The dark-haired wizard slips another finger into the tight opening and drinks in every moan and delicate whimper that leaves the blond, but he doesn't stop. He cannot.

Lucius glares coolly. "Just been a while."

Sirius moves like a master conducting a symphony. He feels like a beast that slips and soars and stalks through a forest in the night and finds himself inside that very moment. The blond's legs are splayed against his hips; so wanton and powerful and vulnerable. Sirius moves without a single thought in his head and readily pushes his cock in as deep as it is allowed - and it is a feeling of divine sin.

The velvet that grips him is magic itself. He moves like it is familiar; like he has always been inside that maddening heat of this beautiful wizard. Sirius feels his muscles starting to ache and he coaxes Lucius to sit on his lap, legs astride.

Lucius moves without hesitation, without taking his eyes away from Sirius and rocks back and forth. The feeling of lust is like a river rushing down a narrow pathway, never to be contained. Lucius' lips are soft and inviting, a serpent with its fangs hidden away, and Sirius falls over the edge of sanity. He wishes he could live without breath, swallowing each whimper Lucius slips between his lips. He
thrusts up over and over again, a part of him trying to mark the blond in ways that no one ever has and never will again.

"Fuck, you're tight," Black grunts, but he can't help himself and laughs. Bringing his mouth to the blond's lips, Sirius swallows all the moans and whimpers.

"Additional preparation would have been nice."

"Maybe next time," Sirius professes.

Hair no longer as pristine, a pink flush creeping down his neck and shoulders, an unholy halo around him - Sirius thinks that he has died and gone to heaven. The rise and fall of the body pressed against him is enough to send him over the edge.

"This is a one-off, Black; don't go thinking otherwise."

"Don't break my heart or anything," Sirius mocks and roughly thrusts up to emphasise his taunt. He grabs the wizard by the hips and holds him in place. Despite turning it into a joke, Sirius hopes for at least a repeat performance; his appetite for Malfoy isn't gone and will not be sated with just one romp. But he isn't bringing it up at the moment.

For a standoffish prat, Lucius is rather wanton and Sirius is loving every minute of it. He is going to taunt him each chance he gets if he actually survives the night.

There is a strange sense in the air around them; a vibration of magic. A flash of awareness invades the muddled minds of the wizards tied in a sweaty tangle of limbs - **sex magic**. It is nothing more than naturally produced magical energy; it can happen between magical humans during a particularly ardent physical interaction. Nothing more will come of it, nothing to bind them, but it offers heated sensations. It offers heightened desire.

It purrs around them, against their skins. Sirius feels it as he slides inside the body in his arms and wrings desperate cries from Lucius' throat. He crushes Lucius against his body more ferociously. The blond slips his arms around Black's shoulders, tightening them as his body tightens around Sirius cock in turn. A trickle of sweat gathers in the hollow of Sirius' throat but a tear glides down Lucius' cheek to join it. The ache is bone-deep - so close and yet out of reach.

Sirius jerks without coordination as he fills Lucius to the hilt and his pleasure is pulled from him by the constricting muscle around his cock. He shudders and Lucius trembles all over as the magic moves around them and quivers like the wings of a bird. He lets Lucius slide down on the bed and goes with him, arranging his body to settle behind the blond. Instead of feeling utterly used, Sirius feels grateful. Like a blessed man.

A few moments later, Lucius shifts and takes a juddering breath. He looks half-satisfied and wholly arrogant as he pushes Sirius flat on his back and smoothly straddles him again like he belongs there. The sexually charged magical energy returns, entering every part of Sirius. He is in control of his mind, perfectly so, but the magic fills his cock and makes him horny as hell. Again.

It shouldn't really work like that - but sex magic isn't something that works as one would expect. It is nothing sinister, but it is surprising. Sex magic cannot be created without magical compatibility. Sirius wants to curl up in laughter because he and Lucius might be more **well-suited** than they want to be.

The renewed hardness of his cock isn't something Sirius minds because that means that the night is not over. He gets to have Lucius for a bit longer.
The blond slides his fingers around Sirius cock and twists. He moves his hand like an artist; slipping it up and down so efficiently that Sirius wants to cry. Every inch of the man's skin in tight with lust and prickle pain. He blinks his eyes open when Lucius slants forward and slowly sinks down with a look of rapture on his exquisite face. His hair falls over his shoulder, strands of it sticking to his face. Sirius reaches out and pushes it away, dragging his thumb over pliant lips. Lucius toys with him and doesn't let Sirius control the action. He moves with unbearable slowness in his limbs, like a languid dance for two, but it's burning Sirius to the core. He groans and the madness in his eyes flashes bright, but Lucius keeps him on a tight leash.

The frustrating tempo is making something ache deep inside and it has nothing to do with magical energy. It is pure anger that bubbles; it rages against the cruelty of being plucked like a cord of a fine instrument by this proud wizard. But Sirius doesn't care if a demon lives inside Lucius because he has seen shadows and owns secrets of his own. He is not untainted.

Sirius bares his teeth as Lucius trembles above him like something sacred and his cock jerks without a single touch. The grip around his cock pushes Sirius over and he comes. He takes perverse pleasure in knowing that Lucius is full of him; has been marked irrevocably by Sirius Black. The humming magic around them drapes over them like a soft whisper and Lucius collapses on top of Sirius. A shaky breath leaves Lucius like a hiss.

Pushing the wizard to the side, Sirius thrust inside again, pulling a gentle yet injured moan from Lucius. They stay joined for a while, almost docile in manner. Sirius can't resist the attraction; he knows that he won't be satisfied ever again. The pull of all that fair splendour and elegance has hooked its claws into his flesh; unrelenting and inconsiderate.

Sirius breaks the silence. "That was fucking brill. I don't think I can move right now."

"Shut up, Black," Lucius mumbles, voice smothered by Sirius' neck. He is too drained, too overwrought to even move. Speaking feels like a foreign thought; completely pointless.

Sirius has a stupid grin on his face as he drawls out, "Told you I would give you a wild ride." He is still chuckling when Lucius kicks his calf. The wizard cries out and exclaims, "That bloody hurt!"

"Does it look like I care? Pull up the covers." Lucius demands, feeling the last of the swathing magic fade away. He cares nothing for the tackiness covering his skin. He can't bring himself to feel indignation.

"You really are charming, Malfoy. Wonder what you're like after waking up." Black mutters but does as he is told, searching the edge of the discarded sheet with his free hand. Lucius is sprawled over him and he clearly isn't moving. He isn't even awake anymore and Sirius can only express his frustration to himself. Sirius closes his eyes as well. The pleasant hum inside his head lulls him to sleep.
If pigs could fly

Chapter Two

If pigs could fly

The bright morning light that blinds Sirius is far from pleasant. With an irritated groan, the Animagus shields his eyes by throwing an arm over his them and promptly curses under his breath. The blinding beams of sunlight are alien. He always has the curtains drawn and the sun blocked out; it is strange to wake up with so much light. Removing his arm, Sirius blinks his eyes a few times to adjust and then lifts his head a bit. The room is lavish - all dark furniture and decadent fabrics.

Sirius definitely doesn't remember his room ever being this pristine. Not to mention so clean.

The previous night comes flooding back when he feels a slight ache in his muscles, having been subjected to vigorous exercising the night before. With a satisfied grin, Sirius closes his eyes and deducts two things - he hasn't been kicked out yet and he is still breathing. And that only means that Lucius doesn't dislike him as much as he claims. The thought is cut short when he is pushed out of bed, the polished floor offering him a hard landing. He yelps and flails about as the sheet goes over the edge with him and twists around him.

"Get out, Black."

Sirius sits up and groans, rubbing his stinging elbow. "Warn a bloke next time; that hurt my arse."

Lucius is sitting on the bed, wearing a silk dressing gown that only serves to make him look more regal. Sirius gets back on his feet and stands by the bed, only a sheet hanging over his shoulder and covering him up. He would definitely enjoy the blond in the mornings, looking very appetising in silk; a few sleek strands of hair tucked behind his ear giving him a look that says 'I just woke up this perfect. Deal with it'.

"In case I wasn't clear enough before, there will not be a next time, Black. Get dressed and get out."

"You're so sweet in the morning, Luce," the Animagus hums and flops back on to the mattress with a bounce, "like a daydream."

Lucius makes a move to stand, but Sirius is faster and grabs the blond's arm, pulling him back down. The skimpy-looking robe slides to his shoulders, revealing pale porcelain skin. Making quick work of discarding the sheet, Sirius pins the man to the bed. "Now, now... No need to show me your claws, Malfoy. I think we ought to discuss this mutually beneficial arrangement."

The wizard raises a brow. "And what arrangement would that be, Black?"

Sirius elaborates with an amused smile, "Well, I have a perfectly working cock that is very happy to be around you and if last night is anything to go by, you seem to like it as well. Now, I heard you the first time, but do you really want this to be a one-off? I'm not suggesting anything other than sex; Merlin knows we'd kill each other if we had to spend actual time together."

"You really are full of yourself," Lucius says, but he hasn't protested yet. Something Sirius counts as a good sign.
"You were pretty full of me last night." the Animagus smirks. "So...do you accept my generous offer of casual shagging?"

Shoving the Animagus off, Lucius reverses their positions and sits astride the wizard's legs. Not that Sirius minds of course. "If I agree to this...arrangement, you will agree to my terms."

"Fine, whatever you wish," the wizard beams.

"You will not mention this to anyone, Black. We are not friends nor will we ever be. I wish to see you as little as possible outside of this room. I expect you to follow a few simple rules and nothing more. Do not go bragging. And do not tell anyone about what happened last night."

"You mean that part about sex magic?" Sirius raises a brow and received a very pointed glare as a reply. Lucius really does not want to discuss the fact that their magical energies are rather similar. It is a piece of information Sirius stores away for later and he gives a nod. "I can keep my mouth shut, you know. It's not like I want to tell anyone that I'm shagging you. And trust me, you are a lot more appealing inside the bedroom than out of it."

"As long as we are in agreement, Black," the blond wizard says and starts to get up, but Sirius doesn't like that and sits up, curling his arm around the man's waist. Lucius realises that it is a position that brings him immense satisfaction, but he pushes the thought far and deep, never to resurface again.

"How about sealing the deal with a kiss?" Sirius suggests, sneaking his other hand downwards towards the tied ends of silk. Slightly tugging on it, the wizard grins smugly when he feels the lithe body pressed against him tense up. "Oh, so you do like the idea."

The elf carrying a message to his Master turns abruptly when he hears loud moans. He squeaks and flees the scene. It certainly isn't any of her business.

*****

Downstairs in the dining room, a group of people are sitting down for breakfast. Severus has arrived with Draco in tow, the two basking in the fact that summer break is upon them. The O.W.L level exams have taken a lot out of students and teachers alike. Not to mention the mess with the pink monstrosity and the Weasley twits.

Severus is especially grateful to be away from Dumbledore. The man's inane ramblings are hard to swallow. And Severus is usually the one to suffer through them.

Narcissa greets her son with a kiss on the cheek and guides him towards the table. Her smile is warm as she says, "Darling, I missed you."

"Mother, you see me more often than any other parent sees their offspring." Draco points out and reminds the witch that he can Floo over whenever he wants using Severus' personal Floo that Dumbledore doesn't know about. Draco starts piling his plate with fruit and toast, making the witch fuss over him.

As Snape takes a seat as well, he glances around. Narcissa sees it and informs the man before turning back to her son. "Lucius seems to have slept in; I haven't seen him all morning. He is certainly no early riser, but I find it odd that he has not joined us for breakfast. After all, it is Draco's first day
back from Hogwarts."

"Very peculiar indeed."

Speaking of the man, Severus shortly spies the wizard walking into the dining room, wearing an annoyed expression that Lucius rarely lets anyone else see; only among family. When he sits down, slightly wincing, Severus makes a note of it. He is known for catching small insignificant cues. It makes him wonder. Two or three darkening bruises on his neck make Snape wonder some more. Clearly, the wizard has not slipped in the shower or hasn't bumped into something to get distinctive looking bruises on his neck. Unless the manor has a problem with leeching parasites.

Having just poured himself a cup of coffee, Severus comes to regret taking a mouthful soon enough as he sees Sirius Black in all his idiotic glory. Choking on the drink, Snape coughs. Talk about parasites...

"Have mercy! It's too early for Snivellus."

Narcissa turns to see her cousin waltzing in, wearing questionable attire and grinning. Draco's toast is halfway in his mouth, but he isn't doing any biting or chewing; it is just there, shocked in place.

"You let that in?" Severus sneers at Lucius, who simply presses two fingers to his temple to stave off a headache that is undoubtedly going to strike any moment now.

"I could say the same about you," says Sirius and grabs a chair, pulling it out for himself and slumping into it. Only Severus seems to notice that it is closer to Lucius than Narcissa. The dark-haired professor states with disdain, "I didn't know this place was so poorly warded."

"There will be no childish quarrelling at the table," Narcissa warns. "You are civilised wizards, not uncouth Muggles."

Sirius glares at the Potion Master but doesn't say anything. Instead, he turns his attention towards the witch. "Can't I visit my favourite cousin on a whim?"

Severus eyes the Animagus suspiciously. Or rather eyes his disarrayed looks and the side-eye Black is giving Lucius; although it is clearly meant to be inconspicuous. He, too, has reddened marks decorating his skin...very suspiciously located almost exactly like Lucius'.

"Of course you can visit, Sirius," Narcissa says warmly, daring anyone to dispute her. "Would you like to stay for lunch as well? We would have a chance to talk; I have not seen you for ages."

"I'd love to, but I'm supposed to be hiding away in Grimmauld Place. I don't want Shacklebolt to get too curious; he already thinks I spend most of my time sneaking away to visit the whores of Knockturn Alley. Hah, as if I couldn't get a proper shag without paying for it." Sirius shoots an almost lewd look at Lucius who is pretending that he does not notice.

"I'm truly shocked that no one has discovered your double-cross," Severus sneers. "With your minuscule brain, it is a miracle that you haven't incriminated yourself."

Sirius hums in delight. "I'm glad to have shocked you, Snivellus. Makes my day really." The Animagus turns his gaze towards the younger blond and asks, "So, mini-Malfoy, you're friends with Harry?"

Draco is unsure and silently shares glances with his family and Snape.

"Kid, I know you get along with him, no need to look so panicky. Just asking 'cause I'm nosy. He is
my godson, you know; I have an avid interest in his wellbeing. Who he befriends, who he dates..."
Sirius trails off with a grimace, no doubt remembering that Harry is seeing the Dark Lord - in a very adult manner no less.

"We are friends, yes," Draco clarifies, sipping his own coffee.

"How come you didn't tell me that my godson and the Dark Lord are making puppy eyes at each other?" Sirius asks Narcissa, glaring at the witch. "I only ever pretended to be Light because of Harry - years of annoying pretence just for him - but now I find out that he's been holding hands with Voldemort behind my back."

Narcissa chuckles. "We were not instructed to say anything. Harry Potter was under the impression that you were fighting for Dumbledore and the Dark Lord did not want him to know that you are really against Dumbledore. Perhaps he had his reasons for doing so, and perhaps he has a reason for making sure Harry found you out."

Severus drawls. "Potter was afraid to tell you, believing that you would reject him after learning about his true nature and the Dark Lord saw it as an opportunity to keep you close to Dumbledore and his Order for a bit longer. You were simply a convenient source of information for as long as you believed that Potter was Light. He no longer needs Potter to be in the dark about your loyalties."

"That makes me feel so much better," Sirius replies with no small amount of dryness. "I'm kicking the Order out on the street as soon as Harry says it's time; can't stand those idiots. I'm being held captive in my own damn house, they keep tabs on me like I'm some kind of criminal. Monitoring my post, giving me guarded looks and Molly Weasley keeps nagging at me as if I was one of her brats. Fucking hypocrites!"

Only Narcissa takes notice of the man's tirade and sends him a look filled with sympathy. "Siri, language."

Severus and Draco start speaking about potions and exams and there seems to be a moment of silence as everyone busies themselves with their breakfast. When Lucius coughs, having choked on his own hot beverage, Severus glances at him with narrowed eyes. Sirius is looking perfectly innocent, buttering his toast as he discreetly rubs his foot up the blond's leg. The Animagus has taken a seat to Malfoy's left, opposite Draco. The boy doesn't notice anything out of the ordinary happening.

Sirius trails his foot up until he reaches Lucius' knee and keeps it in place. Clearing his throat, the blond pushes his chair back and stands.

"Leaving so soon?" Sirius asks with a glint in his eyes. "Don't you like our family reunion?"

"Don't outstay your welcome, Black," says the fair-haired wizard and strides out of the room.

Severus finishes his coffee and stands as well. He has a reason to leave, having left a potion brewing hours earlier, but he is also interested to know why Lucius is so eager to leave. He has a theory, but he hopes he is wrong. Oh, how he hopes to be wrong. Excusing himself as well, Snape stalks out of the room, robes sweeping behind him as he goes.

He finds Lucius in his study, going over papers that have cluttered his desk for weeks. Though Snape notices that some are scattered on the floor, also under the desk, and there are two empty glasses on the small table to his right.

Severus hasn't bothered with knocking and just glides in and takes a seat on the settee by the
window. He stares at the blond but does not speak, just sitting and picking invisible lint from his sleeve.

"Is there something you need, Severus?"

"Not particularly, merely curious as to why your study looks this disorganised."

Lucius places his quill on the desk and leans back. "Have you nothing better to do than scrutinise the neatness of my personal study? Such strange hobbies you have, my friend."

Severus grumbles, losing whatever patience he had before. "Do shut up, Lucius. How you can stoop so low is beyond me. The dog! Lucius, really? I sincerely hope that you didn't get fleas from him."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Lucius says offhandedly.

"Don't insult my intelligence, Lucius - you know perfectly well what I am talking about." Severus huffs. "Out of all the possible wizards out there, you took that immature Gryffindor cretin to bed? I didn't think you were that desperate for a shag."

"Oh, sod off!" the blond snaps. "I don't have to explain myself to you."

Snape snorts and huffs in displeasure. "I didn't ask for an explanation; I'm simply interested in knowing what could have possibly possessed you to sleep with Sirius Black. The thought alone makes me cringe in disgust."

"You're only saying it because you loathe him."

"A sentiment I thought we shared, but as it turns out, you don't loathe him enough to keep your fucking legs closed."

The blond wizard summons the bottle of firewhisky he has in his cupboard and a clean glass for himself. The two glasses on his desk vanish, courtesy of the elf who is responsible for keeping the study immaculate.

Snape grunts. "Get me a glass as well, I need to wash the image out or I'll be brain damaged for the rest of my life."

Summoning another glass for Severus, the blond man pours out the alcohol and says, "Frankly, it does not concern you who I spread my legs for."

"As if I'd care otherwise, but we're talking about Black. That's unforgivable and you know it."

"Get over yourself, Sev. You didn't get along in school, but you're not in school anymore. He's a follower of the Dark Lord, a pure-blood wizard from a powerful family. Of course, he's an immature twit, but I'm hardly dating him. It's just a physical understanding we agreed upon."

"It's still repulsive." Severus makes a face and downs his drink. "At least tell me he was an inadequate lover. Tell me that he failed miserably, that he's all mouth and no trousers."

Lucius doesn't say anything, only looks down at his drink with a slight smugness and that makes Snape rumble with annoyance. "At least have the graciousness to lie."

The blond states, "There will not be a repeat."

"Do you think me stupid? Naturally, there will be one. You will most certainly continue this physical understanding."
"Perhaps." Lucius hums. "We started on that very sofa you're sitting on."

Severus shoots up and glares, his face set in a disgusted scowl. He smoothes his robe, though it looks as if he is wiping his hands clean, and says in a low tone. "I despise you right now, Lucius."

"I'm so glad we had this talk, old friend." Lucius chuckles as Snape slams the glass on the desk and stalks towards the door and slams it shut.

*****

Two weeks go by and during that time nothing significant happens. Harry and Draco are both enjoying their summer vacation. Well, in Harry's case, he has to enjoy staying with the Dursleys. Fortunately for him, both Vernon and Petunia are now afraid that Harry will kill them in their sleep and the risk of Sirius Black - the mass-murderer and escaped convict - coming for a visit makes the Dursley family cower in fear. So they have left Harry alone and have not said a word to Dumbledore about Black picking the boy up and taking him away while giving them the middle finger. Escaping the Order's watchful eye is hard, but Sirius has been sneaking around for years.

When the end of July comes closer, Fudge finally admits that the Dark Lord - the bane of everyone's existence - is back and not about to stay quiet in the shadows. Attack after attack, wizarding villages are targeted; many go missing, but they are all somehow connected with the Order. Soon enough, everyone figures out that Voldemort only targets those who are actively fighting against him, and that means that if you keep your nose out of any type of rebellion, you are relatively safe. Harry isn't one for graphic violence; for now, he prefers to stay ignorant to whatever Tom is doing if it doesn't directly affect him in some way.

The clear summer day is proving to be a hot one and Harry is lounging outside on the terrace, half-asleep on the love-seat that the teen uses as an outdoor bed. It is one of those rare days, an Order-free day that Harry doesn't get to have very often because of the tight security the Order has established in the old house they are all hiding in. The sun is out and warming the Gryffindor's naked shoulders. Life seems good.

When a shadow appears in front of the sun, Harry lifts his head and squints to see what is blocking the source of warmth. He doesn't have his glasses on so the image is blurry at best. "Oi, piss off whoever you are!"

"Is that how you talk to your beloved?"

Harry shields his eyes with his hand and smirks. Tom picks up the teen's glasses and hands them to Harry, chuckling as the teen blinks and smiles.

"What are you doing?"

Harry stretches and hums. "Enjoying my freedom, sunbathing, napping - all of those apply."

Tom lowers himself to the love-seat and motions Harry to move into his lap. Throwing one arm around Tom's neck, Harry presses his forehead against the other wizard's face. "Don't make me leave you again. I know why I have to keep up this ridiculous show, but I can't take it anymore." Harry huffs and adds with a groan, "I'm this close to killing the lot of them; ask Siri if you don't believe me."
Nuzzling the teen's neck, Voldemort sighs. "I know you cannot stand them, but Dumbledore has to believe that he has you, that you will save them all. It will make his ruin all the more satisfying."

"I just miss being careless. I have to watch what I say all the time, I have to restrain myself and act like I give a shite. If it wasn't for Sirius, I'd go mad. Thankfully, Snape's been trying to teach me how to protect my mind from Dumbledore's intrusions. Trying being the operative word."

"I try to give them enough work so that you can leave the house undetected."

"It's your fault that Dumbledore decided to drag me to Grimmauld Place; you started a bloody war and made it dangerous for me to stay with my loving Muggle relatives. So technically it's your doing and I should be angry with you," Harry says and crosses his arms.

Tom only laughs.

"It's really not that funny," Harry says and sulks. "Since you so rudely interrupted my nap, I think you ought to make it up to me before I have to get back to Grimmauld."

"Would lunch in the sunroom satisfy you?"

"Depends really." Harry shrugs. "Will we be alone?"

Tom gently thumbs the boy's bottom lip and says, "How else can I enjoy your company. With Black constantly shadowing you, I'd be surprised if we could manage one simple lunch date."

"He's been muttering about dirty old perverts ever since he found out."

Tom growls. "I'm not a dirty old pervert."

"Yes, you are...but I want you anyway," Harry says and gives the man a peck on the cheek. "Sirius is protective and he would rather see me as a little boy than snogging the Dark Lord."

"Perhaps I should Crucio him until he can't see at all."

Harry chides, "Leave Siri alone. Now, you mentioned lunch and I'm hungry."

Tom stands, hauling the younger wizard over his shoulder. The Dark Lord smirks and carries Harry back inside, the teen's laughter fading as they disappear from view.

*****

"Harry's going to be here soon, so where's the cake?" Draco says, head whipping around as he tries to locate Dobby. The elf who had just been there but is now gone. Narcissa breezes by him and opens the large doors that lead to the ballroom. There is a table filled with various foods; a proper amount of delicious grub to celebrate a birthday.

Dobby pops into view again and he is jumping up and down. "Master Harry's birthday cake be done, Dobby wills bring it out when Master Harry arrives."

Draco gives a nod. "And the special guests our Lord invited?"

"It is done, sir. Dobby has everything ready for Master Harry."

Draco waves the elf to get on with his duties and walks into the decorated ballroom. Narcissa is
adding finishing touches when the young blond finds her.

"I can't believe Harry's never had a proper birthday."

Narcissa sighs sadly. "Growing up with those beastly Muggles... Sirius did say that they always celebrated their own son's birthday, but never Harry's. The poor boy must have felt so alone all those years. It's a good thing Sirius takes care of him now."

Draco snorts. "By the looks of it, I'd say that the Dark Lord is taking care of Harry. Black is just his pet dog."

"Cousin Sirius hasn't had the best life, now has he? Imagine spending years in Azkaban, knowing that you deserved none of it. I for one am happy to have him back in the family; we were always close as children."

"Severus hates him with a passion." Draco points out.

Narcissa waves her hand in a dismissive manner and states, "Holding onto school yard grudges - ridiculous if you ask me. Your father was no angel when we were in school, always picking on me, but we grew up and left the childish antics behind us. Although, it is a miracle that I didn't hang him up by his hair. I was tempted more than once."

Draco chuckles and asks, "Do you think Harry will like it? He's not one for surprises, I know that much."

The witch smiles, looking around the ballroom. "He will love it."

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Harry indeed likes it and laps up the attention. Tom has invited those he trusts completely and in addition, he has prepared another surprise. Harry almost drops his goblet when he sees Fred and George Weasley, with Luna and Neville standing next to them.

"Happy birthday, Harry dearest. The Weasley twins humbly request an audience," says Fred. He has a large box in his arms.

George immediately goes to Harry's side and pulls him into a hug. "How about you give the Dark Lord the slip and run away with me and Freddy."

Tom is not amused and George backs away a little, but still stays close enough to throw his arm around the teen's shoulder. "Got you a box of fireworks and other ingenious Weasley products for pranking purposes."

"Everything has been tested on little ickle Ronniekins, so you shouldn't worry about it." Fred grins.

Harry snorts. "Thanks, guys."

Luna hugs Harry as well and pushes something into his hands. "Happy birthday, Harry."

Harry smiles and unwraps the package, revealing a book. More specifically a book about fun bedroom games for couples. Harry blushes scarlet and shoves it under his arm as Neville approaches with a shy expression and gives the teen a hug. He hands Harry a box of sweets and broom
maintenance kit.

Luna states matter-of-factly, "Neville should help you blow out the candles."

Harry recalls that Neville's birthday party had been held a day before and Dumbledore had totally fucked up his plans to go see the other Gryffindor and wish him a happy birthday. So he says, "Of course, we'll share the honour. I'm sorry I couldn't come, I was locked up."

"It's okay, I spent it with my Gran. Luna came too."

"As far as the Order is concerned, I'm still with my Muggle relatives. At least I don't have to celebrate my birthday in a house full of loud redheads."

Fred laughs. "Hear, hear!"

While the adults mind their own business and mingle among themselves, Harry gathers the younger wizards and the blonde witch towards the windows and has Dobby serve them drinks. Draco had sauntered over as well and attempts to blend in without being blatantly obvious. That is until Luna stares at him and smiles.

"For the love of Merlin, sit down will you!" Harry demands, having seen the blond wizard hovering around them.

"Yeah, sit down, Draco...you can sit in my lap if you want," Fred says and wiggled his eyebrows while leering at the wizard.

"Feel free to sit next to me, I won't try to molest you," George remarks. "Maybe just prank you."

Harry snorts when he notices Draco's uncomfortable expression and Luna's constant staring. Harry can tell that Luna is very much hoping that Draco will sit next to her instead.

"Oh, I almost forgot," George quips and pulls something from his inner pocket. It is a triangle shaped pendant with a ruby fixed in the middle. "It's from Bill; he's in Egypt at the moment, but he wanted us to say that he wishes you a happy birthday and to give you this. One of the many cool things he has found on his travels. It's charmed to detect poison; the ruby will heat up when you've consumed something poisonous or any potion that could be harmful to you. Pretty neat if you ask us."

"In case Dumbledore slips something into your pumpkin juice," Fred adds.

Harry fastens it around his neck and says, "It's lovely and please tell Bill that I appreciate it."

"You know, Bill doesn't think less of you for not wanting to help the Order, though he doesn't know that you're working with the Dark Lord. We lost all trust in Dumbledore after what happened to Ginny. He let that happen and he's just as responsible for her death as Voldemort. Bill couldn't forgive and forget as everyone else in our family has done and he can't play nice with Mum and Dad who both blindly follow Dumbledore."

Fred is nodding along. "We don't have much contact with our family either, except Bill. They're all barmy, heads so far up Dumbledore's arse they can't see what's right in front of them. Mum even said that she's so disappointed in us because we don't have respectable jobs in the Ministry. When Charlie pissed off to Romania to fondle dragons, Mum didn't say a thing...and we're the ones shaming her? Go figure."

"Let's not talk about Dumbledore or any of the other Order gits. I want to enjoy my night away from them and celebrate with my true friends."
"You should cut the cake now," Luna suggests.

"Mother said she had some gifts for you as well," Draco says and watches as Harry's eyes lit up.

The green-eyed teen asks with excitement. "Your mum got me presents?"

"We all did," Draco says proudly and asks, "Did you really think we wouldn't get you birthday presents? Come on, Potty."

Harry follows the blond and the rest tag along. Narcissa sees them approach and brandishes her wand, giving it a swift flick and making gift-wrapped parcels float into the room. She, too, notices the teen's eyes sparkling with something akin to wonder. It occurs to the witch that Harry has probably never had presents given to him on his birthday. It is such a maddening thought that Narcissa wishes she could visit the horrid Muggles and remove their spines.

She pushes the thought away for now and pulls the green-eyed boy into a fierce hug. She only releases the teen when Harry gives a slight wiggle in her arms. She says, "I do hope that you enjoy our gifts to you, Harry."

From Narcissa, the young wizard gets a beautiful wand holster made of dark leather, with golden fastenings and clasps. Harry loves it and already plans to use it as soon as he can get away with it. He receives a crate of potions from Severus; useful stuff that he could never make himself. There is also three bottles of Polyjuice in case Harry ever needs it. The hatred between Snape and Harry is mostly fabricated by the two wizards themselves, though Severus can admit to some lingering annoyance towards the boy. However, that is only because every now and then, James Potter would surface in the teen. Mostly, the boy shows intellect and just the right amount of Slytherin traits.

Draco has chosen a collection of books about the Dark Arts and Quidditch. Lucius is an unlikely gift-giver, same as Severus, but he has, too, has procured a gift for the teen. Harry unwraps the small box of blue velvet and inside he finds a leather bracelet with a silver ornament of Celtic design. Curious as to why Lucius would get him jewellery, Harry frowns.

"It's a Portkey that will take you through the protective wards around Malfoy Manor."

Harry is surprised that Lucius has basically offered him an open invitation to visit Malfoy Manor if he so wants. It is also very thoughtful because Harry is constantly edgy and ready to dump the Order and run like hell. Not to mention, Harry doesn't know how to Apparate yet.

Then Sirius pulls Harry into a loose hug and says, "I know I haven't been there for you like I was meant to, but there's nothing I can do about that now. I was always meant to look after you, Harry."

Harry nods, "I know, Siri."

"Your dad trusted me," Sirius goes on, "your mum not so much; she thought I'd teach you pranks and encourage you to challenge authority, whatever that means...anyway, they named me as the person who would raise you should anything happen to them. It didn't quite turn out like they wanted, but I'm here now. I can't make it official yet, but you are my heir. You're my kid, Harry. I know James and Lily wouldn't mind sharing you with me."

"I'd like that," Harry says, clearing his throat to unclog it, "I'm happy to be a part of your family. I've never really had that - somewhere to belong."

The most surprising gift giver is Bellatrix who steps forward with her contribution. Harry just stands there dumbfounded when the witch gives him a kiss on the cheek and hands Harry a dagger. The weapon is encased in a black leather sheath. The hilt of the dagger is carved, rune markings running
along the handle. The blade itself is razor-sharp and cool against the teen's hand; no doubt sharp enough to cut his fingers off with a single swipe across. There are three emeralds lining the end of the handle where Harry's fingers wrap around it. There is an insignia on the blade and Harry recognises the Black crest.

"For cutting up your enemies, little Lord."

"Um...this is really awesome, Aunt Trix," Harry tells her with glittering eyes.

Fred sighs wistfully. "Wish Bellatrix was my aunt."

Tom meets Harry's gaze across the room and he whispers in the teen's mind. *Cut the cake, my lovely, for there is one gift left.*

Harry motions Neville to join him and they blow out the candles while the twins cheer and holler like rowdy lunatics. Then Harry takes the knife from Dobby and slides it through the sweet dessert. Tom's gaze never wavers, watching as Harry brings the knife to his lips and licks the icing off the blade. Fred and George are already passing out the cake when Harry gravitates towards the Dark Lord. No one minds nor wants to call the teen out on it.

Tom rakes his hands down the teen's sides and pulls Harry in for a chaste kiss, something that is witnessed by Sirius who hasn't stopped glaring since Harry told him about their relationship. Tom takes great pleasure in rubbing it in and making Black glare.

"I have a gift as well."

"Dumbledore's head floating in a jar?"

"Not quite. I'm afraid nothing as vivid as Dumbledore's lifeless body or his detached head." Tom chuckles and reaches into his robe pocket, pulling out a scroll. Harry raises a brow at that.

"You got me a scroll of parchment? Hope you got me matching stationery." Tom holds the scroll out for the teen who takes it with a cautious expression, his eyes never leaving Tom's face. Rolling the parchment open, Harry scans it and then frowns. He reads the last part again and then he shouts out, excitement bubbling in his voice. "You got me Sirius?"

"No need to shout, Harry." Tom winces.

Harry reads the parchment again to be absolutely sure and all but cries. "You had Siri's name cleared...he's free to do what he wants. I can't believe you got me Sirius for my birthday. This is the best birthday ever."

Sirius, having heard his name being shouted loudly enough to raise the dead, strolls closer to see why Harry is calling out his name. He reaches the teen when Harry launches himself at the Dark Lord, wrapping his arms around his neck and kissing him.

"Oi, why'd you shout my name for? I don't want to see you snogging old Voldy over here." Sirius glares daggers and pulls a face. Instead of saying something coherent, Harry jumps on the Animagus and hugs him tightly. Sirius brings his arms around the teen, though he is understandably confused.

"Bambi, are you feeling okay? Did you get into the wine?"

"Tom got me the best birthday gift."

"There better not be anything but innocent kisses or Padfoot will bite his bollocks off," Sirius warns, still having an armful of Harry.
The teen is smiling as he says, "Siri, you're a free man. Your name has been cleared, you don't have to hide in Grimmauld anymore."

"What are you on about, Harry?"

Harry shows the Animagus what he is on about. "This is your pardon, Siri, signed by the Minister himself. You're officially a free man as of today; no more hiding and running. You have been exonerated."

"Is this real? You're not pulling my leg, are you?"

Tom, growing tired of the conversation, says, "Black, you are no longer a wanted criminal. Enjoy your freedom and try not to end up in Azkaban again, for I will not help you a second time."

"I need a bloody minute," Sirius groans. "Better yet, I need a drink."

"This is a good thing, Siri." Harry tries to say upon seeing his godfather looking a bit queasy and still very much perplexed.

"This is fucking brilliant, but I have trouble believing that it's actually happening. The last time I was a free man, you were in nappies. It's overwhelming, that's all."

Harry smiles but then he recalls something and asks Tom, "What about Dumbledore? Won't he find this a little odd?"

"The Minister is responsible for this pardon; he found it prudent to look into an old case and since Pettigrew has miraculously come back from the dead and has been delivered to the Aurors by a concerned citizen, there is no longer any doubt that Black was wrongfully convicted and the Ministry is lucky if he doesn't demand compensation for his terrible ordeal. All charges have been dropped and the good old Minister has personally written an apology," Tom explains with a small smirk. "Frankly, I don't care what Dumbledore thinks; there is nothing illegal about this pardon. He can't do anything about it without appearing too eager to get Black's pardon overruled."

"You're amazing, did you know that?" Harry says and gives the Dark Lord another kiss.

"Can you not suck face when I'm standing right here and having a personal crisis." Sirius barks.

"Perhaps you should go and reacquaint yourself with the concept of being a free wizard," Tom suggests or rather orders with a piercing glare that promises torture then and there.

Sirius stalks away, holding the parchment in his hands, still not fully believing that he is no longer required to hide. He wants three things as he walks towards the others; a strong drink, a chance to gloat in front of Snape and then he wants to drag Lucius into an empty room and do some snogging of his own.

Harry watches him go. "That was a sneaky thing to do."

"Naturally. I'm a Slytherin."

"Did you know that Sirius wants to make me his official heir? Because this seems like you knew beforehand."

Tom shrugs. "His mind is far too open sometimes."

"So you ordered his pardon because you wanted to please me, knowing that Sirius wanting to claim
me as his heir would make me happy? That's some plan you had there, Tom."

"Perhaps."

Harry hums with amusement but doesn't pester the man further. It is his birthday, he has received presents and his friends are there. It is a great day.

*****

"Sirius Black, what is the meaning of this?" Molly Weasley shrieks from the kitchen and stomps straight towards the sitting room. Her fiery hair flaming and creating a wild image of a crazed witch. She has a newspaper in one hand and the other is firmly fixed on her hip as he comes to a halt and stares at the wizard in question.

Sirius is lounging on the sofa, half-asleep when the witch comes in and raises hell. He hasn't had a decent nap since Harry's birthday. On top of his interrupted nap, he really hates Molly's shrill voice. It is enough to rupture his eardrums. Blinking, the wizard lifts his head and groans. "Why are you so loud, woman?"

Molly waves the paper in the man's face and speaks with a high-pitched voice, "What is this? It's all over the Daily Prophet!"

Sirius has a fair idea what the witch is speaking about but decides to play dumb. "No idea what you're talking about."

"This!" she screeches and points at the bold headline that has the wizard's name plastered all over the page. "When did this happen? Why did this happen? You were pardoned, for Merlin's sake and you didn't bother to tell us."

Black sits up and shrugs. "The Ministry did something right for once. I reckon they pulled their heads out of their arses and did their job."

"But this is...I mean...Why? This makes no sense."

"First of all, I am innocent, in case you have forgotten already. Why wouldn't they exonerate me? I haven't done anything wrong," Sirius barks, not liking the woman's insinuation as if he doesn't deserve it. "Fudge was an absolute moron and useless to boot; he wouldn't have lifted his little finger for anyone other than himself. I guess the new one has his head in the right place, not shoved up his own arse."

Molly isn't completely satisfied, but she puts on a good face, Sirius can tell it is forced. "Of course it's good news, I was just shocked that's all. I'm just surprised that you didn't say anything to Albus or any of us."

"Not everything is your business or Dumbledore's for that matter," Sirius grumbles and slumps back into the sofa, not giving the Weasley woman a chance to argue.

When Molly leaves, Sirius grabs the discarded newspaper and eyes the front page, grinning. The bold headline states that Sirius Black has been cleared of all charges due to new information and that the Ministry has issued a formal apology because an innocent man has suffered needlessly. There is a picture of Sirius and the man mutters in irritation. "Bastards didn't even use a recent picture."
There is a picture of Pettigrew as well, snivelling like the rodent he is. Under the picture is a caption that states that Peter Pettigrew is, in fact, alive and responsible for framing Sirius Black. The rat-like man is cowering, two Aurors flanking him as the flash goes off, making the wizard shield himself from the camera. It is sweet; not only the feeling of being free but the knowledge that little rat Peter is finally where he belongs. The Dark Lord had tossed the wizard before the wolves and Sirius feels somewhat indebted to the man. It is only because of Harry that he has pulled all the right strings for Sirius.

The wizard isn't given any peace and the silence is broken when Tonks, Kingsley and Moody barrel in and start questioning him. Moody is the most suspicious of the lot, asking about Peter. "How come Pettigrew just ended up in the Ministry?"

"We didn't know anything about his hideout," Shacklebolt throws in his Sickles and crosses his arms in an expectant manner.

"How should I know, I've been locked up here for months. So he was caught? How does that have anything to do with me, since I'm obviously not involved in his capture?" Sirius says, enjoying the way Moody frowns and grows more irritated.

Tonks snorts and narrows her eyes. "That's convenient."

"The point is that all this is very suspicious. Pettigrew's sudden arrest, the Ministry looking into an old case...All I'm saying is that something doesn't seem right."

Sirius gets up, every muscle in his body tight like a bowstring. "Who cares if it seems right or not, what matters is that justice has finally been served and I'm a free man who can do whatever I want. That being said, I'm going out and I'm not coming back until morning. The lot of you can just piss off."

Moody quickly stands his ground and moves in front of the doorway, blocking Black's way. "Just a minute, son."

Sirius matches Moody's stance and his tone gets considerably less friendly. "We're done with this conversation. Feel free to stay and come up with theories, but I'm not required to stay. As a free man, I am no longer a prisoner in my own house, and that's something you all ought to remember; this is my house and you being here was a condition Dumbledore made me agree to. That agreement no longer exists, so you are still here because I allow it. Do not push me."

Before any of them can protest, Sirius moves past Moody and stalks towards the front door. He has every intention to leave Grimmauld and seek better company elsewhere. If Moody or anyone has something to say, Sirius doesn't hear nor care to as he slams the door on his way out.

The Muggle neighbourhood seems quiet; children who had played on the streets earlier have already gone home. They are likely having dinner with their families, unaware of the magical presence in their midst. Sirius wanders the length of the street, gazing at the streetlamps with his hands stuffed in his trouser pockets. It is still warm outside, the first days of August offer the last of the wonderful summer nights that Sirius loves. Before landing in Azkaban, Sirius had loved taking midnight walks, simply watching the sky and gazing up at the stars like a young boy.

Now that he is free, Sirius has plans to sort out his affairs. He will make Harry his legal heir and then he is going to take care of himself. New clothes and perhaps some grooming because he still isn't convinced that he no longer looks like an Azkaban escapee. He has a pretty good deal going with Malfoy and he isn't about to lose such a sweet deal because of his worn-down looks.
He rounds the corner and promptly felt a presence watching him and most definitely following him. Sirius knows that it is Tonks; the witch is too obedient and will do anything Moody and Kingsley order her to do. Moody himself isn't very good at stalking someone while remaining unnoticed and Kingsley considers himself too important for such a menial job, therefore it is young Auror Tonks who is following him. They are growing more vigilant every day, distrusting Sirius and tightening the circle of people they do trust. It amuses Sirius, but it also angers him; he hates the righteousness of the Order, being well-aware of the ways of the organisation. Sirius knows that they obey Albus like dogs. They will do whatever Albus tells them to do, even if it means doing something they themselves do not believe in. It disgusts him even though he is no angel and takes part in Voldemort's plans.

He steps into the busy Muggle traffic and blends into the swarm of people who clutter the sidewalks and streets. Tonks is relentless and does not lose sight of Sirius, following the man until the wizard grows tired of the game and disappears into an alley. He touches the Portkey he has been given and smirks as he is whisked away, leaving Tonks empty-handed.

The Portkey takes him straight to Malfoy Manor and he finds himself in the parlour. Knowing his way around, the Animagus turns into the hallway that leads into the blond wizard's bedroom. He doesn't knock, thinking it pointless, and simply pushes the door open, bounding straight in. He finds the room empty; perfectly clean and tidy like the wizard himself. The double doors that lead to the balcony are open, the delicate curtains fluttering in the soft night wind. Taking off his coat, Sirius throws it on the bed and rolls up his sleeves before stepping out into the medium-sized terrace that overlooks the vast lands that surround the manor. There is a small glass table with four beautifully ornamented legs made of gold and encrusted with jewels. It is entirely too pompous and extravagant and Sirius would never have such a piece of furniture in his home. The carved marble and stone balustrade matches the timeless elegance that seeps out of the manor itself; each generation of Malfoys having left their own mark on the pure-blood stronghold.

Lucius is sitting on a comfortable al fresco settee, a pillow tucked under his arm. It creates an almost comical display. He is obviously not ready for visitors; definitely not expecting any to pop up in the middle of the night. His long silken hair is done up in a messy twist; the entire thing held up with one silver clasp, with strands sticking out and falling around his face. He is wearing little, just silken pyjama bottoms and a flimsy robe over his shoulders, giving Sirius a wonderful view of naked flesh. There is a book on his lap and a plate of biscuits and a pot of tea on the table.

"What do we have here then? Love the hair, Malfoy."

Lucius is clearly oblivious to the wizard's arrival and Sirius suppresses a laugh when the blond jumps a little and mortification washes over him, making his fair cheeks pink. He hadn't noticed the slight tingle in the wards upon the wizard's arrival.

"What are you doing here?" Lucius asks, automatically pulling the robe tighter around him, obscuring Sirius' view. He sneers. "You can't just come as you please."

Sirius gives a dismissive wave with his hand. "It's not like I jumped you in the middle of the night. And I do have a Portkey, one that you gave me for late-night visits to your bedroom."

"Well, regrettably I do not require your company this evening," Lucius states and closes his book. "You can leave now."

Black snorts as he saunters over and sits down next to the blond wizard, reaching his arm behind Lucius. He says, "Maybe I'm not here to please your royal highness. Maybe I'm here to be pleased. Nowhere does it say that I'm supposed to just lay there and think of England."
Lucius rolls his eyes and moves to get up but Sirius wraps his arms around his waist and pulls him back down and against his chest. He purrs into Lucius' ear, "You smell nice."

Seemingly content where he is- or rather having succumbed to it - the man asks, "Were you followed?"

"My cousin's girl came after me when I left the house and told everyone to piss off. She lost me along the way. The *Daily Prophet* made a big announcement of my pardon and as expected, the Order asked stupid questions. Mainly the Weasley woman and Mad-Eye; they kept pestering me about it and then implied that it was so outrageous of the Ministry to do the right thing. Gods, I hate them; wish I could burn the house down with all of them in it."

Lucius comments, "It won't be long now; soon we will take the Ministry and Hogwarts and you can kick them out."

"I can boot them out right now, but I suppose can wait a little longer. I call dibs on Moody though; that one-eyed bastard is mine to torture."

"Such violence coming from you, Black."

Sirius hums in agreement. "Turns you on, doesn't it?"

Lucius doesn't offer an answer but then again, Sirius doesn't need one; he is satisfied with the fact that Lucius hasn't moved away from him and remains in his lap. Grabbing a biscuit from the plate, Sirius plops it into his mouth and groans. "I'm sick of eating Molly Weasley's culinary creations; you should have seen Harry's face last year when she piled some gunk on his plate and called it a casserole. The bloody fork stayed upright. The woman can't cook for shite despite what she thinks and she bloody grinds on my nerves. Makes a bloke miss Azkaban."

"When will you make Harry your heir?"

Sirius shrugs. "As soon as I can. Harry is and always will be like a son to me and I know I'm not exactly an ideal parent, but I do try and Harry knows that I love him. He will be my heir...that is until I manage to produce a son of my own, but that's highly improbable."

Lucius inquires, "You haven't considered children of your own? Seems like something all idealistic would Gryffindors want."

"Do I seem like an idealistic Gryffindor to you? Besides, I'm not exactly father material."

"It was simply a question. Not all wizards are cut out for parenthood. Salazar knows I haven't always been a kind and caring father to Draco."

"He seems like an okay kid, so you didn't bollocks it up completely. Not everyone gets to have a perfect mini version of themselves; yours even sneers like you. It's cute, you know."

Lucius huffs a laugh. "Cissy can tell you stories about my inadequacies as a parent; the times I completely failed as a father. Draco was a difficult child, always complaining and demanding. Always whining."

"Proof that he is yours; he could be Snape's for all you know," Sirius comments but snaps his mouth shut when Lucius glares at him. But it does nothing to dampen the Animagus' amusement. "Look at us, having a proper conversation and I'm not even naked yet."

The blond wizard sighs. He stands and walks towards the entrance to his bedroom and disappears.
inside. Sirius enjoys another snack and slouches a little, lifting his eyes towards the night sky. It really is beautiful.

Lucius re-emerges from his bedroom and raises a brow at the star-gazing wizard. "Did you come here to watch the stars or did you want my attention?"

Sirius grins and jumps up, eager to follow the blond inside. The stars have nothing on the view he is about to uncover.

*****

The rest of the month passes with little fuss and come September, Harry is back in school. He hates acting a certain way; he loathes the image he is portraying. The constant pretending is exhausting, especially with Granger and Weasel shadowing him almost all the time. At least there is a new plan being plotted.

During the first weeks, Harry had managed to slip away without making Granger suspicious. Neville and Luna are always ready to cover for him and even Slytherins like Pansy and Theo are willing to help with whatever escape plan Harry has in mind. Now, almost four months in, he is keeping Draco company again, making sure that the plan is actually going to work.

Harry is eating an apple, one that Draco has given him, and dutifully lounges in a dusty old armchair in the Room of Requirements. Draco is busy with the project entrusted to him; he is making sure that the Vanishing Cabinet hidden away in the room will be ready for use by the end of the term. The young Malfoy is completely focused and demands absolute silence, but Harry is terribly bored and almost done with nibbling on the fruit. He is humming the Hogwarts song under his breath, jiggling his leg in a distracting manner.

"You don't have to babysit me."

Harry stops humming the infernal tune and cocks his brow. "Who said I was babysitting? Maybe I simply enjoy your company."

"Don't you have Gryffindors to fool? A certain Potion Master to annoy perhaps? Anything that requires your presence elsewhere? Go skip around the school like a good little hero."

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you're trying to get rid of me. Are you by any chance nervous?"

Harry teases, silently grinning.

Draco clears his throat and is about to protest, but snaps his mouth shut and waits a moment before he says, "None of your business, Potter."

"If you say so," Harry smirks with amusement. Then he adds. "I invited Luna to Slug's Christmas party."

Draco's head whips around; his grey eyes are narrowed, but his expression tries really hard to stay neutral. Obviously, he is failing because Harry makes an innocent face, holding back laughter. The young Malfoy snaps, "Why should I care about who you'll be going with? I'm wasn't invited, was I?"

"Slug doesn't want to seem like a Dark sympathiser, which he is regardless. He has Dumbledore
believing that he's afraid of the Dark Lord, but that's not exactly true. Slughorn is pretty proud of Tom. Who gets to say that the Dark Lord used to be their best student? Slug feels special."

"He's a fawning idiot. Severus is a far better Potion Master than Slughorn. He's not terrible, but Sev is probably the best there is."

Harry smirks. "True. Severus is awesome."

"It simply grinds on my nerves that you were invited. You're absolutely shite at brewing. He just wants another trophy student to pant after." Draco gives a dismissive shrug. "Whatever."

Harry knows that Draco's not happy about the snub and says, "Inviting you would be too noticeable; he can't allow Dumbledore to question his loyalty by playing nice with the Malfoys. Don't worry, I'll tell you all about it."

The blond sniffs in disdain. "I don't care either way."

"Sure you don't," Harry says dryly, taking one last bite out of his apple. "How is it going with the cabinet?"

"It's difficult, but I think I can fix it if I'm given enough time. The Dark Lord was clear; I have to get it fixed and soon."

Harry grins and suggests, "I can ask Tom to give you more time if you need it."

"I don't want any favours from your boyfriend; this is my task and I'll get it done my way," says the blond a bit too tetchily and grumbles as he turns away and ignores Harry's snort. Draco adds snidely, "It would help me if you'd stop eating the apples I need in order to test the Cabinet."

"Fine - I'll leave you to it then. I have a lunch date with Luna anyway, she wanted to show me a book she found on Snorcks. They eat apples too, you know. Green ones I think"

Draco's mouth thins into a hard line, but he doesn't say a word. The green-eyed teen gets up and hides a smile as he watches the blond try to tame his jealousy. Harry knows for a fact that Luna is interested in the young Malfoy because the Ravenclaw has expressed her thoughts on the matter a number of times. Draco is having similar thoughts, though he has yet to voice them to anyone.

Harry starts whistling again and leaves Draco alone with the mission he has been tasked with. Irritating the huffy Slytherin is amusing and Harry finds little amusement these days with the impatient Order grooming him for the final confrontation and Dumbledore dragging him into his ridiculous plans. He sees Ron coming his way and promptly takes a right turn, running into a group of Slytherin students. Theo and Zabini are standing there and Harry runs behind Zabini's back. He spies Ron walking past the group.

"You're safe now, mighty chosen one," Zabini smirks.

"Thanks for that," Harry says, stepping out from Blaise's shadow. "I have better things to do with my time than have Ron Weasley on my back."

Ron and Hermione are not talking and the redhead spends most of his time snogging some bint. Harry doesn't have the patience to hear Hermione moan about Ron and listen to Ron's complaints about Hermione. It is exhausting and he really doesn't care.

"Have you seen Draco? He was supposed to meet me in the library, but he never showed up."
Harry knows that Theo and Draco are good friends so he says, "He had to do something important. I'm sure he didn't mean to bail on you."

"I know we're not supposed to know about it, but Draco has been acting strangely since the beginning of the term. Is he involved in some sort of mission?" Blaise asks.

"I'd rather you didn't know the details, but he's currently working on something. You're his friends and he's not being a git on purpose. What he's doing - let's just say that it's vital to the cause."

"All right, we won't pester him about it," Theo promises.

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Harry spies Snape from the corner of his eye, sneering at teenagers flocking around him. Most of his acerbic looks are aimed at the giggling girls. Slughorn is acting as the perfect host, though Harry is sure that no one cares for the professor; they are all here to eat, drink and gossip. Hermione Granger stands by the table that holds various snacks and she is looking uncomfortable and a tad bit annoyed, mostly because of her pushy date. Harry has nothing personal against Cormac McLaggen; he is handsome, perhaps a bit lewd, and his family is connected. The only thing Harry doesn't like about the wizard is his taste in witches.

Luna is dancing by herself, twirling and smiling in a mysterious way that is purely Luna Lovegood. Harry spots the Slytherin Chaser finishing his drink, eyes set on the blonde Ravenclaw. The wizard is eying the girl rather intensely and Harry doesn't like that one bit so he, in turn, sets his eyes on the wizard. Harry smirks when he sees the Slytherin student flinch a bit. He turns his gaze away, deciding to chat up one of the Carrow sisters instead. The children of loyal Death Eaters know that they are to stay out of Harry Potter's way. Many understand the meaning of their parents' warning, but some still think it wise to anger Harry.

Luna is laughing as she comes to Harry's side and grabs his arm. "Come on, Harry. There's a vampire here that I want to talk to."

"A vampire? Slug sure keeps weird company."

"Or we can always dance; that's what people do when there's a party."

Harry gives a nod. "Just so you know, I'm a shite dancer."

Luna grins. "I know, but don't worry, I won't let you step on my toes. You know, I bet Draco is a great dancer."

"Only one way to find out, Luna love." Harry hums and adds, "I think you should make the first move. Draco is too stubborn to do it himself."

Luna pulls Harry on the makeshift dance floor and places her hands on Harry's shoulders. She muses out loud, "I think you're right, he does seem to drag his feet. Head full of Wrackspurts, I imagine."

Harry is about to open his mouth to reply, but he doesn't get very far... seeing as his attention is pulled away by Filch dragging a reluctant Draco Malfoy by the sleeve. He makes a ruckus and Filch mutters something to Slughorn and Harry spots Snape making his way through the crowd of teenagers. Luna is giggles and gives Harry a nudge, wanting to get closer. Draco has just yanked his
sleeve from the caretaker's grip, sneering at the Squib. Severus is there in an instant, pulling his student away, muttering in low tones. Harry watches as Slughorn smiles awkwardly and tells everyone to get on with the party.

Edging closer, Harry sees Snape pull Draco outside, the heavy door thumping shut.

"I'll be right back, Luna love."

The blonde witch smiles. "I think I saw cauldron cakes being served." Then she is gone, disappearing back into the swarm of guests as Harry goes to investigate.

He spots Snape and Draco a few steps away, hidden by an alcove. Harry sneaks closer and peeks into the hideout. He hears Snape talking about irresponsibility and Draco's mission and sneaking into private parties drawing too much attention. Settling on making his presence known, Harry clears his throat and stares blandly, "You aren't as stealthy as you think if that was your attempt to sneak in."

Snape mutters something about snooping Gryffindors and steps in the hall, wordlessly keeping watch.

Draco mutters. "All right, all right...enough with the lectures. Clearly, it wasn't my best moment."

Snape snorts in the background but remains otherwise silent as Harry speaks in agreement with the professor. "The master spy has spoken, Dray. What was the purpose anyway, just spying on the Slug club? I thought you said you didn't care for it."

The blond teen looks away, but he is shuffling his feet a bit, sticking his hands into his trouser pockets like a child who has been caught doing something improper. Harry smirks knowingly as if he has figured out some big secret. "You were spying! Hah, I knew it!"

"I was not spying; I was merely curious. There is a difference."

Harry laughs, "Of course you were; curious to find out what I was doing with my lovely date. Admit it, you just couldn't let it go."

Clenching his jaw, Draco forces out. "This is ridiculous."

"No, you are ridiculous." Snape sighs tiredly, clearly done with everything. "It's fairly obvious to anyone with eyes that you are infatuated with the Lovegood girl, but simply too pig-headed to actually do something about it. So either man up and do something about it or stop acting like a nitwit. It shouldn't come as a surprise that you are just like your father, but somehow I'm still surprised."

Harry starts laughing, holding his hand over his mouth as Draco gets a dressing down from Snape. The Potion Master glares before snapping out. "Do not get in trouble again; I have better things to do than look after a love-sick Malfoy."

Then he stalks away, marching the length of the corridor before taking a hard left and disappearing. Both Harry and Draco watch him go. The green-eyed teen hums out. "You really are an idiot."

The door to their right creaks open and Draco steps into the alcove when he notices Luna stepping out, wearing a wistful expression. She smiles and walks closer, linking her arm with Harry's; then she sees Draco sulking in the shadows and smiles. "Hello, Draco. That's a strange place to stand."

Harry smiles slyly, ignoring Draco's murderous stare aimed his way. "Draco was just very eager to see someone."
"Potter, shut up!" Draco growls, but that doesn't chase away Harry's smug smile.

Luna's smile is bright and easygoing. "Do you boys want to talk some more? I think I want some pumpkin juice."

"Maybe Draco can walk you to the kitchens?"

The witch's face is happy and excited, but she tries to control it some when she says, "I'd like that very much."

Draco narrows his eyes at Harry, but steps out of the alcove and removes his hands from his pockets, fidgeting. But Luna is bold and takes Draco's arm and loops it with her own. She asks, "Do you think we can sneak out and look for some moon frogs?"

"Err...sure." Draco stammers, trying to keep a casual tone and face, but Harry can see he is sporting a blush; the blond's neck and cheeks are dusted pink.

Harry sees the wizard give him a look over his shoulder and the green-eyed teen responds by sticking his thumbs up with a grin. Draco does not look happy with Harry, but he isn't complaining either; after all, he does have the girl he likes curled around his arm and Luna certainly isn't objecting.
A few days after the Slug Club party, Harry is in the dormitory, sitting on his bed, when he hears voices. Thinking that it is just a couple of housemates, Harry ignores it and goes back to reading the latest edition of the *Quibbler*. The voices grow louder and despite somewhat hushed, they are distinctly familiar; belonging to Ron Weasley and Dean Thomas. Harry stays on his bed, the thick drapes hiding him from view, but now he's curious.

"Are you sure about this?" comes from Dean, his voice perhaps a bit hesitant.

Ron's voice is boisterous, even when trying to whisper. He is joking and says offhandedly, "Yeah, he'll pay for what he did to me."

Now Harry is intrigued and gently casts the reading material aside as he edges closer to the foot of the bed.

"Come on, Dean. You're not backing out, are you? Longbottom won't do anything, he hasn't got a backbone. Besides, he won't even know who did it."

Harry considers Neville in the same manner as Luna and even Draco; he is a close friend and very important to the teen. He hears Dean say something about getting caught and then Ron telling the other boy that no one will care if a loser like Longbottom gets hurt.

Harry feels rage, especially towards Ronald Weasley; that stupid, ignorant ginger who has little respect for other people. He decides not to expose himself and stays silent to hear more. There is some shuffling about, something creaks and something makes a fizzing sound.

"Let's get out of here before someone sees us."

Ron pulls a face and grumbles, "Yeah, we don't want to run into Potter."

Dean seems genuinely surprised when he asks. "I thought you and Harry were mates?"

"Mates, hah! What a load of bollocks! He's an attention-seeking prat, always trying to get into the paper and going on about You-Know-Who. As if he's really that powerful to defeat him," Ron rants, his face twisted in a hateful grimace. Then he smirks with malice, his entire face changing from
sneering to gleeful. "No, I'm not really friends with Potter, but Dumbledore asked me to pretend and stick close to him, he thinks the freak is going dark. I reckon the Headmaster is right, what with all the trouble with You-Know-Who. I bet he's just gone 'round the bend."

Dean makes a funny voice, somewhere between agreeing and still being dubious. The two leave the dormitory and Harry hisses out a curse or two; something he often does when he is mad or agitated. He has no love for Ronald Weasley; Harry would rather see him tied to a pole and lit on fire, but he has to play a game as well. They are so close to victory and Harry has to pretend as long as possible that he is the Golden Boy and Dumbledore's big weapon against Voldemort.

Sneaking out of his bed, Harry goes to investigate what the two cretins have done to Neville's bed. He finds nothing, but it isn't meant to be seen. Harry smells it; a tangy smell that resembles too ripened fruit and something like rotten eggs.

Neville arrives with a book tucked under his arm and greets Harry as he makes a move to sit on his bed. But Harry grabs his arm and shakes his head, explaining. "Ron was just here doing something nasty."

Neville doesn't seem shocked; instead, he sighs. "I knew he'd try to get revenge after the incident in the Great Hall."

"What happened?"

"The freckled idiot is spreading rumours that you've gone mad, that You-Know-Who has possessed you and that you are dangerous," Neville explains. "He's acting like a complete arse."

Harry snorts. "I know he's been talking shite about me, nothing new there. What did you do to Ron?"

"I hexed him. Each time he opened his mouth to speak, he sounded like a goat. He went all red in the face and in the end, Professor Snape took twenty points for disturbing the peace and acting like an imbecile."

Harry starts laughing, sincerely amused. "Gods, that's brilliant; it's a shame I missed it. You have to give me the hex you used, it sounds absolutely hilarious."

"Something my Gran taught me; she told me to use it when someone is speaking utter rubbish. I think it was high time I used it on Ron. In the end, Professor McGonagall took pity on him and removed it. Only Ron saw me cast it, so I didn't lose points."

"He and Dean were here just now, doing something potentially dangerous. Do you smell that?"

Neville sniffs and narrows his eyes. "That's a mixture Professor Sprout uses to kill parasites in the greenhouse. It can burn off your skin and right through the flesh; she always tells me to wear dragonhide gloves when using it. I'd know that smell in my sleep, I've used it loads of times in the greenhouse."

"Well, Ron just earned himself a gruesome death." Harry deadpans.

"He must have soaked the bedcovers or sheets with it, hoping that I'd burn myself badly enough to learn my lesson, but he really is an idiot if he thought I wouldn't smell it. He knows I help Sprout in the greenhouse. I can easily identify the smell, yet it seems that he didn't think that far ahead."

"Tom won't be happy. If Ron manages to get through to people, Dumbledore might try to isolate me, make me more compliant and Tom will not like that one bit." Harry muses and goes to retrieve his
wand. Coming back to stand next to Neville, the green-eyed teen asks, "Do we switch the bedcovers and sheets with Ron's or would that make it a bit too suspicious? After all, we are trying to make everyone believe that we're innocent Gryffindors."

Neville shrugs. "I wouldn't mind giving Ron a horrible skin rash. Luna gave me a powder that makes you itch if it comes in contact with your skin. Fred and George gave her a whole jar of it."

Harry asks with concern lacing his voice. "Is she still getting harassed by the Ravenclaws?"

"Not as much as before," Neville assures. "They used to tease her all the time and some idiots hid her stuff, but after she started hanging out with you, they eased up. Probably terrified that you'll go crazy dark wizard on them."

"They can bet on it," Harry mutters, completely serious.

Neville huffs a laugh. "Others have noticed that she spends time with Draco Malfoy now. I'd say she has powerful protectors and that makes bullies think twice before bothering her."

Harry banishes the ruined bedcovers and sheets. Sirius had made it his mission to teach his godson proper spells and hexes over the summer hols. Spells he can use if someone annoys him. Hermione still views Harry as an incompetent beginner who knows nothing; as if he is a first-year. Ron is always jealous if Harry uses a spell they haven't been taught yet. That always makes Ron say that Harry brags about his godfather as if he is a shiny broom that no one else has.

Neville and Harry move to sit on Harry's bed and the usually shy wizard says, "It's a bit weird; Luna and Draco Malfoy. It's just really hard to believe."

"Not really. Luna deserves someone who will take care of her and spoil her. Draco may be many things, but he treats Luna with respect and her eccentric personality doesn't bother Draco, it adds to why he likes her so much. Luna doesn't like him because he's the Malfoy heir; she just likes him for who is as a person."

"If Luna is happy, I'm happy for her," Neville says sincerely, having no issue with Malfoy. "It's just that not everyone thinks like that. Hermione believes that Draco has Luna under a spell or a curse; she even thinks that Dumbledore ought to do something about it."

Harry laughs. "What can the old man do? It doesn't concern him and if he decides to interfere, we won't stand for it. We'll lynch Dumbledore before the old man even knows what's happening."

The green-eyed wizard relaxes against the bedpost. "I think Draco can handle it himself. And so can Luna for that matter; they're both strong enough to deal with the backlash. Luna may seem like an airhead and fragile, but she can kick my arse to Durmstrang."

*****

It is a warm evening when a group of masked Death Eaters gather inside a dark shop, waiting for their cue.

"How long is this going to take?" rumbles the irritated voice of a cloaked Death Eater waiting to gain passage to Hogwarts, just like the rest of the masked wizards in line.

Bellatrix is playing with her wand, twirling it between her fingers out of pure boredom. She, like
many of her colleagues, is waiting for the signal to travel to Hogwarts and finish the task Lord Voldemort has set up for them - killing Dumbledore.

It does not take long for the Death Eaters to receive the go-ahead. The Vanishing Cabinet is fully operational and takes the small group of masked figures to Hogwarts, alerting no one of their attendance.

The Astronomy Tower is dark and shadows dance on the walls, curling around the staircase and casting black figures on the floor. Dumbledore is present, standing on the platform with knees too weak and eyes dimming to a faded grey. Piercing cackles cut through the air and as a black cloak is pulled over the sky and clouds start to swirl. Death Eaters enter the tower, each of them ready to hunt.

Harry is already there, hiding away. Dumbledore had cast a Body-Bind Curse on him, but the curse really has no effect on Harry; the green-eyed wizard had wandlessly deflected it as soon as it had reached him. Albus had not paid enough attention and had only seen what he had wanted to see - and that was Harry in an immobile state.

Harry hears Bellatrix as she nears; the witch is humming an eerie melody and dragging the tip of her wand against the metal barrier that lines the spiral staircase. Heavy footsteps above Harry's head tell him that the rest of the Death Eaters have arrived as well. Greyback's low growl echoes in the hollow tower.

The teen hears Dumbledore say, "Draco Malfoy, are you here to finish your task?"

Harry holds back a snort when Draco drawls in his most bored tone. "Headmaster, please... You have no idea what my task entails. You only believe what you were meant to believe."

"The cursed necklace, the poisoned mead - forgive me but those were the actions of a scared boy."

Draco smirks, "You caught me, Headmaster. Those gifts were never intended as instruments of murder, they were just small tokens."

Bellatrix, having arrived during Draco's explanation, giggles and announces. "Long time no see. Isn't that right, Headmaster? We're about to have so much fun."

"Aunt Bella," Draco sighs, "there is no time for your type of fun."

Fenrir Greyback's low growl sends shivers down Harry's back, but only because it is invigorating. "Let's kill the old man already."

"Now, now, wolf!" Bellatrix hisses and then chuckles darkly.

Harry can see the blond teen; he seems wary when he lifts his wand, but Harry knows that he is practically jumping up and down with glee; it just isn't for everyone to see. Bella keeps taunting, egging him on to finish it, to utter those sweet words of death.

Dumbledore tries to sound kind. "Draco, my boy, you are no killer. You won't harm a defenceless man. You are not your father; there is no cruelty in you."

"Hush now, Headmaster." Bellatrix orders. "It's showtime, old man."

Draco sighs and states, "Maybe there is, maybe there isn't; that's not for you to find out."

Harry smiles when Draco lowers his wand and steps aside; Dumbledore assumes that he is doing it
because he is a coward, but Harry knows the game Draco is playing. Harry feels another presence and slightly turns. He meets Snape's dark gaze and gives him a smile that speaks of hunger for blood - Dumbledore's blood.

As Severus joins the others, Harry can hear an almost relieved breath roll over the old man's lips. He calls out the man's name and for a moment, it is silent. It is Snape's way of telling Harry that it is now or never; Dumbledore's demise is close.

Walking the steps, Harry holds his wand loosely between his fingers, enjoying the weight of it. Draco is the first to notice Harry; he gets out of the way with silent steps. Pointing his wand at Severus, Harry sees the ghost of an annoyed glare. Severus does not appreciate the teen's spectacle, but it is not the time to tell him so.

Dumbledore is looking straight at the teen and says his name. It is all he says; it is neither a question nor a plea, simply a statement. The Headmaster is waiting, coming up with a new and even better way to influence the boy. Harry sees right through it. Albus wants Snape to kill him in front of Harry, wants to make the teen see who is truly his enemy and perhaps even make Harry guilty for not being braver or faster. Clearly, the old man does not believe that Harry can stop Severus.

"You should have seen your faces. Priceless!" Harry lowers his wand as he howls with laughter, amusement shining in his green eyes. Dropping the mask, Harry faces Dumbledore, who is looking rather pale or even green, and feigns surprise. "Dumbledore, you're still here? Weren't you supposed to die?"

Severus lifts a brow and drawls, his frustration showing, "I was getting to it before you interrupted me. Just like you to think that you can steal away my moment."

"My apologies then. Continue." Harry grins, not sorry at all. He turns to Draco who is standing to his left and claps his hands a few times. "Brilliant acting by the way."

The blond picks invisible lint off his robe and sniffs. "I'm always brilliant, Potty."

Dumbledore's knees are shaking and there is a horrible expression on his face, one that is stuck between gawking and suffocating. "Harry - I don't understand. What is the meaning of this?"

Harry gives him a cruel smile, almost a mocking one, thus reminding every person there of their Lord. He steps closer to the old man like a prowling tiger. "Understand what exactly? It can't be that hard to figure out. What did you expect?"

Bellatrix clears her throat and whispers, "Little Lord, we cannot stay much longer."

"We'll make time for this. I want him to die; I want to see him writhing in pain and I want him to know that Harry Potter will never save the people he cares about," Harry tells him with a cold edge. He takes pleasure in seeing Dumbledore's pallid face and laughs. "I was never yours - all this time you placed your hopes in me, groomed me to be the perfect soldier for you to control. You should have taken Ginny Weasley's death a bit more seriously; because that was the day the Dark Lord regained his power. That was the day my strings were cut and you lost this war you so desperately wanted me to win for you."

Obviously, Dumbledore remembers that wretched day; the day he still curses with all his might. The death of a student, the youngest Weasley girl, had caused trouble for the Headmaster; it had almost ruined his plans to achieve the greater good. William Weasley, the eldest of the Weasley children, had lost faith in him that day; his sister had been killed and nothing had been done to save her. The rest of the Weasleys, minus the twins, had found Albus completely innocent. They still remain as
devoted to the Leader of Light. Loyal as if he has enchanted them.

"You knew what the Dursleys were like; you knew how much they hated magic. You didn't care because it was the perfect way to shape me into what you wanted; a broken child who never knew love or kindness. You wanted me to have nothing, to only know cruelty and hatred. Well, here I am; exactly like you wanted me. I will offer you nothing but hate and pain. You wanted me to die for you, for all of you, but now you will die because I find the idea of your lifeless corpse amusing. I want you to look at me when life leaves you."

The Killing Curse comes as soon as Harry finishes speaking. The green light hits the old wizard straight in the chest...and when his eyes lose all light in them, he is staring at Harry. Dumbledore's dead body disappears, having vanished over the barrier of the Tower. They all hear the thump.

"I wasn't finished, Sev."

Bellatrix keeps laughing; her day is now complete. Severus remains standing on the platform, ignoring the teen's rant. He is gazing into the distance with an almost serene look. Harry smiles, his anger gone, and inquires, "It's nice, isn't it? To be free of him."

"I was just thinking that I can now drink my morning coffee in peace. No more urgent reports, no more 'Severus, my dear boy', no more pretending."

Everything is over rather quickly; the fall of Albus Dumbledore has been quick but not entirely without merit. It had been amusing and the sense of freedom both Harry and Severus feels is known to all.

As the Death Eaters cause destruction and mayhem, Harry takes a moment to enjoy the view from the tower and inhales the night air. From the distance, Harry hears Bellatrix cackling after casting the Dark Mark. The ominous skull appears above the tower, twisting and turning in a snake-like manner, making anticipation bubble in the pit of Harry's stomach. He knows they cannot linger for long so he moves towards the staircase and spots Snape. The man is still there.

As the Death Eaters scatter towards the forest, Harry catches up with Snape. The Potion Master stops for a moment and speaks, "The Dark Lord will be pleased."

Harry sees the man's expression loosen up a little; his years of being a spy finally over. He tells the man, "You should be pleased as well."

Snape seems to stand still; his eyes are closed and he looks downright blissful as if enjoying an elevating sonnet or listening to a classical piece from a beloved opus. Harry feels like he should let the man be but they are on a tight schedule and need to get going - at least Severus has to before members of the Order come running out of the castle. Surely, they have discovered the corpse in the courtyard. He snaps his fingers, consequently bringing the man back to the present moment. "You sort of spaced out."

The man hums. "I was enjoying the moment of realisation."

Harry flatly says, "Could you perhaps continue after you leave the scene of the crime? You did just kill a man and officially got top billing on the Order's wanted poster."

"As will you if you insist on trailing after me like a lost puppy," points out the older wizard. "Shouldn't you be playing the distraught saviour, perhaps weep over the old man's dead body?"

"I suppose I ought to drop a tear or two." Harry muses out loud. Then he tells the older man, "If you happen to see Sirius, send him to Grimmauld. He needs to act as if Christmas didn't just arrive early."
"I'm not an owl, Potter."

"Fine, I'll just risk sending an actual owl and tell him myself." Harry sighs in an overly dramatic manner. He sees the Potion Master frown and then gives a stiff nod in understanding. It is vital to keep the masks firmly on for the time being.

"Shall I tell them how you murdered our beloved Headmaster? I'll try to make it as cruel and evil as possible."

Severus is already leaving and says over his shoulder, "Knock yourself out, Potter."

Harry turns back towards the castle and smiles to himself when he sees Hagrid's hut go up in flames. Death Eaters sure aren't subtle.

*****

Some time has passed since the horrific end of Albus Dumbledore. The school is in mourning, the Order is headless, and the Dark is still celebrating the old man's demise. After the body had been discovered, Harry had dutifully sobbed for a while. He had made solemn promises to avenge Dumbledore's death and had told everyone the story of Snape being a murderous traitor.

He has done his part and now the Order has to make the next move.

Dumbledore's funeral turns out to be a grand event. A delegation from the Ministry is in attendance and many wizards and witches from all over the wizarding world have arrived. Several of them look truly mournful yet there are a few who look unaffected by it. There are rows and rows of golden chairs and they all face a podium of sorts, made to hold Albus' lifeless body.

Harry is there as well; it is expected of him after all. He sees Fudge, the pudgy man looking fidgety and sweaty, his eyes wary as he spots Sirius Black lurking around the perimeter. Of course, Fudge had nothing to do with the wizard's pardon, seeing as he had been chased from the office. Yet anyone can see that Fudge still believes that Sirius is a deranged criminal.

There are people there that Harry knows well; Madam Malkin and Rita Skeeter, the latter trying to coax interviews out of sorrowful attendants. Madame Maxime and Hagrid are sitting together, the witch sobbing into Hagrid's shoulder. The green-eyed teen feels a little bad for Hagrid; the half-giant has no idea what Dumbledore had truly been like. Hagrid had followed the man blindly because of a sense of gratitude and a certain obligation after everything Dumbledore had done for him and the world. Funny thing is, Harry actually likes Hagrid and doesn't want to harm the friendly half-giant; that is if he keeps out of their way and doesn't try to fight what is coming.

The entire event makes Harry gag. He can't stand the tears and the pretence; the absolute gullibility that most seem to suffer from. It is sickening to see Molly weeping, hiccupping from all the sobbing and sniffing. The twins are there, looking perfectly subdued and reserved but George had shared a look with Harry before the start of the ceremony; a look that had been filled with the same kind of morbid glee and perceptive insight that Harry knows all too well.

Harry counts the people faking tears. There is a surprising amount of them. Neville, being a kind-hearted and peace-loving in character, does not have to fake tears, but he's not sad about the Headmaster. Sometimes funerals make people sad; it's natural. Hermione and Ron are sitting next to each other, the girl wiping away tears. The redhead looks pensive - likely thinking about how
Dumbledore's death affects his finances.

All Harry can think about is just how glad it makes him. A part of him doesn't like that he takes pleasure in the suffering of others. He doesn't understand what has changed him... but then he thinks about everything that has forced him to change over the years. The Dursleys and the treatment Dumbledore had subjected him to when he left him with those Muggles, the way he is worshipped but not actually respected or loved. They all want something from him; something he can give but no one ever offers anything sincere back. Aside from a few, Harry has hardly known love in his life. Now that he has let go of the Light, he feels like he has gained something much more with the Dark; a family and the chance to be himself. With every passing moment, Harry feels himself falling deeper and he really does not mind one bit.

Having lost himself in his thoughts, Harry doesn't notice that the ceremony is almost over. He sees Molly coming his way, no doubt to hug him, but Sirius intercepts her and comes to Harry's rescue. He pulls the teen into a hug and smother's Molly's attempt to speak to Harry.

"Is she gone?" whispers Harry.

Sirius releases the teen and snorts darkly. "She took a left turn as soon as she saw me. Let's just say that I'm not the Order's favourite person at the moment."

"Finally kicked them out?" Harry questions.

"I would in a heartbeat but the timing is still not right. Dumbledore has been dead less than a week. I'll let them grieve and then I'll toss them out; like a cruel afterthought. As I've heard, the Ministry has been successfully infiltrated, so I guess I don't have to wait too long."

"How long do I have to stay and act all depressing? It's giving me a headache and I can't stand the constant howling of every witch in the vicinity."

"We can go right now; we'll tell them that you're too grief-stricken or something. Besides, it's none of their bloody business." Sirius gives the area a quick look and goes on, "If I have to stay for another bleeding minute, Padfoot will piss on Fudge's leg. Or maybe I might."

Harry does believe his godfather and smiles to himself, imagining the outrage. He asks with his best innocent godson expression, "Can you make sure Luna and Neville know we're leaving, and the twins maybe? I don't want to leave without saying goodbye, but that means walking straight into the throng of crying Dumbledore fans and I'm not doing that."

"Sure, Bambi." the Animagus shrugs as if he really doesn't mind one bit and suggests, "Think you can sneak away and meet me at the gates?"

Harry gives a nod and slips away from the man, making his way towards the front gates. From the corner of his eye, he spots Sirius finding Luna. He leans closer to speak to her. Without looking back, Harry walks away from the scene, intent to never visit the past again.

He doesn't have to wait long before Sirius is coming towards him. With a smile on his face, Sirius says. "I know just the place to go."

"Do I even want to know?" asks the green-eyed youth.

"There aren't many places with wards around them that allow me entrance."

Harry takes hold of the man's arm and braces himself for the horrible twisting and lurching that always comes with Apparation. Unless you're an expert or the Dark Lord, who always does it with...
style and precision. Harry ends up face first or on his arse most times.

If anyone sees them leave, Harry doesn't care. While Sirius lands on his feet and grins, Harry looks positively green. The Animagus gives Harry a quick look-over and quips, "You're not going to be sick, are you?"

Waving it off, Harry gathers himself. "It usually passes after a few minutes." He takes a couple of deep breaths and notices a familiar setting. "You brought us to Malfoy Manor?"

"It beats going to Grimmauld and your boyfriend doesn't actually like me enough to let me roam free in his house," the man explains, drawing out the word 'boyfriend' with as much disdain as he can possibly muster. "Besides, Cissy wanted to hear all the juicy details about the funeral."

Harry chuckles as they walk towards the drawing room, hoping to find someone in residence. "I think Scrimgeour pulled off a great show. He must be thrilled to have Dumbledore out of the way; this way he can be sure that the old bastard isn't meddling in his business and trying to draw attention away from the Ministry and onto himself."

"Funny fact, but old chap Scrimgeour is an avid supporter of the Dark."

Harry stops in his tracks. The surprise is evident. "No way! Former Head of the Auror Office and sworn hater of everything Dark is actually a closeted Voldemort fan-boy?"

"You'd be surprised to know just how many fans your boyfriend has in various closets," Sirius replies and adds, "Rufus knows which way the wind is blowing and he's certainly smart enough to not be caught on the wrong side of the war. Unlike Mad-Eye or Shacklebolt, the man knows how to keep his arse out of the fire."

Reaching the drawing room, Harry hums. "No one ever accused the Order of being overly smart."

They find Narcissa sitting on the sofa, her delicate fingers holding a teacup as she reads through a magazine. Sirius spots her first and launches himself at her, planting his backside right next to her on the sofa and throwing an arm over her shoulder in a brief hug. "My favourite cousin."

Narcissa closes her magazine and states. "I'm the only cousin you like; there is a difference."

"I like Bella too, but only a little bit and when she's not around," Sirius replies with a cheeky grin that makes it hard for Narcissa to scowl at him. Instead, she offers a rare smile only meant for family and those closest.

Harry greets the witch with a smile of his own. "Lady Malfoy."

"None of that, dear. Cissy is fine," the woman tells the green-eyed wizard and goes on, "Have you come to share gossip? I do love a good story."

They are interrupted by someone groaning deeply. It's Snape and he groans like he's dying. "Do the Gods have no mercy? Even now they find a way to make me suffer."

Sirius isn't all that happy to see Severus Snape, but he knows to tolerate the man and not hex him when Cissy is around. The witch knows some pretty nasty hexes herself and Sirius likes himself in one piece.

"Behave," Narcissa warns. "I will not stand for bickering and insults of any kind. Now, tell me about the funeral."
Forgetting about Snape, Sirius starts talking about the ceremony and the ritual, never failing to mention just how stupid it all was. He recounts the best bits and only stops when Narcissa starts laughing.

"I take it you were not aware that the Dark Lord was also present?"

Now it is Harry's turn to speak. "He what? That rotten bastard!"

"Now, now, Harry," Narcissa chides. "No need for such language. The Dark Lord was just as curious as the rest of us and it was the perfect triumph over Dumbledore and his supporters."

Severus intones. "Perhaps he did not tell you because you would not have been able to keep your hands to yourself?"

"I can!" Harry argues back. "It's not as if we're always touching."

Sirius sighs and pins Harry with a look that speaks of all the spiteful thoughts the man has ever conjured while in the presence of the Dark Lord and his still innocent godson. "Trust me, you do not want to hear what I have to say on the matter. I would gladly remove his bollocks through his nose with a hot poker; alas, I cannot because he's the Dark Lord and would literally make me chase my tail until I dropped dead. Just trust me when I say that I've seen enough snogging and groping to give me nightmares until I'm in doggy heaven."

Harry flushes pink; embarrassed and equally annoyed that the man would say such things in front of Snape and Narcissa. Instead of arguing or expressing that annoyance, he shuts up and clears his throat in an awkward manner. He chooses to ignore the amused look Snape gives him.

"The Dark Lord has called for a meeting... to discuss what happens now that Dumbledore is no longer an issue. I believe he wanted you to join this time; I guess you can bring your dog if you cannot dispose of him."

Harry understands and speaks, "I'd like to see Draco before I leave."

"Draco is also in attendance, seeing as he is now a member of the Inner Circle."

"Oh, great then," Harry perks up and offers Sirius a brief look. "I'll leave you to your gossip then. Cissy, I will be back for him, so make sure he stays out of trouble."

Before Sirius can respond, Severus saunters out of the room with a grinning Harry in tow and neither allow the Animagus a chance to speak.

"Cissy, I ban any kind of relations between you and Snivellus that involve him without his trousers," Sirius demands in a frank tone, leaving no room for arguments.

The witch only offers a cool look. "Dear cousin, you cannot possibly expect me to listen. You cannot ban anything, despite now being the Head of House Black - and in any case, I would point out that you are in fact a hypocrite if you dare say such absurd things."

"I wouldn't touch Snivellus if it could save my life," Sirius counters with a grimace. "I'd rather die a horrible death."

Cissy smiles sharply. "But you would and currently are bedding my darling husband."

"Spiteful lies," Sirius mutters, but he does not act very shocked. Or like it bothers him.
"Honestly? You think me dim-witted, my dear cousin, or simply blind as well as deaf? If this is a secret then it is a poorly kept one because I have known for months and Severus has known since the very morning you joined us for breakfast, wearing yesterday's clothes and covered in hickeys like a pubescent boy."

Sirius snorts, trying to play it cool and relaxing against the sofa with his arms spread out. "Well, your husband is a fantastic lay. I'd be completely daft not to bed him; stupid, sightless or absolutely uninterested when it comes to shagging."

"Of all the immature things your Gryffindor brain could come up with, you chose to involve yourself with something as irresponsible as sleeping with Lucius," Cissy snaps as the man, yet she does not appear as angry as her voice makes it seem. "Bella always said you were the most likely Black to end up with a broken heart."

Sirius feels uncomfortable and a frown appears on his brow. "Who said anything about hearts...or broken ones?"

Cissy says with a curious look. "You do not know your own feelings, Cousin."

"There are no feelings. Pardon my crude tongue, but it's just a really great shag and nothing more. Definitely no hearts and puppy love. We don't recite poetry, we fuck."

"You spend most nights here," Cissy is quick to point out. "Before you stop me, let me say it how I perceive this. I have not seen you like this in a long time; there is a lightness about you and even you can't deny that you are happier now. That may be due to your lovely godson or your freedom, but each morning you sneak out, there is a smile on your face and that smile speaks of many things."

With a sudden jerk, the man jumps to his feet and turns to speak, but his mouth remains closed. Then he opens it again, only no words come out. Pacing around is another option and Sirius uses it. There are things he wants to say but the words do not form as he wishes them to. Instead, something else bubbles in his mind and forces his thoughts on a different path.

"Despite your initial agreement, you have started to care for him and coming here has gotten easier but leaving has grown harder with each time. I don't know why you two idiots decided that this was in any way a good idea, but now you have to figure out if it has to end before either of you gets hurt."

"I'm not in love with that egotistical git!" Sirius barks, but it doesn't have enough force behind it to fool anyone, least of all Sirius himself. Adding weakly, the Animagus scoffs. "At least I think I'm not."

Cissy pats the sofa. "Come sit down and tell cousin Cissy everything that's bothering you."

With a sulk, the Animagus settles back on the sofa and mutters, "I'm not a child, no need to hold my hand or anything."

"Need I remind you that I am older than you. Therefore, I am wiser."

"Fine, but just remember you asked for it," Sirius warns. "It's clear I don't have to tell you how we got started and since you are a proper lady I will not divulge all the scandalous details."

Cissy picks up her cup again and sips her lukewarm tea before speaking. "Sirius, you will not shock me. I assure you that while I am a lady, I am not a prude. Do you think just because Lucius is very much indifferent to my feminine charm, other men are as well and I have stayed untouched for two decades? I stopped lamenting over my husband's preferences a long time ago and frankly, I wasn't all
"That's the thing," Sirius moans with frustration. "I'm not sure I like him either. I mean everything is fucking fabulous in the shagging department and I do have perfectly working eyes to appreciate a fine looking wizard when I see one, but I'm not so sure about everything else. We still insult one another, still hex and curse when we see each other outside the bedroom. He's an arrogant jerk, and a pretty face does not change the fact that we don't get along."

"And you think you're such a charming and impeccable wizard yourself? Sirius Black, you two are more suited than you realise. Be truthful and answer me this; can you see yourself spending time with Lucius? Extending this arrangement to include time spent outside the bedroom, to perhaps forge new opportunities for the two of you? Such as a possibility of something lasting and more fulfilling than simply using each other as a way to satisfy physical needs?"

Sirius' brow develops a deep crease and Narcissa can see that the man's mind is working and processing the crumb of new information and the witch's subtle suggestions. When the man speaks, it is with a newfound awareness of the inner workings of his own heart and mind. "Circe's tits! I think I just had a bloody epiphany."

"It's hard to please Luce, but do so and you will have everything and more. Over the years, I've seen his lovers but none have stayed as long as you. Where there is a spark, there is often a fire."

"You are a wise woman, Cissy," Sirius smirks and takes the witch's hand and plants a kiss on the back of it. Then he stops mid-movement and frowns. There is a completely baffled look on his face. "What if he doesn't want me? Sure, I'm good enough to get him off, but what if he doesn't want anything else?"

"Only one way to find out," Cissy says with a smile. "Just be honest and don't annoy him too much. The worst possible outcome is that he rejects you and never lets you near him again."

Sirius huffs. "That made me feel loads better, cheers."

"The Dark Lord has called for a meeting as Severus said; naturally, Lucius will attend and you either go now and implement yourself into the meeting or wait here until he gets back. Meetings always make him irritable."

"He's always so fickle after meetings; I can show you more hickeys to prove it."

Sirius makes a move to lift his shirt but Cissy stops him. "I believe you. Despite not being a prude, I don't want to get a detailed description of your activities with Lucius."

The Animagus grins. "I thought all witches gushed at the mention of blokes getting hot and heavy?"

"I am not one of those witches," Cissy states wryly. "If you insist on over-sharing, I will do so as well and speak of nothing else than Severus and his charms."

"Say no more," Sirius makes a gagging noise and stands. But his childish nature doesn't allow him to just drop the matter. "You should compare notes with Luce then, find out which one of us has the charms."

"Cease talking and leave if you know what is good for you," the witch orders. "You can use the Floo to get to Riddle Manor. Try not to get lost; I would hate to tell Harry that I misplaced his precious dog."

Sirius exits the room with a laugh, not at all offended. He enjoys his banter with Cissy; the witch has
never failed to tease or taunt the man and Sirius loves it. It is invigorating but not as exciting as having a shouting match with Malfoy.

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The meeting is only for the Inner Circle and Harry; the Dark Lord has not invited anyone from the lower ranks. Greyback is allowed as well, only because Tom has a task for him. So when he spots Sirius Black, he does not feel happy. The man doesn't even wear his mark.

He has Harry next to him and he pulls the teen closer, enough for him to brush his lips over the boy's ear. "I do not recall asking your mutt to be here."

"Snape said I can bring my dog." Harry grins, not very sorry. "Siri is my guest, let's say I invited him and you don't make a fuss."

"You are quite insufferable."

"I thought that's what you loved about me most?" Harry teases.

Tom taps his fingers on the sturdy oak table and hums. "I remember saying no such thing, however, I do recall saying that I admire your brazen nature and ability to see the potential for personal growth. And I guess everything else is just a bonus, wrapped up in a delectable package."

"How long is this meeting going to take?" Harry questions with a half-smirk. "Or would it be rude of us to engage in some tête-à-tête with all your Death Eater chums here?"

"I would be forced to gouge out their eyes if they were to see you in such an intimate setting."

Harry sits back into his own seat and says, "Better wrap up this meeting then."

The meeting itself is mostly like all the ones before and Harry grows bored rather quickly. Some Death Eaters drone on and on about Ministry nonsense that sounds like a really dull history lesson with Binns. Instead of paying attention, the green-eyed teen decides to watch Sirius. The Animagus isn't doing any better, bleakly eying the one speaking and making noises that indicate that he is close to offing himself. Tom has taken notice as well but does nothing. He sends a few glares the man's way.

Harry watches the others and his eyes meet Draco's; the young blonde is blinking slowly to stave off sleep. The teen's father is just hiding it better, but Harry can see that Lucius is not pleased to sit through an hour-long report about some rubbish. Bellatrix is slouched in her seat, her chin pressed against her chest in an utterly slob-like manner and she does not care if anyone sees her. At some point, Tom clears his throat and tells the wizard to shut up; though he expresses himself in a more authoritative manner suitable for a Dark Lord.

When they start a discussion about Dumbledore, everyone perks up and they all join the meeting once again. Bella is first to giggle. "It was glorious, my Lord. The old man went flying like a baby bird, flapping his useless limbs. We all heard the racket he made when he landed flat on his back."

"I'm glad it amuses you so, Bellatrix." Tom chuckles.

"I have a question." Sirius leans on the table. "Can I show the Order the door now or is there a
certain time period I have to let them stay before blasting them out on the street."

The Dark Lord seems to think it over and offers a dismissive shrug. "Do as you please, Black. I don't think we have to keep coddling them, especially now that their leader is dead. We have enough loyal individuals in the Ministry to take it and with the good Minister on our side, I see no reason to delay the takeover."

"Kick them while they're on the ground," Bella suggests. "It would certainly be funny."

"Why not just kill the lot of them?" Rabastan asks.

The Dark Lord allows a smile on his face as he says, "And deprive you all of a good hunt? I think not. We'll let them run and then we'll catch them one by one."

Everyone seems to agree with their Lord. It is a great idea after all. Bellatrix is very eager to start hunting.

"I reckon I ought to have a housewarming party after I toss them out," Sirius laughs. awfully pleased with himself and the Dark Lord's decision.

Rodolphus comments. "I think you need to torch it to get rid of the Order's presence."

"That would be wicked, but I think the Muggles living next door would object," Harry points out. "You could renovate it though; I know how much you hate that dump even though it's your ancestral home or whatever."

"Maybe I'll give it to you." Sirius shrugs and adds when Harry makes a face. "Or Draco if you don't want it, as a part of his Black birthright."

Lucius seems surprised but hides it well. "That's gracious of you."

"He's a Black by blood and I doubt he would be satisfied with just a handshake when he becomes of age. He can do whatever he wants with it, I don't care."

Draco gives a nod. "Er...thank you. Very considerate of you, Cousin."

Tom's voice seems to carry out all around the room as he speaks. "If you are quite done, I'd like to discuss another matter."

"Be my guest, Tommy," Sirius smirks and adds a little bow.

Harry snorts but covers it up with a cough when Tom glares at him. The green-eyed wizard senses the underlying meaning. He tries to look stern. "Siri, behave yourself or you will not be sitting with the big boys anymore."

"I do believe it is an unfamiliar concept for him."

Sirius raises a brow and snaps back at the blond wizard. "Maybe if you ask nicely enough, I'll behave."

Tom starts to feel annoyed again. "The Lestrange brothers and Greyback will be tasked with capturing as many Order members they can get their hands on. I do not care who you capture, I just want it done."

"Can I add some names?" Harry asks and goes on when Tom replies with a slight nod. "Aurors Henley and Otis, if it's not too much trouble. Horrible gits, fully positioned far up Dumbledore's dead
arse and both of them work under Shacklebolt. And Otis gives me the creeps; he's a sleazy individual."

Tom's eyes narrow. "Explain."

Severus explains for the teen. "During Order meetings, the Auror's mind was just a tad bit too open and I regret ever using Legilimency on him. I was thoroughly disturbed by his fantasies."

"Henley is just a rude pig," Harry adds with a glower. "Caught him stealing the silver, among other things. I told Kreacher to search him and he banished his clothes, left him stark naked in the kitchen, silver spoons and forks clattering to the floor as his trousers disappeared. It was hilarious. He never did tell Dumbledore about that."

Sirius scoffs. "I think I'll burn the bloody place down with all of them in it."

"You can set Otis on fire if you like." Harry offers and smiles when he sees Sirius' frown transform into a dark look of blood rush.

"I think Greyback should handle the two Aurors," Tom muses and pointedly tells the grinning werewolf, "Feel free to make it hurt." Tom smiles darkly, sharing a look with Harry, the teen agreeing that the ferocious werewolf would be the perfect delivery boy.

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Sirius finds himself sulking in the Dark Lord's pitch-black sitting room long after the meeting is over. Harry had disappeared with the Dark Lord, surely doing something that would make Sirius wish he could punch Voldemort in the face.

It is gloomy outside; as dark as a late summer night can get. A helpful elf has provided Sirius with a bottle of scotch and the man is happy to take a swig.

"The Dark Lord will without doubt Crucio you if you pass out in his sitting room with one of his prized bottles of single malt tucked under your arm."

Sirius doesn't have to see in order to know that Lucius is leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed. "I've slept in places far worse than the Dark Lord's sitting room. Azkaban doesn't exactly invest in beds, you know."

Lucius moves and Sirius feels his stomach clench when the blond comes close enough for him to see. The little bit of light coming in from the window allows Sirius to make out the finer details of his face. He speaks before taking a mouthful. "I'm not in a good mood at the moment."

"I don't see why I should care for your mood, Black."

"Would it kill you to say something nice?" Sirius asks, taking another gulp of the drink.

Lucius wraps his fingers around the bottle and pulls it away, saying. "You can use the Floo to get home."

"I'm not a child," the wizard states. He reaches out and yanks the blond wizard closer, making Lucius stumble into his lap. Circling an arm around the wizard's waist, Sirius grins before sneaking
the fingers of his free hand up inch by inch and runs his thumb over soft lips. The angry scowl on Lucius' face looks plenty tempting. "I would really like a kiss right about now."

"You smell like a distillery."

Sirius grabs the bottle of scotch back and holds it out until the blond takes it and lifts it to his lips. The Animagus watches intently as Lucius downs a hefty gulp of the strong drink. The Animagus surges forward and slants his mouth on the other's, licking away the trace of bitter alcohol. Sirius deepens the kiss and feels a white-hot rush of yearning in his gut.

Pulling away, Sirius says with urgency, "Find us a bed or the Dark Lord will find something far more outrageous in his sitting room."

With a wave of his hand, Lucius makes the door close with a soft click and Sirius knows that a simple locking ward has gone up as well. Not powerful enough to keep the Dark Lord out but that doesn't matter. The blond wizard does not waste time as he divests himself of his robe.

"You think a little ward will keep Tommy away?"

"Then I suggest you hurry," Lucius remarks with a dry tone before pulling Sirius in for another heated kiss.

Sirius fumbles around, trying to place the bottle safely on the little coffee table next to them. It dawns on the wizard that he enjoys everything he gets from Lucius; whether it is in a bed or not. The moment of recognition is powerful enough for him to pull away and leave a bit of distance between himself and the wizard. He stares and stares, the sweltering feeling in his stomach making its way up and sneaking into his chest. The pulse of awareness washes over him.

"What is it?"

Sirius doesn't answer; it is very difficult to do so at the moment and he just shakes his head and makes a promise to himself that he will share his crazy and wild ideas with the blond another day. He presses forward, and with the bottle dropped on the floor, Sirius places both of his hands on Lucius' neck, moving them up to cradle his face. He slides his fingers into the man's hair. If Lucius notices the gentle intimacy Sirius presents, he does not speak of it and simply permits the other wizard to slowly pull him into a slow-burning inferno.

*****

The prospect of reaching seventeen years of life makes Harry look back at the previous years and all that had happened during that time. Not long ago, he had watched Dumbledore die; he had taken great pleasure in seeing it happen. His upcoming birthday is another reminder of everything Dumbledore had done; how the old fool had manipulated and groomed him into a perfect little tool. Except he hadn't managed to warp Harry's mind, for the teen had already chosen a side long before Albus or anyone else had tried to use him in his plans.

Harry feels a consuming rage in his heart - a feeling so intense that it threatens to consume him whole. The Order of Phoenix is a nest of vipers; liars and cowards all huddled together, waiting for orders like mindless pawns. He now knows that they all fear him, consider him unnatural and distorted, bent and shaped by the death of his parents and the encounters with Voldemort. Molly Weasley pities him and misguidedely believes that she can be the mother Harry has never had. The
witch can't understand that Harry doesn't tolerate her forced and ill-advised attempts at mothering.

Both Moody and Shacklebolt have treated him like a stupid child; they had always questioning everything Harry had said or done simply because they had thought of him as an idiot boy with no real idea what the world can be like. The list goes on and on; too many people in Harry's mind.

The worst part is not being able to trust anyone. He has lost the ability to see the good in people. He suspects everyone of being in league with Dumbledore and the Order. Even Remus Lupin is not truly his own man, and despite how much it had seemed that the werewolf had cared for Harry, he has made no attempts to reach out and tell Harry how much he cares. Harry thinks that he doesn't care at all; too wrapped up in his own shame over being a creature and riddled with weakness.

"Your mind is filled with distractions."

Harry turns to see Tom walking into the room, clad in just a simple dress shirt and fitted trousers. He looks relaxed and casual - a look Harry likes a lot. "I'm thinking about lost causes."

"Those are hardly worth a thought," Tom says and reaches Harry's side, wrapping an arm around his waist. Harry is lean and almost matches his height now, but he had been a skinny and short child during their first meeting in the Chamber. The persistent thoughts over the past cause Tom to feel a surge of anger; it pushes him to fall deeper into a murderous fury. He often pictures the things he wants to do with the Muggles who had treated the teen like an unwanted pup.

Harry can sense a shadow lingering in Tom's mind. "Tell me about your plans for the Ministry."

Tom chases away the darkness that clouds his thoughts and starts explaining, "When the Order of Phoenix has been crushed, I will take over the position of Minister; I will rule as both Minister and Dark Lord."

"Voldemort is a great title to have and certainly a perfectly scary one if you're trying to make the wizarding world fear you, but I think it's not suited for the Minister for Magic."

Tom raises a brow. "And what shall I call myself then?"

"Well, you are a descendant of Salazar Slytherin and that's a wicked pure-blood name. Why not take up the title of Lord Slytherin. Or you could just use Riddle or Gaunt as a surname."

"The idea has worth." Turning the younger wizard around in his arms, Tom says with a well-hidden smirk, "Harry Riddle does have a rather lovely ring to it."

Harry frowns a little but he can't say anything before he feels the twisting sensation in his stomach. His nausea vanishes when he takes a look around and sees a rather familiar scene.

"The Chamber of Secrets?" Harry gapes. "But how? I thought you couldn't Apparate because of the wards around Hogwarts."

Tom releases Harry and looks around. "With Dumbledore dead, the magic placed around the castle is gone as well. This place is Slytherin's creation; it does not belong to Dumbledore or any of the Headmasters before him. Only those who can find it may enter; Dumbledore never knew where the Chamber was and no wards or charms he placed on the castle would affect Slytherin's chamber."

"I found it in my second year."

Tom has to smile at that. "Because you are my equal."
"Not that I don't appreciate you bringing me here, but what exactly are we doing here besides reminiscing?" asks the teen.

"This is where we first met."

Harry gives a rather dry reply. "We met when you tried to kill me while I was sucking on my thumb."

"I did not truly know you," Tom says. "It was here that I saw you for the first time, where you confronted me and joined me. This place is where you saw me as I was before my sanity was lost; the beginning of the true Lord Voldemort. You met me as Tom Marvolo Riddle, the heir of Slytherin."

Taking in the chamber, the green-eyed wizard finds the exact spot where he had watched Ginny Weasley take her last breath. He stands close to it and says, "A twelve-year-old boy was more interested in an enemy than his friend's little sister who was dying before him. In the end, I chose you over her."

"You fascinated me; I could not comprehend how an ordinary baby had done what no wizard had ever managed before. I wanted to study you, consume you and mark you as mine."

"Which you did." smirks the teen. He falls in thought for a moment and only comes out of it when he senses Tom's hand on his cheek. He blinks a few times. "And it all happened under the old man's nose."

Tom places a kiss on Harry's temple. "He was blind to your wickedness, my little lion."

"He was blind to many things, but he always did try to see the best in people. He was a fool to trust me; after everything he had done to ensure that I was a broken, affection-seeking hero, he still believed that I would never turn on him."

"His arrogance brought him to his knees." Tom lets out a cruel laugh.

As if remembering something, Harry twists his head around and asks, "Where's the Basilisk?"

Everyone believes that the ancient creature to be a mere skeleton collecting dust in the deep bowels of the Chamber, but Harry had never killed the giant serpent; it had been something they had all needed to believe at the time. Tom had helped with creating a false memory for Dumbledore to see and the old man had been satisfied with what he had seen in Harry's mind. In truth, the serpent king is still there. The creature is no longer allowed to roam through the pipes; instead, it has to get his snacks elsewhere.

"Dumbledore knew it was a Basilisk; he was a crafty wizard, certainly smart enough to play dumb for so long without raising suspicions."

"Let's not talk about the old man." Tom dismisses the subject and takes Harry's hand into his own. Bringing it to his lips, he places a kiss on the teen's knuckles and speaks, "I brought you here for a reason, my sweet."

"Before you divulge the details, perhaps you can explain to me why you didn't tell me that you were present during Dumbledore's funeral. I had to hear it from Narcissa and Snape. They told me that had I known, I wouldn't have kept my distance."

Tom sighs, a bit put out. "I did not tell you because I was only there for a few moments; long enough to see that the old fool was indeed dead. You did not need me disrupting your well-played act."
"I wouldn't have jumped you if that's what you mean."

The Dark Lord senses that the teen is no longer in a good mood and wraps his arm around the teen's waist, Disapparating away.

When they get back to Riddle Manor, Harry twists his body away from Tom and tries to pull out of his grasp, but the Dark Lord is having none of that and hold the teen close in a vice-like grip. He says softly into the teen's ear, "Do you recall the time I visited you before the start of fifth year. You had just arrived when I called you to me through our link."

"I almost got caught sneaking out. Neville covered for me when McGonagall came to check up on me." Harry huffs, but he does remember what night.

"Do you remember what I said?"

Harry swallows hard and cranes his neck enough to see Tom's face.

"I told you that when you reach seventeen years of age and once the old man has been removed, I will claim you as my own. Do you remember that?"

Harry gives a weak nod. "You were too noble to get into my pants when I all but begged you to. You wanted to wait until I was all grown up."

"I am still far too old-fashioned to get into your pants. Although, there is a solution to my traditional views, one that I wanted to offer you tonight before you so rudely insisted on ruining the moment."

Harry steps away from the man's hold and crosses his arms. "You lied to me, Tom. I don't tolerate lying."

"I did not lie; I merely did not tell you for your own safety. It was better this way."

"Just don't do it again." Harry lets out a deep breath, his resolve crumbling away.

Taking the teen's hand, Tom laces their fingers together. "I am not a sentimental man nor do I like to dwell on feelings. However, I am possessive and I do not allow something of mine to slip through my fingers."

"I know you care for me," Harry says with a small smile. "You're emotionally stunted, nothing I didn't know before, Tom."

"You are mine, Harry," the Dark Lord states with a slight growl that sends shivers down the teen's back. Tom continues after a few moments of silence, "I did not expect this to be so hard."

He takes a step back and turns away from Harry, his fists clenched. While Harry stands there unmovning and confused, Tom starts to pace and eventually walks into the other room, only to come back with a small box in his hands.

"You are nothing like I imagined." Tom begins, a husky tone making its way into his voice. Or maybe he's trying to mask the emotion seeping into it. "You are the very opposite of what I believed. At first, I was intrigued because you were so very different from what I thought I knew of you and it was interesting to see you grow closer to the dark your heart harbours. Then it all changed and I knew that I had to have you; as an equal and as a confidant. You did not fear me or the madness within me; you weren't afraid. You were attracted to the chaos I created." He stops for a moment, looking for the right words before continuing, "I lost my humanity a long time ago, but you give me enough of it to see that you are not a possession. I do not truly want to possess you but always be
near the light you have given me to see through the black mist of insanity that wants me for itself."

Harry does not know what to say, he stammers. "Tom-

The man holds up his hand and shakes his head. "Do not speak. Just let me finish."

Harry can only nod and watch as Tom clutches the box closer to his chest. The Dark Lord picks up again; this time his tone is more gentle, watery even. "If you have demands, I will give you everything. I could leave all of this behind, but only if you stay with me. I am utterly at your mercy."

He opens the box and reveals the inside of it to Harry. There is a ring inside. In the middle of it is an oval stone of stunning green, enhanced by smaller black stones on the sides. "This ring belonged to Salazar Slytherin; it has his family coat of arms on it."

Harry feels drawn to it. "It's beautiful."

Taking the stunning band out of the box, Tom places the little chest on the table behind him. Meeting the teen's gaze, Tom reaches out his hand, which Harry immediately takes. "With this Consort ring, I wish to claim you, Harry James Potter. Will you accept my claim?"

"You want to marry me?" Harry gawks, his green eyes wide and filled with astonishment.

"More than anything else," Tom promises. "I want you to be mine, always. Not only as a Consort to the Dark Lord but as my equal and spouse. I want everyone to see that you belong to me, that you are mine as I am yours."

As Tom gently slides the ring on Harry's finger; the teen only stares in wonder. When the ring rests on his finger, Tom lifts it to his lips and places a kiss on it, making Harry's insides turn to goo and his legs to jelly. He realises after a while that he has not said anything and exhales with marvel in his voice. "Yes. To all of it, yes!"

Tom chuckles at the teen's bright smile and child-like wonder as he eyes the ring.

"Siri will go mental," Harry snorts after a minute or two of admiring his ring.

"Your godfather will not object to it, Harry. If anything, he will feel relieved that I am not simply playing with you but indeed have honest intentions. He is a Lord himself, raised to follow the traditions of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. He values the same conservative ideals as I do."

Harry looks amused. "Clearly you don't know Sirius Black. He might be Lord Black, but he is not old-fashioned or noble. Conservative is a word you will not find in his vocabulary. Trust me on this."

"If he does not like it, I will simply have him fixed like a common dog."

There is a glint of warning in Harry's eyes. "Unless you wish to spend our wedding night by yourself, I urge you to reconsider."
The devil staring back at you

Chapter Four

The devil staring back at you

The next morning, Sirius examines the ring on his godson's finger, his eyes slightly narrowed. Harry is positively giddy and Sirius just doesn't have the heart to ruin the teen's happiness with his temper. After all, Harry is legally allowed to get married.

"Siri, you could say something." Harry is hesitant when addressing his godfather. "You aren't angry with me, right?"

Sirius lets go of the teen's hand. "I'm not angry with you, Pup. However, I am livid that your royal prick of a husband-to-be didn't ask me for permission. Pure-bloods takes these things seriously, but I guess being the Dark Lord means that he makes his own rules."

"He did say that you wouldn't object because of some conservative nonsense ancient families have in common," Harry points out. "Something about traditional values and ideals."

"Hah!" Sirius snorts. "Well, I do value his sense of humour that's for sure. Ancient we may be, but the House of Black isn't as noble as you'd think."

Harry asks, "Pre-marital sex is something Blacks don't shy away from?"

"My hag of a mother was probably a prude and kept her knees crosses until the wedding night, but that's about it. Do you think my cousins were blushing maidens when my uncle married them off? I'm certainly no virgin."

"But you do approve that Tom is a traditionalist and won't touch me before we're married?"

"Bless his purist attitude," Sirius exclaims. "I would rather he didn't touch you at all, but at least he's not a bloody pervert and will put a ring on your finger before plucking your cherry."

Harry reddens considerably. "Not something I want to discuss, Siri."

"So when's the wedding?" the Animagus laughs, seeing that the teen is mortified.

"We haven't set a date yet; he did propose yesterday and it's not like I know how to plan one."

"You should ask Cissy; she'll go mental if you mention a wedding. Her own wedding wasn't exactly a dream come true. I bet she'll help if you ask her."

Harry frowns. "Was the wedding really that awful?"

"It was an impressive event, don't get me wrong," Sirius speaks with disdain. "The wedding itself was nothing short of exquisite, but Cissy wasn't happy and the entire thing was a sham to please my family and Malfoy's father. Cissy was betrothed to Lucius when she was thirteen. The marriage was just an advantageous contract between two wealthy pure-blood families; it was the prestige of joining such prominent families that drove my bastard uncle to seek out Abraxas Malfoy in the first place."

"I always thought that Draco's parents were the embodiment of married life," Harry says with his
puckered brow. "It had never occurred to me that people can marry without love."

"You'd be surprised to know just how many marriages in our world have been the product of a contract. It's ridiculous - and definitely something I'd never put you through. The same as Cissy and Malfoy, I suspect; Draco is in no danger to end up marrying a dull pure-blooded witch of his father's choosing."

"That's good to hear. He's rather taken with a charming witch already and I'd hate to see them miserable."

"Draco should do the sensible thing and run off with Lovegood before daddy dearest finds out."

Harry smirks. "Is it that obvious?"

"He's not subtle I can tell you that much. The boy has hearts twinkling in his eyes."

"Do you think Lucius will cause trouble for them? Luna isn't what most would call conventional and she's different from all the other prim and proper debutantes; it's something Lucius isn't used to. I'd hate to hex him for being a prick to Draco and Luna."

Sirius shrugs, his face set in a smile. "Draco is a Black by blood, thus he is also under my protection should Malfoy throw a hissy fit over his son's choice. Besides, the Lovegood girl isn't a terrible choice considering some of the witches on the table. Lord Bulstrode's girl is looking for a husband and the Flints have been trying to find suitable husbands and wives for their little trolls -- and I do mean trolls quite literally."

"I heard that from Draco -- about the offer to join the Malfoy and Flint name. Draco had a horrible whine over it, partly because he hasn't told his father about Luna and he's afraid he'll be forced to marry someone else."

Relaxing against the sofa cushions, Sirius notes, "Despite being a stuck-up git, Lucius is a decent father and he loves his very own mini-version too much to let him suffer in a loveless marriage. He got lucky with my cousin; there might not be great love or passion, but there is fondness. Cissy treats him like a brother."

"Enough about that." Harry is amused to hear Sirius say semi-nice things about a man he claims to loathe, but he'd rather discuss his wedding plans. "Maybe I should write to Narcissa and ask if she's willing to help me with the wedding. I have no idea where to start."

"I'm having lunch with Cissy in a few hours; I can ask her on your behalf. I assure you that she'll be here first thing in the morning with plans, seating arrangements and anything else a wedding might hold."

Harry can only grin with eagerness.

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As custom dictates, it is also proper to publically announce the upcoming nuptials between the Dark Lord Voldemort and Harry Potter. It is, of course, a secret announcement, spoken only among the Dark Lord’s closest supporters and Inner Circle. They have to keep their mouths shut or risk facing the wizard’s wrath.
Tom is looking regal as always; his slim fingers holding a glass of red wine. His youthful exterior hides fierce intelligence. He has decades of knowledge stored up. Some may even call him an old soul inside a young body. It is something Harry cherishes in the man - his wisdom and experience.

Inhabiting the body of a snake, Lord Voldemort had travelled the woods of a country not his own. He had been a prisoner, forced to live as a meagre thought in the back of everyone's mind. He had been a vermin-like being -- weak and forgotten. During the years of his exile, he had gathered enough strength to travel, enough power to seek a better host.

Quirrell had been foolish enough to come for him; a stuttering idiot who had hoped to gain recognition and skill. Instead, he had succumbed to Voldemort and been made a means of transportation and plotting. Yet nothing had mattered once he had met his green-eyed saviour. His ruin in the form of a redeemer. His soul piece inside the diary had regained a body and all the other wayward pieces had been collected. Now he has Harry by his side; his anchor and remedy for the madness that still haunts parts of his mind. Harry Potter has changed him, has changed his goals and plans; he had been a hollow shell of a wizard by himself. That is no longer the case.

Tom's musings are cut short when a wizard approaches him.

"My Lord, the House of McNair offers its congratulations on your impending matrimony," the wizard bows as he speaks and keeps his head lowered as he goes on, "It is a great honour to take part in such a marvellous occurrence."

Tom gives a nod and that is all that McNair is going to get; not that he expects anything else. Harry offers a barely visible smirk and accepts the man's good wishes. "We thank you for your kind words."

McNair isn't the only one offering his best wishes. Members of the Inner Circle simply bow and back away, leaving their Master in peace. An engagement party is not an unusual event, many families have festivities as such to celebrate a betrothal. It is proper decorum to attend a social event such as the celebration of the Dark Lord's upcoming marriage.

Despite the occasion, Severus is looking grim as always, but he has never been interested in parties. Frivolity makes him nauseous. He can't really figure out why Potter would willingly marry the Dark Lord, but it's none of his business anyway. Potter's relationships hardly matter to Snape. Across the room, Harry drifts away from Tom and walks over to Narcissa. Snape promptly walks off. He'd rather not listen to any more wedding babble.

Sirius tries to scowl as little as possible. He doesn't want to ruin his godson's good mood with his frowning. He is already downing his third flute of champagne. He spots a wizard eying him; a rather good-looking bloke with wavy golden hair and a sculpted face with high cheekbones and nice lips. It is no one in the Inner Circle; Sirius knows everyone and the wizard glancing his way is someone he hasn't seen before. Probably the progeny of some Dark Lord supporter he has yet to meet.

Sirius is a wizard who enjoys attention and he likes flattery as much as the next man, especially when a handsome young wizard sends him heated looks. He flirts back like any man with blood flowing in is veins would.

His mood sours a little when Snape pops out from nowhere and actually speaks to him. "Black, you are digging a hole for yourself; one that is deep enough for you to never crawl out of."

Sirius' expression changes from playful to grimacing. "Why are you speaking to me, Snivellus? Does it look like I want to talk to you?"
Severus sidles next to Sirius and raises one dark eyebrow. "Believe me, dog, I would rather cut out my own tongue than willingly address you, but I chose to do so because you are extraordinarily stupid for a Black and it seems you are unable to use your own Gryffindor-soaked brain."

"What are you on about?"

"I would take great pleasure in seeing you wallow in misery; it would bring me unbridled joy if you were to suffer. I do not care for you in the slightest, Black. However, I do care a great deal about Lucius and his wellbeing is very important to me, seeing as he is my brother in all but blood. Hurt him and I will remove parts of your body with unhurried and meticulous care."

Sirius huffs a laugh. "As if it's any of your bloody business, Snape."

"True, it is not my business." Severus hums and adds with crystal-clear contempt, "Nevertheless, it will become my business if you choose to play with him. I will remove certain parts of your anatomy and feed them to you should you hurt him in any way."

Snape turns and leaves like a storm cloud that had appeared out of nowhere and then disappeared just as silently. The young man is still looking at him, but Black's eyes snap towards the doorway in an instant when Rabastan appears. Yet the man is not looking at Rabastan but rather keeps his eyes on Lucius who follows Lestrange into the room.

Sirius reaches for another flute of bubbly as his eyes drink in the sight. Being perfect is expected of a Malfoy -- it is deep-seated in them to act and look a certain way. Remembering Abraxas Malfoy with a certain bad taste in his mouth, Sirius knows that there is very little of the man in his only son. There is an almost effeminate attractiveness to Lucius, something Sirius had noticed in his teenage years and still admires to this day. But there is something else that captures his attention. It is the magnetism of his effortless charm and the lure of his power; it is the way he moves and speaks. Every little thing Sirius knows and every inch of soft skin he has mapped with his hands and lips. He feels completely owned by Malfoy and, in turn, wants to own the fair-haired wizard in every sense of the word. The young wizard who had eyed him before seems insignificant now; his attention unwanted as Sirius lets his senses be filled with only Lucius.

"Cousin, it is unbecoming to gawk like a commoner."

Narcissa can already guess what ails her cousin. And she knows for a certain fact that Lucius has made an effort to look flawless tonight.

"He doesn't even acknowledge my existence." Sirius glowers, swirling his drink before taking a sip. "I'm a dirty secret. God -- that's a first for me! Feels weirdly unpleasant."

"And you will remain exactly that if you do not tell him how you feel," Narcissa advises.

Sirius snaps without thought, "I don't know what I feel. I desire him, that's a given, but it won't always be like that. What if it passes?"

"You are insufferable in your indecisiveness." Narcissa sighs deeply and downs her own glass of champagne. "You have only two choices; either tell Luce about your feelings or end it now rather than later."

"And I ask again -- what if he doesn't want me or my feelings?" Sirius questions with an almost pleading tone as if the witch has all the right answers. "He only agreed to this because we said no attachment and definitely no feelings. The very definition of the expression 'no strings attached'."

Narcissa waves her hand in an elegant yet dismissive manner. "You are tangled in strings, Sirius."
How many nights do you spend away from the manor, how many nights do you spend alone for that matter? I have house-elves asking me if you are a permanent resident of our home; they are very curious to find out if they should address you as a guest or a Master as well. You are fooling yourself into believing that this is simply an affair you can end with a mere blink. Even our Lord is growing suspicious with all those marks adorning Luce's neck."

"Fine, fine..." Sirius grunts petulance and straightens his posture. "But if he tells me to stuff it where there is no sunlight, I'm fully blaming you for making me do it in the first place. I can happily keep my mouth shut, but you won't stop pestering me."

Narcissa pats the man's shoulder. "Perhaps you ought to devise a plan before cornering him and simply blurting it out like a brash Gryffindor."

"So I can't just shag him into oblivion and then come out with it?"

"No, you cannot," Narcissa drawls out. "You will know what to do, but do not make me hex you for being an utter imbecile. You do make a habit of it."

The witch strides back into the group of witches and wizards to their left, leaving Sirius on his own again. As expected, Harry is glued to Tom's side, smiling and making it very hard for Sirius to hate the Dark Lord. If he brings that sort of a smile on Harry's face, then how can Sirius resent Tom Riddle?

Sirius casts one last look over to where Lucius is standing with a group of wizards and allows a sigh to escape him. He has no idea what he is going to do, but he knows that he can't leave it like that.

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Neville is happy for his friend; really, really happy. But Harry's infectious grin and the constant flash of the fancy ring makes Longbottom smile with amusement. He has never seen Harry this cheerful, almost teeming with life and elation, constantly sneaking his eyes on the ring and falling into daydreams.

They are sitting under a massive tree -- an ancient oak that shelters the teens from the low summer sun. There is a lake nearby, just a brief walk away from the edge of the small forest area. Draco had asked Harry to visit with his friends and that's how they had all ended up lazing around on the grounds of Malfoy Manor. However, the blond teen is nowhere in sight and Luna has mysteriously vanished as well.

"It really is peaceful here," Neville points out, bringing Harry back from his slight daze. To his right, Neville sees horses trotting around in their enclosure, a big black one circling a smaller honey-toned mare, softly snorting and trying to get the smaller horse to notice him. "I can see now why Draco acts like a haughty prince. He really does have it all."

"He has grown up a bit. I think Luna has had a positive effect on him."

"Where did they go?" Neville asks, craning his neck to see if he can spot them.

Harry shrugs. "Probably snogging by the lake; there is a little pergola there. Though if you ask him, he'll most likely say that they were feeding the swans."
After a while, the young wizards decide to go looking for their missing friends. As Harry and Neville reach the path that takes them to the lake, the two Gryffindors spot the two blonds sitting on the small pier that leads straight into the water. While Harry finds it amusing, Neville looks away as pink creeps up his neck and cheeks.

"Draco!" Harry shouts loudly enough to startle a flock of birds. He makes his voice low and harsh. That makes the blond wizard jump up and he scrambles to his feet from where he had been positioned; half on top of Luna. Both have thoroughly kissed lips and hair in utter disarray. Draco's speed in which he moves away is nothing short of amazing. He's like a Muggle athlete.

"Potter, you git!" the blond cries out in relief. There is anger in his voice as well. He had been sure that it was his father. He gets to his feet and fumes as Harry laughs and Neville smirks. "I ought to drown you, you absolute arse!"

Harry can't stop cackling as the blond wizard smooths his shirt and holds out a hand for Luna to take. She's still smiling brightly as she adjusts her blouse and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, revealing her peculiar electric blue earrings.

As the girl stands, she states. "You were right, Harry. Draco is a great kisser."

"I beg your pardon?" Draco is looking mortified yet oddly proud. "Since when does Potty know that?"

"Oh, just a lucky guess I'd say." Harry titters. "Were you planning on snogging until the sun went down or should we go inside?"

"I want strawberry ice-cream," Luna says and smiles up to Draco, making the blond wizard stare and just nod. He is entirely besotted with the girl and doesn't even mind that the others see him in such an enchanted state.

"Great idea, Luna love," Harry hums and snaps his fingers in front of Draco's face when he sees that the blond is not responsive. "Oi, lover-boy!"

Draco sneers but it is not as harsh as he probably wishes it to be. "Don't you have a Dark Lord to annoy?"

"I was distracting him so he told me to stay away until dinner time, which means I get to annoy you. Don't you feel special?" Harry tells Malfoy with a smirk. "And I have to go over some wedding plans with your mother; she insisted on some changes."

"You've driven her absolutely batty," Draco says. "It's all she wants to talk about. Father has started avoiding her during the day, in fear of being dragged into planning the Dark Lord's wedding ceremony. Honestly, couldn't you have just eloped and spared us the agony of my mother's school-girl sensibilities?"

Harry finds it vastly amusing. "Oh, sorry for being inconsiderate."

The foursome walks back towards the manor, Neville and Harry leading the way as Draco and Luna walk a few steps behind, seemingly stuck to the other's side.

They have lunch in the sitting room - at least Harry and Neville are eating, the smitten pair is sitting close and speaking in hushed voices. Narcissa walks by the door but doesn't step inside; only after a little while does the witch come in and greet the young wizards and the only witch in the room.

"Harry, what a lovely surprise," Narcissa says with a small relieved smile. She then offers a small
nod to Neville. "Master Longbottom, welcome to Malfoy Manor."

Neville smiles almost shyly. He has no idea what the social etiquette says about such matters. He has never really studied the pure-blood protocol. He opts for a neutral greeting. "It's my pleasure, Mrs Malfoy. Thank you for having me."

Draco seems visibly nervous when his mother zooms in on the witch sitting by Draco's side. Narcissa knows everyone worth knowing in the wizarding world and instantly recognises the daughter of Xenophilius Lovegood. "And this must be Miss Lovegood."

Luna, however, is not shy or bothered. "Mrs Malfoy, it's wonderful to finally meet you in person. Draco has told me so much about you."

Narcissa, pleasantly shocked by the girl's politeness, composes herself in a heartbeat and offers the young witch her hand in greeting. She turns sharply to her son and says with veiled disapproval. "Darling, you never mentioned you were acquainted with such a charming young lady. She is simply divine."

Luna offers a sincere smile when Draco shrinks back into the sofa under his mother's gaze. "Must have slipped my mind, Mother."

"Inexcusable," Narcissa states with a tight smile, displeased with her son's behaviour. "Miss Lovegood will surely agree to dine with us tonight. Won't you, my dear?"

"I would be most honoured, Mrs Malfoy. Draco can be such a silly Slytherin at times, I'm sure he simply forgot to mention me. Nargles can do that to you."

Harry snorts and covers it up with his hand when Draco throws him a venomous look.

"Harry, you must stay for dinner, as will Master Longbottom I hope." Narcissa charms with her warm smile. "Lucius will not mind, I assure you."

"Of course we'll stay," Harry smiles. "That way we can discuss the wedding plans in detail."

The witch's eyes shine as she speaks, "I have a number of ideas for you to look through. I had acquired the most splendid fabrics for you to select from."

"Well, Siri suggested a contract where I demand to be co-Dark Lord. At least I'd get something out of marrying a psycho wizard. His words, not mine."

"Pay him no mind, Harry. Sirius has his own troubles to sort through."

"Mother," Draco starts with a measured tone, "perhaps I can show Luna the manor?"

Narcissa raises a brow. "Perhaps you should show the young lady around after a private moment with your mother."

Draco gives a nod and follows Narcissa out of the room. Luna seems unconcerned and shares a look of secret mirth with Harry who figures that Cissy is simply playing a mean game with her son.

As the three remain seated in the sitting room, Draco drags his feet to follow his mother to the other room; the witch's personal sitting room. Awkwardly standing in the middle of the room, ready to receive a scolding like a disobedient child, Draco waits for his mother to speak. Narcissa glides into the room and takes a seat in her favourite armchair, silently laughing at the way her teenage son stands before her like a naughty child.
"This girl is your intended and yet you did not consider it significant enough to tell your parents about?"

Draco grimaces, clenching his teeth together. He manages a curt nod.

"Your father and I have given you your independence; you have been given freedom to make your own choices. I think you know that we only want the best for you."

"Mother." Draco fidgets, running a hand through his hair. "I am aware how partnerships are formed in our circles; the pure-blood way of doing things, so to speak. I have not asked for much, mostly you have just given me what I want without having to hear me ask for it, but the one thing I do want and have asked for is the freedom to choose my own wife."

"You also know that your father and I have an arranged marriage."

Draco makes a noise in the back of his throat. "Hardly a love-match, Mother."

"I love your father dearly, make no mistake, my Dragon. Just as your father loves me. It may not be unbridled passion nor even a romantic type of affection, but it is affection nonetheless. I have not had an unhappy life by your father's side."

"But it isn't entirely fulfilling either," Draco argues, unsure as to why he is digging his own grave. "I mean -- I'm not trying to imply anything; it's not that I want to say that you aren't content, but you can't honestly say that your...needs have been satisfied. That is to say -- womanly needs."

Narcissa raises one elegant brow. "My womanly needs? Do tell, darling."

"You know...needs." Draco chews out, waving his hand around. "It's not like Father is any good at that. I think I should consider myself lucky to be here at all."

"Don't be daft, Draco," Narcissa curtly states. "If you must know, your father is more than competent; he is just more talented in other areas of taking care of certain needs."

Draco grimaces. "I really don't want to hear this, Mother. I discovered many things at the tender age of ten; I am still trying to find a way to erase certain memories from my disturbed mind."

"Very well, then we shall talk about Miss Lovegood and your intentions towards her," Cissy says with a tight smile, folding her hands in her lap. "As I said before, an arranged marriage does not have to be a life filled with torment. I know quite a few good matches and Lady Greengrass has expressed an interest in joining our families through marriage."

"Daphne is a friend, nothing more."

"What of their other daughter? Astoria, if I remember correctly." Narcissa smiles innocently.

Draco snorts with disdain. "She an inane cow. I'd commit suicide within the first month or two. I'd rather Avada myself than marry that stupid bint. It will save you the trouble of planning a wedding I'd hate anyway."

"You are very dramatic -- it is a trait you certainly did not get from me."

"Well, I'm sure Father shares my sentiments and would kill himself within the first two weeks," Draco says to his mother. "Disown me if you must, but I will not marry a suitable pure-blood bride of your choosing."
Narcissa muses, her face giving away nothing at all. "I see."

"You told me to be a man and that's exactly what I'm doing, Mother. Luna is who I want and she is who I will have. A Malfoy only accepts the best and she is the best for me."

"You would defy your family for this girl?" Narcissa asks with a frosty look, even though she is secretly proud. "You would renounce the Malfoy name and leave this house without a Knut to your name -- all for Miss Lovegood?"

Draco wants to say many things; most of all he wants to say that he would rather keep his name and the gold in his vaults, but Luna matters to him and he is willing to part with the gold in their vaults if that means a happy life.

"You would give up your name, standing and wealth for one witch?"

With shaky resolve, the blond wizard exhales loudly. "I would. She is not just some average witch; she's a remarkable witch and I intend to marry her."

Narcissa takes in her son's unflinching expression -- until she can't torture her only child much longer. A slow smile spreads across her lips. "Darling, I am very proud of you. You are indeed not a child but a mature wizard."

"Mum!" Draco cries out in indignant horror and crosses his arms over his puffed out chest. "You said all those things on purpose!"

"Of course I did, dear." the witch laughs heartily. "Oh, do forgive me, Draco. I simply wanted to see if you are indeed serious or merely entertaining a passing fancy. To know that you'd give up the Malfoy name for Miss Lovegood -- I must say that while I am astounded, I am very happy to know that you would choose your happiness over duty. Nothing good ever comes from duty that takes away your heart's desire. Your father did what Abraxas wanted and it did not bring him any happiness other than you."

"You are a wonderful actress, Mother," Draco relaxes somewhat, his shoulders losing some of the rigidity. "I didn't think you'd be so cruel to your only son."

"Necessary evil," Narcissa states with a smirk. "I did not intend to torture you this long, but seeing you squirm before me like you did when I caught you decorating the wall with your food -- well, I simply could not resist. At least I know what your true feelings are and I will know to support you when your father objects in any way."

"Do I have to give him the same speech?"

Narcissa smirks. "I'd leave out the part where you said he's not any good in fulfilling my womanly needs."

"It's not exactly a secret among family, Mother."

"Still, best not to tease him about it. What he lacks in that area, he makes up in another. Or so I've been told."

"You mean Sirius Black told you."

Narcissa's brow goes up. "What exactly have you heard?"

"Not much, just my father and your cousin trying to shag themselves into an early grave. I do have
perfectly working ears and they stopped using silencing charms around the third or fourth week. One night, I was sitting in the garden and witnessed a rather improper scene on Father's personal balcony. For a secret affair, it isn't all that secret. I think the only one who hasn't figured it out is Harry."

"Sometimes your Father has dreadful ideas."

"Cousin Sirius isn't known for bright ideas either. I think they deserve each other, in more ways than one."

Giving her son a slight nod, Narcissa replies. "It certainly makes life less dull around here. I advised Sirius to come clean or end it before it has the chance to hurt either one of them."

"Come clean about what?" Draco inquires.

"It seems that Sirius is looking for something more than an uncomplicated physical relationship, but he doesn't want to tell your father because he's fearful that it will bring a swift end to it."

Draco takes a seat on the armrest of the sofa and says with a small smirk. "Father would not have allowed this to last this long if he did not think it worth his time. I personally can't see the appeal for obvious reasons, but Sirius is a handsome man and he has taken up the mantle of Lord Black. I have seen many lovers come and go, but I haven't seen one stay before."

"We'll see what happens," Cissy sighs and then brightens. "Now, let us get back to your lovely young lady. I'm rather eager to know more about her. As I recall, you did not have many good things to say about her when you were younger; 'loopy' and 'weird' were often used to describe her."

Draco has the decency to blush. "I didn't know her then, just what I had heard from other people. Luna is not like other witches; she is different in so many ways. She doesn't like me for my name or because I'm Lucius Malfoy's son. Luna doesn't care about the perfect image and the high standing; she just likes me for me. I've never had that before, Mother. No one wanted to befriend me because of who I was as a person, but for my name and the size of our vaults. Harry was the first person to befriend me because he wanted to know me, just as I tried to do when we first met. Luna is just like Harry; she would still like me even if I didn't have a Knut to my name."

Narcissa says with a touch of regret lacing her words. "We can't shed the weight of a powerful name. When I became a Malfoy, I felt the burden of it, the expectations that came with it and there were times when I thought that it was going to bury me. Yet I feel as though that will change soon enough. While there are still standards to uphold, it will not be as hard for you as it was for your father and grandfather before him. Miss Lovegood will make a fine daughter-in-law one day, that is if you ever get there."

Draco definitely wants to get there. "She's very dear to me."

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Dinner with the Malfoys is a marvellous occasion as always, but there is an air of openness around the table. Harry is openly discussing wedding details with Narcissa; the food, the mood and everything between the beginning and the end of the ceremony. Neville seems to be included as well, talking about flowers for the ceremony.
Draco sits close to Luna, not that it surprises anyone, and Narcissa is very happy to see a smile on her son's face. Severus arrives sometime in the middle of it and a hint of shock flashes across his face when he spots not only Neville Longbottom but also Luna Lovegood sitting at the dinner table. Seeing Harry does not inflict any kind of surprise; it is a common occurrence to see the green-eyed teen.

"Severus, glad you could join us," greets Narcissa, offering the man a smile full of warmth. She waits until the man seats himself before she says, "I do believe you are familiar with Mister Longbottom and Miss Lovegood."

"Rather unusual dinner guests." Severus intones.

"Hey, Sev?" Harry asks with a seemingly innocent look. "Do you want to help me with the wedding?"

Severus grumbles. "No, I do not want to help you with the wedding, brat. I would be grateful if I did not have to attend at all."

"Sirius will be giving me away, so I put you down as Tom's best man." Harry grins.

"Absolutely not!" Snape barks.

"It's either that or you're on decorating duty," Harry surmises while penning down something on a piece of parchment. "On second thought, you can't decorate anything or it will surely resemble a dungeon orgy rather than a wedding ceremony."

Ignoring the teen, Severus drinks his wine and chooses to watch Draco with the strange girl. Narcissa's secret glee is coming out and Severus catches her wistful expression as she watches the two.

"You're scheming," Snape murmurs to the witch.

Narcissa puts on an affronted look. "What an appalling thing to accuse me of."

"Is Lucius not joining us?" Snape asks.

Narcissa inclines her head closer and whispers, "Perhaps it is a good thing he is absent. I fear Draco has not yet gathered the needed courage to tell Luce about his intended."

"The Lovegood chit is a few short steps away from a mental asylum."

"Must you be unkind, Severus?" Cissy raises one perfectly sculpted brow. "I happen to think that she is very lovely and insightful. And if Draco has chosen her then we will respect his choice; the poor boy was ready to face disownment for her."

"Foolish is what I'd call him," mutters the man.

Narcissa chides, "Let the matter rest, Severus. I like Miss Lovegood; I dare say she is good for Draco. Luce will accept it as well or he'll face losing an heir."

"With the way he's whoring around with your dog cousin, losing an heir won't become an issue. He'll have enough puppies to chose from."

"Such a malicious tongue you have," Narcissa sniffs with scorn. "Instead of spewing such bile, you ought to mind your words. It is not your place to be bitter."
Regardless of the woman's harsh words, Severus is more than just bitter. He is livid, mostly because he is always livid when Sirius Black is concerned, but mainly because he is afraid to lose his friend to the dog he has despised since they were first years.

"Do not appear so obtuse, Severus; it does not suit you. In spite of this schoolboy quarrel you and my cousin are trying to keep alive after all these years, you can and will act like a mature wizard instead of a spoiled child."

As if having forced to swallow a rather large and sour lemon, Severus Snape glares at the witch but does not speak. Draco, who is sitting across from Severus, notices the silent stare that the man is trying to pierce through the witch.

"Mother," Draco clears his throat, "is something wrong?"

Addressing her son, the witch smiles. "Nothing is wrong, only a small disagreement. Pay Severus no mind, he is not in a good mood."

"I'm never in a good mood." Severus declares as he sips his wine with an angry look.

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Having tea in the small sitting room next to the library, Draco tries to follow Harry's chatter about what type of cake he'd like and who will actually attend the ceremony. Of course, he isn't listening even though he nods along and hums whenever Harry asks something. Draco's mind is currently drifting from Luna to the conversation with his mother. He feels better knowing that his mother approves and finds Luna to be suitable, but he still fears his father's reaction.

"Do you think we should have the ceremony in the garden or in the ballroom? It might be too cold by then. Tom wants to hurry with the wedding, so I think late August or early September," Harry says as he scribbles down words. Noticing that the blond isn't really paying attention, Harry nudges the other's shoulder. "You're not listening, are you?"

"Truthfully, not a word." Draco looks sheepish. "I'm sorry, I don't really know all the wedding know-how. I'm thinking about a way to tell my father about Luna."

"Get him drunk first and then ease him into it?" Harry suggests with a grin. Setting his notes aside, the green-eyed teen slumps into the sofa cushions and watches Draco's expression. "Look, your mum obviously approves of Luna; it's hard not to like her. Lucius will support you or face your mum's wrath."

"Easy for you to say, Potter." Draco snaps, although it is not in anger.

"Do you want me to come with you? I can tag along and linger in the back for moral support," asks Harry as he gets up, leaving Draco no other choice than to agree. The dark-haired Gryffindor waits for Draco to get to his feet before walking towards the main parlour where the staircase leads to the second-floor landing.

Draco's first guess is the study and they venture towards the corridor. Raising his hand to knock, Draco hears voices and skips the knocking part and goes straight to eavesdropping. Harry stays in the hallway but he does see Draco lean on the door with his ear pressed against it. That makes Harry curious as well.
Hearing a rough bark of laughter, Draco pulls himself away when he recognises the laughter. It belongs to Black.

"Father is busy," Draco says to the green-eyed wizard and pulls at his arm in order to leave.

"Busy with what?"

'Busy with your godfather' rests on the tip of Draco's tongue, but he remains silent and simply shrugs. "Probably a mission for the Dark Lord. Anyway, it doesn't matter; I'll talk to him some other time."

Harry is less than convinced, but he doesn't ask why Draco is suddenly in a rush to leave.

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Days later, Sirius finds himself sitting in Grimmauld Place; a direct order from Voldemort to spy on the Order. Shacklebolt and Moody are in charge now that the old man is dead -- which is no surprise considering how loyal those two have always been to Dumbledore. Being in his old house is terribly suffocating and reminds Sirius of all the crap his parents had pulled. He hates the dust that has settled in the air, the depressing wallpaper and gloomy old portraits hanging everywhere; a special treat for all those who had not seen the archaic Black ancestors while they had been alive to spew their hatred and vile insults.

In a way, it is amusing to see Tonks cringe away from the abuse Walburga screeches at everyone who comes across her portrait. It is almost hilarious how no one can get the portrait off or even stop the witch from screaming cruel words. Sirius simply doesn't care.

His peace is ruined when a horde of people invade the kitchen and flood the room with noise. Molly Weasley is the loudest with her irritating voice, followed by a pair of Aurors Sirius hasn't really seen before. Most likely new recruits dumb enough to fall for the Order's claptrap. Moody hobbles in and, as usual, glares; his face set in a deep scowl. There has been a mission of some kind; what exactly, Sirius does not know because he is rarely told these days.

Molly demands. "Where have you been?"

Ignoring the woman's question, Sirius decides to watch the people currently in his kitchen.

"I'm surprised you bothered to show your face at all."

Sirius picks up his goblet and gives a mocking salute to Moody. Finishing his drink, the Animagus' voice is cold. "This is my house after all."

"You are a member of the Order, Black," Moody splutters, teeth set in a snarl. "It's high time you did something to help us defeat You-Know-Who. You and your godson are proving to be useless. You'll fetch him from the Muggles first thing tomorrow; he's seventeen now."

In an instant, Sirius gets to his feet. "Watch your mouth, Mad-Eye! You are in my house and I am under no order to keep you here. Dumbledore is dead and frankly, I am sick of you and your bloody hounds."

"Sirius, calm down," Molly states with a smile that has no place on her face. It is as fake as Moody's magical eye. "There is no need to get upset."
"There is every need to get upset." Sirius huffs a bitter laugh. "Albus Dumbledore did *nothing* to stop me from being hauled to Azkaban, he did *nothing* to help me get a trial and he certainly didn't do anything to help Harry. Lily and James would be disgusted if they knew about that old arse's treatment of Harry; sending him to those Muggles who, instead of love and care, showed him contempt."

"Now, that is simply not true. Albus did everything for that ungrateful boy. Harry is surely exaggerating and just wants attention." Molly gives a flippant wave of her hand.

"Do you actually believe that or did you get that drilled into your head by Dumbledore?" Black asks.

Molly looks positively affronted. "Well, I never--"

"Shut up, woman!" Sirius balls his fists, snarling in a vicious manner. "Not one of you cares about Harry; you only care about what he can give you, what he can *do* for you! The only reason I agreed to let you have your meetings here was because of that senile old goat. Since he's feeding worms six feet under, I can kick you out with pleasure."

Moody whips out his wand and points it at Sirius, his mouth in a twisted sneer. Tonks and Kingsley both stand alert. They are showing Sirius their true colours and he is glad for it.

"Go on, you one-legged prick," Sirius taunts, smirking at the retired Auror. When Moody fails to use his wand against Sirius, the Animagus states. "I, Sirius Orion Black, legal successor of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, hereby ban all members of the Order of Phoenix and those who have sworn loyalty to the Order of Phoenix from ever stepping foot in 12 Grimmauld Place and I gladly kick them out. So I speak and so mote it be."

Within a moment, the Order gets forcefully thrown out of the house; an invisible force sucking them from the kitchen and slamming the door as they are ejected on the street. Kreacher pops into view as if feeling he is needed and offers a curt bob of his wrinkly head. Sirius sits back down. "Make sure everything belonging to the Order gets dumped outside."

"Kreacher will gather everything," the old elf sneers and pops away, only to return a few minutes later. "It has been done, Master Sirius. Will Kreacher be needed?"

"I'm going out, so that's a no. Make sure no one comes snooping around; the Order won't just accept that I threw them out. If anyone tries to get inside, blast them out. Be sure to you make it hurt."

Kreacher gives a nod and disappears. Feeling rather eager for some more fun, Sirius checks that he has his wand tucked in his inner pocket before activating a Portkey.

He appears back into view miles away from Grimmauld Place. The enormity of Malfoy Manor looms before him. Perhaps now is the time to have the conversation he has been pushing away for days. It is easy to lie and say that he would not care either way -- but truthfully, Sirius is vibrating with nerves. There is a tight coil in his chest; like hot barbwire twisted around his lungs, making it hard to breathe.

Lucius is probably sulking in his study, savouring a glass of old whisky. At least Sirius hopes that he is awake still and willing to speak. He is almost correct; Lucius is, indeed, in his study with a drink in hand, but seems surly; the lines of his face harsh and constricted in pain. However, he does sense an intruder and knows exactly who it is. "Black, leave me be."

"You're in a charming mood."

Lucius sits in his wingback chair, in the shadows and curled in the seat. It is reasonably dark and
Sirius doesn't see the blond; only an outline of his body and the drink in his hand.

"Care for some company?" Sirius asks as he rounds the desk and takes a seat on the edge of it. "What has your silk knickers in a twist?"

"You're appallingly irritating." Lucius sighs and Sirius sees his fingers resting on his temple, gently rubbing circles. Plucking the drink from the Slytherin's grasp, Sirius places it on the desk out of reach, making Lucius scoff. "I wasn't finished with it."

"Too bad," Sirius smirks. "That won't do you any favours, trust me."

The Animagus saunters over to the cupboard. There is a crystal carafe of water and clean glasses. Pouring the cool liquid out, Sirius delivers it to the blond wizard. "Drink it."

With mild distaste, Lucius takes the offered glass. He gives Sirius a doubtful look before downing the glass.

"Feel better?" Sirius grins, feeling pretty damn pleased with himself. Lucius glowers at the question, only fuelling the wizard's wide grin.

"I do not require a nursemaid, Black," Lucius states, and yet it lacks any sort of heat. Seeing as Sirius doesn't budge, the blond keeps his gaze cool, hoping that it will sway the wizard into leaving. However, it does nothing to shift Sirius, who continues to sit on the edge of the desk. He holds his eyes on Lucius, annoying the man. "Do you actually need something?"

Sirius mutters, "Came to talk."

"Then talk and be done with it." Lucius waves his hand dismissively. When Sirius fails to say anything, he raises a brow. "Well?"

"I changed my mind." Sirius looks almost petulant. "Because you're a cranky ponce."

Lucius really doesn't have the energy to argue. "Black, my head is trying to split itself open. I'm in no mood to be anything other than a cranky."

"Then let's go to bed," Sirius attempts to reason; this time without a lecherous grin. "I'll even give you a proper kneading if you're nice to me." Seeing the odd look on the blond's face, the wizard comments. "Not everything is about shagging. I can keep my cock in check."

"I sincerely doubt the truthfulness of that statement," Lucius remarks, but he is willing to amuse the wizard. "By all means, Black."

Grabbing the blond's hand, Sirius pulls him upright and tight against his body; the twist of Disapparation taking the two wizards into the bedroom just a few doors away. The Malfoy patriarch has always been elegant with all means of wizarding transportation, but Sirius isn't always as graceful. Together, still wrapped up rather snugly, the two land on the floor -- Sirius flat on his back and Lucius sprawled on top.

The Animagus takes advantage and steals a quick kiss. He tries to keep himself from laughing as he takes in the affronted look. "No need to look so outraged."

Lucius manages to get up and dusts his robes before promptly walking into the adjoining bathroom and slamming the door. Sirius sits up and sighs, feeling a piece of ice lodging itself into his heart. Why is everything so hard when involving a Malfoy?
The door to his right opens and Lucius appears into view without his robe, dressed only in a pair of slacks and a shirt. Sirius has to hide his beaming smile.

Lucius walks towards the lofty windows and shuts the drapes. He turns to face Sirius. "Why are you still on the floor?"

With renewed vigour, the Gryffindor climbs to his feet and shrugs off his own jacket, letting it drop on the floor. There is a strange feeling in his stomach, a fluttering of warmth. It tingles like a trail of fire ants. Lucius simply stands there, doing nothing in particular to warrant the other's undivided attention, but he has it regardless; just parading his snobbish Malfoy attitude for Sirius to see. There is a dull throb in the back of Black's mind, pushing his private thoughts to manifest through words.

"Did you hit your head?" Lucius' voice brings him back from the pleasurable haze. The blond keeps looking at him with a frown.

Shaking his head, Sirius produces a playful smirk. "Loads of times. Bellatrix pushed me down the stairs when we were kids all the time."

There is a shadow of a smile on the blond's face.

"Anyway, I promised you a proper rubdown," says the Animagus. "How about a bath and then I'll rub you all over." The leering expression on Sirius' face speaks of a different kind of rubbing. When Lucius offers no words of protest, Sirius rubs his hands together and disappears into the en-suite.

As he starts to fill the large tub, Sirius sits down on the rim of the bathtub and rakes a hand through his hair. Skimming his fingers over various bottles of oils and fragrances, the wizard chooses one that smells fresh like wildflowers and something earthy.

He notices the other wizard by the door, wearing an odd expression. Sirius doesn't know what the snobby git is thinking -- and that itself unnerves him. Something soft passes through in the blond's usually cold eyes and if that doesn't cause concern then Sirius isn't sure what qualifies as such.

As soon as Lucius spot Sirius' eyes on him, his expression closes off again. For a moment, Sirius thinks that he has imagined the whole thing.

Lucius snaps. "Black!"

"What?" Sirius blinks rapidly. He grumbles. "I'm not deaf; I can bloody well hear you."

"What is the matter with you? You're acting strange - more so than usual."

Seeing the blond with his arms crossed and an impatient look gracing his face, Sirius shoots him a grin. "Just appreciating the view." Lucius snorts when Black orders, "Take off your fancy clothes and get your sexy arse over here."

"Don't assume you can order me around in my own house, mutt," comes a sneering reply from the other room as Lucius disappears from view, leaving Sirius alone in the bathroom.

"Yeah, whatever, Malfoy," Sirius retorts with an air of boredom. "Don't take forever."

The Animagus feels his mouth go completely dry when Lucius comes back a few minutes later, wearing a midnight green silk robe. He has a silver clasp in one hand. Sirius jerks to his feet and grabs Lucius around the waist, bringing him against his own lust-filled body. "Bloody hell, Malfoy," Sirius groans like a dying man. "Fucking sexy prat. To hell with keeping myself in check, I'm going to bury myself in this hot arse even if it's the last thing I'll ever do."
"It just might," the blond drawls, amusement melting away. "I recall a promise of a massage and I intend to have exactly that. Don't make me drown you in this very nice bath you prepared."

"Love it when you threaten me; makes me hard as hell."

Lucius hands Sirius the hair clasp. "Do not make me regret this, Black. I'd hate to inform your godson of your untimely demise."

"Such a prissy snob," the Animagus mutters to himself, but there is affection in his words. Letting the blond go and turning him around, Sirius feels a slight tremble course through him when he slides his hands into the silky strands and gathers a bunch of it in one hand and secures it with the clasp. Planting a kiss on the junction where the blond's shoulder meets his neck, Sirius commands. "Get in before I bend you over."

Lucius doesn't argue and soon enough, Sirius is admiring his lover's naked back as he lowers himself into the steaming water and glides towards the opposite end of the large tub. It can fit three people and still leave enough room for everyone to feel comfortable.

Making quick work of his trousers and shirt, Sirius grabs his wand and places it where he can reach it if there is a need for it. Sinking into the tub, Sirius crooks his finger, beckoning his lover to move closer. Sirius figures he's supposed to believe the reluctant sneer on the blond's face, but it is clear to him that Lucius isn't half as unwilling as he tries to present.

When he finally gets his hands on the wizard, Sirius swiftly manoeuvres the wizard to face the other way and relax against the Animagus' chest. Sirius inhales the lovely scent that lingers on the blond's skin. "A Malfoy with nothing to say. Weird."

"I like the quiet." Lucius hums.

Sirius starts to run soft circles over pale shoulders and massages Lucius' neck with tenderness. It's not like he wants to piss Lucius off.

"I kicked the Order out and banned them from entering," Sirius speaks with a lazy smile. "Moody started mouthing off about Harry and then Molly Weasley had the nerve to defend Dumbledore. You should have seen their faces when I evoked my right to ban them from Grimmauld Place. I regret not taking a picture of Molly's fuming. Even my cousin Andromeda's girl got booted out; seems she's more loyal to Dumbledore's cronies than her own blood."

Lucius lets out a deep sigh when Sirius presses his fingers into his left shoulder, untangling the knot of aching nerves that have bothered the man since morning. Relaxing further into Sirius, Lucius tells him, "That's good. I think Draco is, in fact, considering your generous offer."

"I don't really give a damn about that house." Sirius moves his hands lower. "He can turn it into a Malfoy house of torture for all I care. I think I have other estates and I might have a rather decent vault as well. I reckon I'm swimming in gold."

Craning his neck to see the wizard, Lucius comments, "I do not make a habit of sleeping with paupers, Black."

"Your discontent is adorable." Sirius laughs and gently nips at the blond's neck. "How's your headache?"

Lucius exhales deeply and smoothly twists his body around to face the Animagus. Again, Sirius believes that sees an odd sort of look etched on Lucius' features, but try as he might, the wizard can't decipher it. It is almost comical but it is annoying the hell out of Sirius. Suddenly, Lucius looks away
for a moment and when he turns back, the look is gone, replaced by something Sirius can understand in an instant. The wizard straddles Sirius, making the water ripple as he moves.

"No more headache then?" grins the dark-haired wizard. "And here I was thinking that I had to take care of that on my own."

"Perhaps you should," Lucius flatly asserts, but Sirius knows that he is totally bluffing. There is little doubt in his mind.

Sirius goes with it. "Fine, but that means the same thing for you. I can go back to kneading you like a piece of meat. Or we can talk. Don't you like it when we have normal conversations without my cock buried in your tight arse?"

Steel-coloured eyes narrow to slits but it lacks the murderous glint Sirius has seen many times before. The blond's hand disappears under the water and soon after that Sirius yelps. "Let's talk then, Black."

"That was entirely uncalled for," Sirius grumbles. "If you damaged the goods, I'll fucking cut your hair off."

Instead of being angry, Lucius smiles. It helps melt Sirius' hard frown. He is less sour-looking when he pulls the blond wizard down for a snog and wraps an arm around his middle. "How about we just sit here until we're wrinkly. Just for a little while."

When it seems that Lucius is about to protest, Sirius cups his jaw and pulls him close so they are nose to nose. Licking the blond's lips, Sirius coaxes Lucius to open for him.

"Fine," the blond gives in and settles against Sirius.

He calls it progress and considers it a small victory when Lucius doesn't leave. The water is getting cold and Sirius hates the lukewarm bath, but he doesn't want to ruin the peaceful moment. Thankfully, he doesn't have to say anything because Lucius lifts his head from his shoulder and hums. "I'd rather not spend the night here."

"There is a functioning bed nearby. Perfect for what I have in mind."

The blond's movements create gentle waves as he turns. A half-hearted glare has settled on his face when he notes, "Considering what you always have in mind, I would regretfully have to decline."

"Dear Merlin, Luce," Sirius groans. "I don't have sex on my mind all the time; only when you show up looking delicious, but even then I do have some control. I was going to suggest sleep, you pompous git."

The blond's expression lightens and he concedes. That unsettles Sirius and something heavy drops to the bottom of his stomach. Unable to keep quiet any longer, he asks, "Is it really so hard to believe that I might want something other than sex from you? Something more?"

The question appears to leave the blond in a flustered state and he opens his mouth to speak, yet in an instant, he snaps it shut. Instead of answering, Lucius shakes his head in disbelief, as if he is disappointed and surprised at the same time. Without a word, Lucius stands and leaves the bathroom altogether, leaving Sirius behind with his mind in a jumbled mess. It takes the Animagus a while to realise that he has been dismissed and that does not go down well with Sirius. He clammers out of the bath and looks for a towel or a robe to throw on.

He finds Lucius in the bedroom. As soon as the wizard sees him, a sliver of fury passes in silver eyes before the blond sneers frigidly, his voice void of any emotions or colour. "Get out, Black."
Somehow, Sirius recovers some humour in the situation and barks out a laugh, even if it is as dry as a barren wasteland. "Stop acting like a child. Every time I say something you don't like, you turn tail and force me out. I never took you for a coward."

"I don't have to listen to this." Lucius is filled with inexplicable anger that doesn't show signs of dissipating.

"You have to and you will," Sirius steps in front of Lucius when the blond wants to dart back into the bathroom in an attempt to avoid the man. Grabbing his arm, Sirius spins the wizard around and yanks him firmly against his own body. "I don't get you, Malfoy."

"You're not required to," Lucius scoffs, pulling his arm free. He adds as a vicious afterthought. "You're only required to take the edge off."

Sirius certainly doesn't buy whatever Malfoy is trying to sell. "That the best you can do? You were much better at insults when we weren't sleeping together. Must be losing your touch."

"What is it that you want from me, Black?"

"I want you to stop running away," Sirius says, hoping that it doesn't sound like a plea. Or maybe it is exactly what he is hoping for. "Just...For fuck's sake, Lucius! I want you to stop acting like this is nothing, like this doesn't mean anything. Because it is not nothing. I'm tired of telling myself that you care because maybe, just maybe, you do care and just don't know how to show it. I'm tired of acting like this doesn't mean anything."

If possible, Lucius' expression darkens even more when he speaks, "It doesn't mean anything, Black."

"Fuck you!" Sirius spits out the insult. "It means everything. I didn't come here to fuck you; I came here because I can't bloody well stay away from you. You're fucking carved into my mind and I can't even think of anything else. I could take a dozen others to bed, but I only ever want you. Because for some unimaginable reason that I can't explain, I fell for you arse over tit and I can't convince myself otherwise."

The blond looks properly stunned and for a single moment in time, Sirius sees all the anger and rage leave those wonderful steel-coloured eyes - but the moment is over too soon. Lucius reverts back to what he knows. "This has been amusing, Black, but it's time to end this charade before you make a bigger fool out of yourself. Leave."

Words clog the Sirius' throat but none want to come out as he watches Lucius walk away and close the bathroom door with painful conclusiveness. Swallowing hard, Sirius wonders if a broken heart feels exactly like a hot blade stabbed in the middle of the pumping organ. There is this hollow pulsing ache in his chest when he gathers his clothes and Disapparates without daring to open his eyes before he senses the wards around Grimmauld Place tingling around him, allowing him access.

Before he knows it, he has a bottle of Firewhiskey uncorked and a scorching trail runs down his throat, dissolving the tight ball of unspoken words in his throat. The alcohol burns his tongue and unwanted tears burn his eyes, but he isn't going to shed any. He is going to drink himself into an oblivion instead.
Sirius hears a thudding sound but the thick fog curled around his mind numbs it enough for him not to care. A couple of louder bangs follow but an ear-splitting one finally pulls Sirius from his stupor. He drags his eyes across the room and sees that he is still slouched over in the armchair he had fallen into and the now empty bottle of Firewhiskey lays discarded by his feet. Through the messily drawn drapes, he sees that it is not morning outside but it must be nearing dawn. That much he knows.

Drunk or not, Sirius feels a shift in the wards and can physically feel them. That forces him to sober up rather quickly. Getting up, although struggling to keep himself on two legs, Sirius starts looking for his wand; he pats down his pockets and even gets on all fours to look under the armchair.

The Animagus ignores his thundering headache and keeps up his search, only to come up empty. Out of nowhere, the door is pushed open -- and wand or no wand, Sirius is ready to bounce on whoever comes in.

It is Bill Weasley, wand in hand. He looks thoroughly confused. "Sirius?"

The Animagus balls his fists and barks, "Of course it's bloody me! Who did you think it was? Voldemort in a bloody tutu?"

Bill raises a brow. "Polyjuice works wonders these days."

"Hilarious!" Sirius mocks and throws up his hands in an overstated manner. "What the hell are you doing in my house, banging about in the night? Couldn't send me a blasted note?" Throwing a frantic look around, he shouts, speaking to himself. "And where the fuck is my wand!"

Bill, seeing that there really is no immediate danger, lowers his own wand. "Look, Mad-Eye practically pulled me out of bed, said that Death Eaters had overrun Grimmauld Place and warded it shut. I only agreed to come here because I thought Harry might be here. I don't see any Death Eaters and there doesn't seem to be an ongoing attack."

Sirius gives up on his wand and slumps into the armchair, stretching out his legs. "I threw them out; evoked my right as the rightful Head and kicked them out of my house. I guess the Order didn't like that. No offence, but your mum is a piece of work; started defending Dumbledore the minute I told her what the old goat had done to Harry. So I mostly kicked them out because I couldn't stomach her ode to Albus. Or Mad-Eye's tirade about my worthlessness as an Order member. Good old Mad-Eye wanted me to drag Harry here so they could start prepping him for the final battle or some rot like that."

"Mad-Eye certainly won't let this go." Bill tucks away his wand completely and says, "Mum's mind has been completely warped by Albus; I never did understand how anyone could follow him so blindly, especially if you think about all of the man's failings. I was surprised when I heard that Mum took them to King's Cross when Ron started Hogwarts, because all the previous years we Apparated to the Platform, never used the passageway. Mum had no reason to travel to Muggle London just to get to the Platform."
"It was no accident that Molly was there. Dumbledore must have instructed her to go to King's Cross Station because he knew Hagrid was taking Harry there. He needed Harry to meet them before starting school because I doubt he would have befriended your little snot of a brother otherwise."

Bill has his doubts as well and voices them, "I always thought that it was strange how much Mum and Dad spoke of Harry, even before they knew him. Ginny idolised Harry from a very young age; mostly because Mum wouldn't shut up about it."

Sirius doesn't speak but he shares Bill's suspicions.

"The fact that you're here means that the Order really isn't your cup of tea, right?"

Bill shakes his head. "I was never an active member. And I don't want to get caught up in the Order's mess." Shaking away ominous thoughts, Bill asks, "Is Harry around? I had hoped to see him, maybe reassure him that there are some Weasleys left who still stand by him. I know from Fred and George that he doesn't want to have anything to do with the Order."

With a private snort, Sirius explains. "Harry's staying at his boyfriend's house." Not wanting to give away too much before Harry allows it, Sirius keeps his mouth shut.

"Boyfriend?" Bill is curious. "That's something Fred and George didn't tell me when I asked how he was doing. I didn't even know Harry liked blokes."

"I didn't even know before I saw them snogging," Sirius states with a grimace, remembering it and instantly feeling protective because he still isn't over the fact that it is the freaking Dark Lord. "Anyway, he's happy and I can't do much about it if he wants to date. I wasn't so innocent myself at his age, can't really blame him for wanting a relationship. He's never had much security in his life, maybe this wizard can give him the stability and care he needs."

Eying the empty bottle on the floor, Bill looks at Sirius with a raised brow. "I see that I came at a bad time. Were you trying to drown your worries?"

Sirius is reminded of the previous hours; those wretched hours of heartbreak. He doesn't want to discuss it. Ever. "It would take a lot more to drown them."

"I won't poke my nose in it, but I'm willing to listen if you want to talk. It's not like I have anything better to do; I was ready to fight Death Eaters. Mad-Eye and Tonks are probably hiding in the park across the street, waiting for me to let them in."

With a puff of laugh, Sirius shrugs. "They can set up camp for all I care. Never letting those bastards in here again." He lets his shoulders relax and for some reason, he actually wants to get it all out. Bill isn't some stranger; they get on well and he likes Bill.

Of course, the redhead does not push. He hasn't left either. So Sirius decides to share some of it. "I think I got my heart broken. Haven't had that happen to me before, so I guess there really is a first time for everything."

"I think I need a drink if we're going to discuss your love-life," Bill gets up, already setting his gaze on the liquor cabinet. Sirius waves for him to go ahead and Bill grabs a glass, fills it with something and goes back to his seat. "So who's this witch who has you trying to drink away heartbreak?"

"It's a wizard," Sirius offers candidly and shrugs when Bill's eyes widen a fraction. "I'm pretty flexible when it comes to that. It's not like I've made a secret of it; 'promiscuous' is my middle name. Mad-Eye would likely choke if he knew - might tell him just to see it happen."
Bill can't say that he really cares about whether it is a man or a woman. "Let me guess. You told him about your feelings and got punched in the face; figuratively of course."

"I fucked up; plain and simple. We agreed not to involve something as trivial as feelings and it was never meant to be anything more than some mutual fun. But then I got a bit carried away and actually fell for him. Hook, line, and sinker."

Bill snorts. "It was bound to end like that. Trust me, it's rare to have something casual stay casual; someone always wants more and then people get hurt and feel like shite because they weren't smart enough to avoid it. Seems like that's the case here."

"I wasn't planning on it; it just happened along the way. Lo and behold, I actually started liking the guy and it messed with my head, made me forget about our agreement."

"Sounds like you picked a challenging wizard."

"I wanted him before I even liked him -- truth be told, I think I might have hated him at first. Thought I would get him out of my system -- how hard could that be, right? But I ended up wanting him more and more each time I had him. He makes all my blood rush downstairs, but sometimes I look at him and my breath catches in my lungs because he's beautiful; like art in motion, every movement is meant to entice and assert his power."

Bill stares, an odd smile on his face. "Pretty sure you're in love. No doubt in my mind."

"He infuriates me and stirs up my blood at the same time." Sirius frowns as if he can't understand it. "I just want to wipe that haughty expression from his face and make him smile like it really means something; as if it only belongs to me. Even his insults make me feel warm inside. Arrogant prat, that's what he is."

Taking a sip of his drink, Bill can't help the traitorous thought that whoever Sirius is talking about sounds awfully familiar. Just based on his words alone, Bill is vaguely reminded of someone, but can't put his finger on it. He swirls his drink a bit, the brown whirlpool in his glass catching his attention. He meets Sirius' gaze, his grey-blue eyes full of suppressed anger and yearning, making for a strange mix. A flash of recognition invades Bill and he lets out a disbelieving laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"Forget about it...it's stupid, can't believe I even thought of it," Bill says with a dismissive wave of his hand. "It's just...for a moment, I considered the ridiculous idea that you were talking about Lucius Malfoy."

Sirius's expression doesn't change and Bill instantly feels better. What a ridiculous idea, he thinks. Bill takes a mouthful of his drink.

But then Sirius looks down and there it is - a sliver of sorrow. "Dating is beneath a Malfoy. But apparently shagging is allowed if there are no strings."

Bill sprays the carpet with scotch and wipes his mouth with his sleeve, coughing and switching back and forth from shock to trying to keep himself from laughing. "You're pulling my leg, right? Great joke to spring on a bloke."

"Yeah," Sirius mutters dryly. "What a joke, right?"

Bill's face hardens. "You're not kidding, are you?" Sirius remains as he is -- unmoving and silent -- so Bill is forced to consider that it is indeed not an attempt to be vulgarly witty. "You're telling me
that you've been shagging Lucius Malfoy? I'm not drunk enough to process this; I don't think there's
enough alcohol in this house to make me process this...You and Malfoy? That's...you have balls of
steel, mate. I'll give you that."

"Well, I think I got castrated because I was stupid enough to hope that maybe he wanted the same
thing. Told him that I sort of loved him and he told me that we were done."

"Commitment issues?" Bill suggests wryly. "I can't believe I'm giving you relationship advice. Look,
I really don't like him; that means that I would probably try to kill him if I saw him. He played a part
in my sister's death and I will never forget and forgive, but since I swore to myself that I won't have a
part in this war, I can't seek revenge without being in the middle of it. I don't really understand how
you managed to get yourself into this mess, but I can understand being dumped. Happened to me a
few times before I realised that I was better off on my own."

"Take an oath of silence," Sirius tells the redhead, "and I'll explain everything. I can't tell you
anything unless I can be sure that you will keep your mouth shut. The Order can't know because it
involves Harry and his safety comes first."

Bill hesitates but gives a nod. "I, William Arthur Weasley, hereby swear an oath of silence on my
magic, to never reveal what I hear tonight whether that be by word, writing or thought. So mote it
be." A golden light surrounds Bill and then disappears into him, sealing the oath. "I was serious
when I said that Harry has a few friends left in the Weasley family. Now tell me what the hell is
going on."

"You're smart, so by now you have most likely figured out that I'm not exactly a poster boy for the
Light side."

"You sort of gave yourself away when you said that you're sleeping with Malfoy. But do go on." Bill
snarks when Sirius shoots a look of impatience his way.

"I have never been Dumbledore's friend nor have I ever been Light. Being a Black makes it hard to
be anything but a Dark wizard, not that I wanted to be Light or whatever it says on the tin."

"So being a friend of the Potters was just a ruse?" Bill inquires, noticeably bothered by it.

"That was genuine; I never had to pretend that. James was my best mate. I didn't have to be
Dumbledore's man to be a friend of the Potters. James knew that I wasn't all that decent, but he didn't
care if I liked the Dark Arts. Though, we kept it from Lily because she loathed everything that had
something to do with the Dark Arts. Do you think James would have made me Harry's godfather if
he hadn't trusted me? Anyway, that's not the point. What matters is that James knew and kept it from
Dumbledore, but he never saw what the old man was actually like; he didn't want to believe that the
Headmaster would do anything to gain victory. So when they were sent into hiding, I told James that
trusting Dumbledore would be a big mistake, yet he and Lily still foolishly thought that Dumbledore
was this nice grandfatherly wizard."

"You're a Death Eater then?"

Sirius lets out a laugh and rolls up his sleeve to show his unmarked skin. "The Dark Lord's scribble
will never end up on my skin; it's completely tasteless. They do better tattoos in Azkaban." Rolling
his sleeve back down as Bill gives a satisfied nod, Sirius continues. "I'm a member of his team but I
don't get much play time. There isn't a nice way to say this, so I'll just be blunt about it. I support his
cause and what he's trying to accomplish and how he sees the wizarding world changing in the
future. He's not seeking to find a way to kill all Muggles and Muggle-borns, but he's coming up with
ways to make sure that wizarding kind won't be exposed because some Muggle-born with a big
mouth can't shut up about it. We want more land and we want to accomplish that without slaughtering unsuspecting Muggles. We want equal rights to all sentient creatures; not just werewolves but also vampires and all manner of beings and half-creatures. It's just the right thing to do."

"Something the Ministry hasn't managed in decades." Bill seems to agree. But there is uncertainty in his voice. "But do you condemn torture, the killings and disappearances?"

Sirius shrugs with no real emotion. "I can't condemn the things that I have done myself. I have tortured, but never an innocent if it makes you feel better. I'm a Dark wizard; it's in my blood and I enjoy the rush it gives me. I won't apologise for that."

"I don't think magic makes a difference. Light or Dark - it doesn't distinguish between good or evil. Intent matters more than the faction you belong in. You learn a lot as a Curse Breaker, but most of all, you learn that magic isn't straightforward. It's so much more and I know to keep an open mind." Bill sips the last of his drink and places the glass on the floor before his feet. "So you're telling me that Voldemort isn't such a bad guy after all?"

"No, he's still a bastard, but all I'm saying is that he has the right ideas," Sirius states "Thus, I find myself supporting his organisation. He's not a complete psycho anymore, and I guess that helps too."

Bill asks, even though he isn't sure he wants to know. "How does sleeping with Malfoy fit into this story?"

"Given that we're constantly running into each other in Voldemort's humble abode, it's hardly a surprise," Sirius points out but Bill just offers him a look that clearly says 'bullshit'. With an annoyed huff, the Animagus scoffs. "I do have eyes. Even a straight man wouldn't be able to deny that he's striking in a way that no other wizard could ever be. I'm walking around with a perpetual hard-on."

"I have absolutely no idea what you are talking about, Sirius," Bill deadpans with a raised brow. "I guess one could say that he's certainly not unattractive, but that's all a straight man will tell you. Take my word for it."

"You're just biased because you hate his guts. I bet I can find some completely straight bloke would be totally into Malfoy."

"Bollocks," Bill snorts with his brows knitted together. Sirius just smirks.

"Stop talking about it...and thinking about it for that matter." Bill groans. Refilling his glass with a quick trip to the cabinet, Bill sighs. "Just keep it vague and do not tell me any details."

"I honestly thought that I could get rid of it after a few times. Like scratching an irritating itch." Sirius starts telling his unhappy tale with a truly pained expression. "Fuck it all to hell, Bill! It didn't go away, it only got worse until I needed it all the bloody time. I wanted him on his hands and knees each chance I got. It's like an addiction; a deep need to touch him. I'm an addict who craves to bury himself in the maddening heat. I need my daily fix of Malfoy."

"No details," Bill warns, eyes flashing. "I could have done without the image of you and Malfoy in the act."

"Sometimes we didn't even have time to take our clothes off, sometimes we did it against the wall and-" Sirius lets out a miserable whinge. Bill takes out his wand again and hits Sirius with a Stinging Hex. The man yelps and rubs his arm. "The bloody hell was that for?"
"Stick to the basics. As bland as possible."

"Fine," Sirius makes a noise in the back of his throat and slumps further into his seat. "I approached him, we made a deal and I was happy to show up a few nights during the week for some adult entertainment. That was a year ago, or at least I think it was a year ago." Sirius frowns but quickly waves it off. "Doesn't matter. What matters is that I got in too deep and fucked it up. I told him that I wanted more, that I fell in love with his arrogant arse and that I think he might care for me as well. That blew up in my face in a spectacular manner and I was rejected like some insipid love-sick fool. I stuck my hand into the fire and unsurprisingly ended up getting scorched. Came here, got drunk and then you showed up. End of my bland story."

"What made you think that he might actually care for you?" Bill asks, truly curious.

Sirius starts laughing as if he has just realised something momentous. Bill is sure that the wizard is done for and makes a move to get up to see if he can shake him out of it, but Sirius' laughter turns into cracked sobs and his shoulders started shaking. He says with a watery laugh, "I'm an idiot. Snape would be proud; he has always believed that I have a mind of a child. Funny thing is, I didn't really see it until now."

Awkwardly, Bill pats the man's shoulder in an attempt to comfort.

"Pathetic, isn't it?" Sirius wipes his eyes.

Bill feels a surge of anger towards the blond git who has hurt the wizard. He considers Sirius to be a friend; they are like-minded and similar in some ways. It is only natural that he feels somewhat protective. "I've seen wizards blubber before."

"I feel like I got trampled over by a pack of Hippogriffs." Sirius heaves a sigh, wordlessly urging Bill to sit back down. It is embarrassing enough without Bill soothing him like he is a small child.

The redhead goes without making a fuss; it is uncomfortable for him as well.

"I guess I put too much stock in the little things he did or said and I fooled myself into believing that it meant something more, you know. There were times when I thought I saw something, affection maybe, but it wasn't there long enough for me to study it. He wasn't a block of ice; at times I felt like I was right, that he wanted me to be there because he couldn't stand to be apart. I think I was just making myself believe it. Didn't want to end up being wrong and humiliated."

"Forget Malfoy," Bill advises. "He's not worth it; just forget all about him."

"Sure, I'll just forget that I spent a year in his bed. It took me a year to figure out what I was feeling. It's a good thing I didn't tell Harry anything."

Bill clears his throat. "Does Harry know that you're Dark."

"That's why you took the oath," Sirius explains, getting to the point, "because Harry is in the middle of it. You know he's not supportive of the Order, but to be honest, he doesn't want anything to do with them."

Bill gives a nod. It's something he knows already.

"Harry isn't just keeping away from the Order," Sirius says. "He sided with the Dark Lord years ago; he is a member of Team Voldemort. Don't ask me how, because I was in Azkaban when it happened but Harry isn't cursed, brainwashed or stupid. He's there because he wants to be and because he feels that it's where he should be. The Dark Lord is fairly sane now. He has his body back and he's one
smooth bastard, I'll give him that. I trust Harry, there's no one I trust more, and I'm telling you that you should trust him as well."

"You know, I don't think I'm as upset as I should be. I had my suspicions, but I wasn't going to voice them before I knew for certain." Bill states, but there is some sort of relief in his tone. "Something else you can shock me with?"

"That boyfriend of his I told you about," Sirius adds with a grin, "None other than the Dark Lord himself."

"You may need to Obliviate me later; my mind is getting disturbing imagery as we speak." 

"I had to watch my godson snog Voldemort, now that was disturbing. No amount of memory charms can erase that. Granted, he doesn't look a day over twenty-five, but he's still Voldemort the Evil."

"I think I need to think about everything you just told me. I'm having trouble sorting through it all." Bill appears to be in a daze. He gets up and checks that he has his wand. "I'll tell Mad-Eye that I didn't find anything here, and somehow explain why it took me almost half an hour to search through this place. I'll contact you. I want to see Harry and make sure he's really okay and not being kept under lock and key."

Sirius can understand and says, "Take your time. Send me an owl and I'll set up a meeting with Harry, but be prepared for his overprotective boyfriend. I can't even hug my godson without getting a death threat for my troubles. Crazy possessive and homicidal. Doesn't that make you feel all warm inside?"

Bill can't help himself and chuckles. "See you around, Sirius."

"Yeah, yeah," Sirius waves him off, "get out of here and take those idiots with you. I'm itching to have Mad-Eye's stuffed head decorating my wall."

The redhead's laughter echoes in the corridor as he leaves. Sirius runs his fingers through his messy hair and groans. He still has a headache and he has misplaced his wand. But he only cares about dragging his worn-out form to bed.

Narcissa twiddles an unfamiliar wand between her fingers as she sits down in the small sitting room with a cup of tea. A dutiful elf had brought it to her, claiming that it had been in the Master's bathroom, laid down among the bathing oils and towels.

She places the wand on the table and looks at it curiously. It is either a spare one or belongs to a lover, and Narcissa is quite certain that Lucius has no lovers aside from Sirius. Besides, Narcissa recognises that the wand, for she has seen it times before. Sipping her tea with a smile, the witch taps her fingers against her knee and hums under her breath.

She hears voices and soon Harry walks in with an armful of rolled up fabrics in various colours. He says as a way of greeting. "Thank Merlin! Please tell me you'll help pick out my wedding robes. I have all these samples you gave me but I don't even know which one to choose. I have to pick one -- today, if possible."
Narcissa is more than happy; she is practically beaming and can't wait to get her hands on the different rolls of cloth. "Of course I will help. Let's see it then."

Harry dumps it all on the table. "The wedding is next week and I haven't done anything." He adds with a sheepish smile. "I don't have many female friends to ask. Just Luna. And I don't know what I'm doing. I'd go mental without you."

"All will be well, you'll see," Narcissa assures Harry.

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It is dinnertime when Narcissa decides to take the wand back to its owner. She steps into the Floo. She plans to go to Riddle Manor, hoping to catch her cousin there.

The witch greets Rabastan and Rodolphus, the latter telling the witch where to find Sirius.

The larger dining room has been made into a room for duelling. She knows that sometimes the Dark Lord has the Death Eaters duel each other to see who is out of shape. At times, it offers a ticket back to the lower ranks. The walls have scorch marks on them and dried black streaks that might be blood. The witch locates Sirius in the adjoining room, rummaging through a drawer.

Narcissa clears her throat to get the man's attention. "What has you demolishing that poor piece of furniture?"

"Looking for a spare wand. Rabastan said there were a few around here somewhere."

"Oh?" Narcissa inquires with a perfectly innocent look. "Did you lose your wand?"

Sirius huffs. "Misplaced it."

Narcissa takes pity on the man and takes the wand from her sleeve, asking with a pointed smile. "Perhaps this is the wand you so carelessly misplaced?"

Sirius knows his wand at once and frowns. Narcissa does not give it the wizard. "Perhaps you can recall where you misplaced it? One can never be sure where they misplace things, but surely you remember where you last saw it, used it even?"

Of course, Sirius recalls it; he even has painstaking memories of the last place he had used it but pride had kept him from seeking it out.

"Now imagine my surprise when an house-elf brought this wand, your wand, to me, having found it in the Master bedroom. Perhaps you wish to explain why you were so hasty that you left your wand behind."

"Must have slipped my mind." Sirius shrugs.

"Slipped your mind?" Narcissa raises a brow; never has she heard such a thing. A wizard who forgets his wand; it is blasphemy.

Sirius doesn't want to have this conversation nor explain anything. "And you returned it to me. Let's just not have this conversation, okay?"

"Why can't we talk about this? Is there a particular reason for it?"
"Can you just not ask me anything? Please, let it rest."

Narcissa isn't stupid. "What happened? Something must have happened...with Lucius, am I correct?"

"You are not incorrect," the Animagus glares.

"You are being evasive, so something must have occurred because you are acting like it. I know you rather well, Sirius. You cannot lie to me; you never have and you certainly won't in the future."

"Just leave it, Cissy," Sirius grits out, his temper coming out to play. "I'm asking...no, begging you to leave it be. I'll have my wand now if you don't mind. You know, places to go, people to see..."

Narcissa doesn't let go of the wand as she declares with understanding, "You told him, didn't you? And he..."

"Told me to get out." Sirius hisses, angry at himself and at the woman for making him say it. "It's over. Done. Now give me my wand so I can get out of here."

Narcissa releases the wand, albeit reluctantly, and says with a deep frown marring her face. "I don't understand."

Laughing, Sirius pockets the wand and even though it sounds hollow and forced, Narcissa can see that she must not let the wizard leave, not yet.

"For a moment, a small yet beautiful moment, I actually let myself believe that I wasn't alone, that it wasn't just me. That maybe I wouldn't get slapped in the face by life, by this fucking cruel thing called love."

"Sirius..." the witch tries to express her sadness; somehow convey how sorry she is. "I shouldn't have pushed you, I shouldn't have--"

Sirius touches the woman's chin and lifts it gently, looking her straight in the eye. "It's not your fault he doesn't love me. It's not your fault that I do. You only pushed me enough to see that I couldn't keep it up."

Narcissa looks away, her eyes glistening. "I still feel awful. You're usually so clueless; perhaps if I had not said anything, you would still be blind to it."

"I'm not that thick, Cissy. Eventually, I would have figured it out and I would still be the one who made a complete idiot out of myself. It would not have changed a thing."

"It's just -- I was so sure that he felt something for you. I was so sure that you wouldn't have to be sorry for taking a chance."

"Doesn't matter now, Cissy," Sirius sighs, mentally threatening himself not to break down. "I'll get over it. Have you ever seen me pine over a bloke? I might want to sock him in the eye, but I won't wallow over being rejected."

"I'll sock him in the eye," Narcissa says with a cold tone, her expression going dark. "How dare he reject you? We're Blacks and no one gets away with messing with us."

Sirius has to laugh at that and he feels a touch lighter after seeing Narcissa eager to defend his honour. It is funny and touching; almost enough to drive his thoughts away from Lucius.
"Please sit down before you make a hole in the floor."

Draco completely ignores the request and keeps pacing. Harry is sprawled on the bed on his stomach, flipping through *Quidditch Weekly* as the blond walks the length of the room; back and forth like a mechanical instrument. Neville is keeping himself busy outside in the little garden patch, having left the others to deal with Draco's agitated behaviour.

Harry's demands go unnoticed and he promptly shuts the magazine and sits up. He grabs a pillow and chucks it at the blond. The pillow hits Draco in the face. Harry grins, finally getting Draco's attention. "Does pacing make you feel better? No, it doesn't, so will you just calm down before I decide to curse you. Luna will be here before you know it."

"Fine," Draco huffs and lowers his backside on the bed. Harry goes back to reading and for a little while the blond remains quiet, but then he starts making grumpy, petulant noises like an irritated child.

Gathering his wand, Harry gets up and leaves the room without a word, leaving Draco to his huffing. The green-eyed teen finds Neville by the rose bushes; the Gryffindor is clipping the stems of the bright pink roses that are always in bloom because of the preservation charm.

He spots Harry and an almost guilty look crosses his face when he speaks, "I thought these would look nice. I hope it's okay."

"Of course it's okay," Harry nods. "I hardly think Tom would care about a few flowers. Besides, it's half-mine now, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't want to get in trouble for pinching the Dark Lord's roses," Neville says with a laugh.

Harry falls silent for a moment until Neville calls his name and brings him back to reality. The green-eyed wizard shakes his head with a smile and says, "It really is tonight. I mean, tomorrow morning I get to wake up as Harry Riddle."

"As long as you're happy," Neville muses and cuts another rose. He certainly doesn't regret joining Harry's side, even if he doesn't believe in violence and has no desire to kill or torture. He knows that this version of Voldemort isn't the insane maniac everyone made him out to be. Still, his best mate is getting married to a man who is considered outside the frame of normal. "You are happy, right?"

Harry's face looks blissful; there is no doubt there. "More than I thought possible. Ever since I met him, I've been feeling like myself. I will only be happy with Tom, no one else could ever give me what he gives me."

"Then I'm glad that he exists. I'm not sure how many would agree with me, but I'm glad that he's around to make you happy and keep you away from trouble."

"I have you for that, Nev."

Neville gives a truthful answer. "Where else would I be? You're my friend, Harry - and you have never asked anything impossible from me."

"It doesn't bother you that I'm Dark, that the Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin?" Harry asks, not for the first time of course, but he still has to hear it again. It is hard to believe that Neville would so
easily accept it. "You know how I feel about the war, what I have in mind for Weasel and Granger...and you still want to be here?"

"Is it so hard to believe that I'm actually not an idiot like everyone seems to think? You are one of the few who sees me as something more, you want to be my friend because of that and it means so much to me, Harry. You helped me see that I'm not the hopeless Gryffindor that everyone thinks I am. You have my loyalty because I have yours as well; I trust you because you have always trusted me and I actually feel happier here than with my Gran or the Gryffindors who never really gave me a chance."

Harry pulls Neville into a tight hug, mindful of the roses clutched in the teen's hand. Smiling warmly like the summer sun, Harry says, "Thank you, for trusting me and for being open-minded. When someone tells you that they want to marry Voldemort, the usual response would be to stun them and drag them to St. Mungo's, no questions asked. I'm glad you're different."

"I think I might actually like being different. Normal is too boring anyway."

"We can always count on Luna to keep it interesting." Harry throws a glance over his shoulder. He sees Draco by the window. "Draco is nervous."

Neville smirks as Harry leads him towards the white pergola near the evergreen garden that is Neville's favourite part of the estate. He has been in Riddle Manor once before but had immediately felt drawn in by the trees and wild plants. It is incredibly peaceful; a funny concept if one is in the home of the Dark Lord.

"I don't know why he's so worried; Narcissa already likes Luna."

Neville snaps back to the present. "Draco's father is an intimidating man."

Harry looks pensive when he speaks. "I guess he might seem like that to those who don't know him personally but not to me. He's not scary when he's with his family or around me."

"I think the general wizarding public doesn't want to think about the possibility that the Malfoys are somehow involved with the Dark Lord; it's a lot easier to believe that such an upstanding and prominent wizard has done no wrong. There are rumours and whispers in the dark corridors of the Ministry but no one wants to say it out loud. They know he's dangerous and possibly Dark but gold does a lot to soothe suspicious minds. Gran likes to keep herself up to date with all that goes on in the Ministry and the gossip; she often has her friends over for tea. A very opinionated lot, I'll tell you that."

Harry looks amused when he asks, "Anything interesting to share?"

"The usual rumour mill stories; who is dating who and whatever Witch Weekly can think up. Some ladies are looking to marry off their daughters, and there is always the Dark Lord to gossip over," says Neville. "It's not like I want to listen in on Gran's equally outdated and toffee-nosed friends from the last century."

"Narcissa likes to keep herself informed; I can always rely on her to share something scandalous."

"Wait until everyone finds out that you willingly married the wizard they expected you to defeat."

Harry snorts, mischief in his green eyes. "That ought to be interesting. We won't be shouting it from rooftops; at least not until everything has been settled. Tom is still 'Voldemort the Horrendous' with big capital letters and still insane as far as the general public is concerned. There are too many loose ends that need to be taken care of before we can even entertain the idea of letting people know that I turned out to be a traitor to the Light and allowed Voldemort to put a ring on it."
"I see what you mean, Harry." Neville agrees with a nod. "There will be a public uproar, mostly because no one is ready to face the fact that the Dark Lord is, in reality, a better choice than an ineffective Ministry that hasn't done anything useful for decades. I think people have started to see that something is going on. The attacks have all but disappeared and there is a tentative calm at the moment. I think it's an ideal situation for the Dark Lord, to come out and start taking a stand. The public is waiting for someone to emerge and take the reins. Granted, most think it will be you, but since you and the Dark Lord come as a package deal now, they have no reason to complain too much."

"I like the way you think, Nev." Harry laughs. "Although I have no real interest in becoming a public figure, someone to fawn over. I will do anything I can to help Tom achieve his endgame. He wants the Ministry and he will get it soon enough."

"That only leaves Hogwarts," Neville points out.

"Patience is a virtue," Harry says and adds with a smile when Neville raises a brow, "or so I've heard."

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Draco holds Luna's hand tightly, almost to the point of squeezing it too hard, but the girl doesn't say anything about it. It is clear to her that the wizard is anxious. Luna is aware why but she herself feels nothing similar; she is curious more than anything, but also happy because Draco is prepared to get disowned for her and that warms Luna's insides to a point where she can't keep the smile from her face. It is an odd sight; Draco visibly troubled yet the girl next to him is smiling and seemingly blithe.

Narcissa greets both with a smile and after giving her son a hug, she kisses Luna's cheeks and says, "We are happy to have you, Luna. You must tell me all about your adventures. Greenland, was it?"

"I'd be happy to," the girl chirps excitedly because she loves to tell people about the places she and her father have visited.

"Mother," Draco tries to appear cool and collected when he speaks. "I hope you did as I asked and told Father about this in advance."

Narcissa makes an entirely innocent face, though she is far from it. "Silly me, it must have slipped my mind, darling. I'm sure you can tell your father without needing my services as an owl."

Draco wants to say many things to his mother but he was raised better and does not utter a word. He just clenches his teeth in an effort to keep his mouth shut. Luna tugs his arm gently and with her usual bright smile that is a tad bit teasing, she says, "Don't sulk, it's unbecoming."

"The elves have prepared a wonderful lunch in the sunroom." Narcissa links arms with Luna and offers Draco a meaningful glance that conveys a single message -- be a man and face it.

Draco watches the two women walk away, heads bent together as they speak in whispered voices. The blond teen mentally counts to ten and releases a deep and troubled breath. The study is the one place Draco had never been allowed to visit on his own when he had been a child, but he likes the solitude and the books. At the moment, he dreads it; he approaches the door that had seemed too big and scary all those years ago, but he doesn't want to be near it for an entirely different reason now. He chooses not to knock, afraid that he would lose the speck of Gryffindor courage in his heart if he
He marches in and finds the study empty. It is almost a relief, but then Draco hears a noise from the adjoining room and he is equally annoyed and curious; mostly annoyed though because he had almost gotten away with not telling his father anything and pushing the encounter to a later date.

Lucius walks into the study, noticeably upset and almost rigid in his stance. He throws a stack of parchments on the desk and only then does he notice his son standing by the door, spooked like a baby animal.

"Can I help you with something, Draco?" Lucius does not have the patience he normally does and waits for the boy to speak. "Well? Spit it out!"

Draco gulps but tries to keep his voice steady and close to boredom. "This is more of a social call than anything else."

"I don't exactly have time to have tea with you, Draco. Whatever you want has to wait until I'm less busy."

"Why do you assume I want something, Father?" Draco counters with a smirk.

Lucius, seeing that Draco is not getting the hint, leans against the desk and crosses his arms. "Am I to assume that you simply wish to spend time with your father because you miss parental affection so much that you couldn't wait until dinnertime?"

"There is a matter I wish to discuss, though I wouldn't say no to some fatherly affection. If you are offering, that is," Draco says with a grin, but it doesn't mask that he is still nervous. He clears his throat and attempts to look self-assured. "I know that this family has always valued convenience and a beneficial outcome rather than a love-match when it comes to marriage, but even though I am a part of this family, I do not intend to follow the tradition of acquiring a suitable bride through a contract."

"And what tradition have you chosen to follow?" Lucius asks, giving away nothing, and simply holding his gaze on Draco.

Draco is jittery on the inside, feeling the weight of his father's eyes on him, but then he thinks about the spectacular witch waiting for him in the sunroom; he quickly lists everything he likes about Luna Lovegood and why he likes those things. Luna's special brand of wickedness and the completely bizarre way she does things, her wistfulness and even those blasted Nargles; it has Draco in a trap and he doesn't want to get out of it. "I plan to pick my own wife. I will not marry some stupid bint because we would look good in the paper. I won't be bullied into an arranged marriage for the sake of blood-lines or because it would further the Malfoy name."

"Admirable, Draco, truly." Lucius comments in a soft but dark tone. "But what makes you think that you have a choice? Arranged marriages exist for a reason; by careful selection of blood-lines, strong and viable lines survive and the lesser ones die out. Malfoys always select carefully."

"I have read the obligatory pure-blood manifesto of keeping blood-lines untainted, so spare me the speech. Frankly, I don't really care about blood when I have the choice to follow my heart."

Lucius' amusement shines through just a little. He does so enjoy the way Draco fidgets like a little boy. He hasn't done that since getting caught nicking Narcissa's jewellery and decorating a poor elf with pearls and diamonds at the age of five.

"I cannot believe my parents are this cruel. You obviously planned this together," Draco grunts coolly, his eyes narrowed. "At least Mother lasted longer; she didn't let her act slip until the very
end...after I was ready to disown myself."

Lucius has no idea what Draco is talking about. "I'm happy to hear that you have acquired a backbone. I would expect nothing less, but I still have no idea what you are talking about."

"Doesn't matter," Draco is quick to mutter. Instead, he says, "I meant every word. I will not be following in the footsteps of my ancestors."

"Seeing where that path can often lead, I can't force you to take it," Lucius smiles, surprising Draco. "Lord Greengrass is most eager to join our families; the man even sent me a draft of the contract."

"Astoria Greengrass is a hollow-headed shrew who only ended up in Slytherin because the Hat could see her ambition to become a bride of some wealthy pure-blood. She is smart, but only when it comes to bagging a husband for herself. How Daphne ended up fairly intelligent and refined is beyond me."

"Your mother and I were betrothed when we were still Hogwarts students. It is customary to draw up contracts during the early years. I started receiving offers and contracts when you were a second year, yet no contracts were ever made and your mother and I declined every offer. Does that not tell you everything you wish to know?"

Draco takes a seat in the nearest armchair. "You mean you never planned for me to marry some stupid chit of your choosing?"

"I haven't always been an ideal father; I will not deny that I've made mistakes. I haven't always been there for you, but that does not mean I love you any less or that I am as cruel as my own father. Abraxas knew of my preferences and he told me that he expected me to reconsider. He could have arranged a betrothal with a number of pure-blooded wizards, but he chose a witch because he was an intolerant pig. Because he thought it would change my nature."

"I know Abraxas was a bastard of a higher degree. I never liked him and I'm not all that sad that he's dead."

"The wizarding world hasn't cared about same-sex relationships for centuries; at least pure-bloods haven't, but some are still stuck in the middle ages. One often comes across such prejudice among half-bloods and Muggle-borns. The taint of the Muggle world."

Draco hums in agreement, but then he remembers lunch and Luna. "There was a point to this; I didn't just come here to tell you that I won't be listening to you in case you want to make my life a living hell."

"If this is about the girl, I think I can do without your explanations."

"You know? How?"

"You were snogging the witch by the lake and you think it was a private moment? Tut-tut, Draco. Besides, I already heard it from Severus who is not known for his subtlety. He informed me that my idiotic child is in the process of courting a mentally unstable girl. Since Xenophilius Lovegood is practically on his way to the mental ward, Severus thought it prudent to warn me that you have taken up with his equally odd daughter and might start producing a new generation of half-baked children."

Draco growls. "Luna is not unstable. Severus is hardly in a position to judge and how dare he tattle on me!"
"Siri -- Black did say that she's not what she seems and if Harry can attest to it then I won't take Sev's word for it. He isn't known for his tolerance; he practically hates all his students."

Draco lets out the breath he has been holding for a while now. "Great. No time like the present. Mother has arranged a lovely lunch and you are going to attend. Luna is so looking forward to meeting you."

"I'm no less busy now than I was when you barged in."

"Yes, I completely understand," says the younger blond with a small smirk. Lucius rounds the desk and makes a move to sit, but Draco stops him. "But you wouldn't want me to send Mother up, would you? I can only imagine how annoyed she will be if I show up alone and tell her that you aren't willing to meet your son's girlfriend. After she made sure that Luna would feel welcomed, and the lunch she had the elves prepare-"

Lucius is aware of Narcissa's temper and has no wish to experience it now. There are a lot of things he doesn't want to experience yet still has to. Giving Draco a curt nod to show his compliance, Lucius waves the boy off. "I'll be there in a moment."

"We'll be in the sunroom," says Draco before leaving, but not before catching one last look of his father. The man certainly isn't looking his best, and Draco feels a bit bad for not noticing it before, but he is glad that the conversation he had feared is now over. And he won't have to live under a bridge with no money.

Draco thinks that he even sees a flash of misery in his father's eyes but the wizard turns his back and Draco thinks it best to leave it alone and join his mother and Luna.

The door clicks shut behind the boy and Lucius lets his posture go slack; the heavy weight on his shoulders presses down hard and without mercy. An ache settles between his ribs, prying open a way to his very core; any kind of physical pain would be better than an invisible ache digging deeper and deeper with each breath, carving its way as it burrows into the very organ that pumps blood.

A few days ago, Lucius had willingly ripped a hole through his heart and now it pulses with pain daily. A choice made out of panic and irrational fears, but it had been a choice nonetheless. It has to be the right choice. It is the better choice; a choice which would hurt now but eventually leave behind nothing more than a faint mark.

"Lucius?"

Narcissa has silently glided into the room. After seeing an odd look on her son's face and hearing an even stranger comment, Narcissa had decided to investigate.

"I was just about to come down."

Narcissa is not convinced. She has been the man's wife for two decades and his friend for even longer. "You know I will not interfere, but I also will not hesitate to coax it out of you. I am rather good at it."

Lucius chooses not to say anything.

"This is about Sirius," Narcissa bluntly states, seeing a small crack in the blond's otherwise flawless mask of indifference. "What I don't understand is why it would even concern you since you made it quite clear that you, in fact, do not care at all. Unless you are deceiving me and yourself, not to mention Sirius."
With a narrowed look, Lucius glares at Narcissa, but she is made of much sturdier stuff and continues to glare as well when Lucius warns, "Keep out of this, Narcissa."

Lucius only ever calls her Narcissa when he is royally pissed or if he means to taunt her, which is not the case now.

"He's only human; he's allowed to have feelings. What is not allowed, however, is your cruelty. If you were stupid enough to start this then surely you must have considered the consequences or at least entertained the idea that it might end badly. My cousin isn't a saint nor is he the wisest wizard around, but he is a Gryffindor and rarely thinks before he leaps. Nevertheless, despite his own idiocy, he did not deserve to have his heart ripped to shreds because you are not man enough to own up to it."

"Hold your tongue!"

"When you didn't hold back with my cousin?" Narcissa snarls back, reminding the wizard that she is also a Black and that Bellatrix isn't the only vicious one. "You pushed him away because the idea terrifies you. You started to like the companionship; you enjoyed having him here and it scares you."

The blond's expression softens for a fraction, but the stubborn set of his jaw remains. Of course, Narcissa is speaking the truth; she always knows and voices the things Lucius himself doesn't want to or simply can't.

"How many meaningless lovers do you plan to go through before you understand that ending it with Sirius was a mistake? When will you realise that you let a good thing slip through your fingers because you insist on being stubborn?"

The witch's words are like sharp claws, scraping the gaping wound. Wordlessly, the blond gathers his mask and fixes it on before he walks out of the room without giving a parting glance to Narcissa.

"I'm too young to have grey hairs because of you," the witch mutters to herself, feeling overwhelmed. She can't batter Lucius like that no matter what her Black code of honour states because she is equally loyal to the Malfoy family. She only wants to bash their heads together and leave it at that, putting her faith into the two stubborn gits. Sirius is going to be present at the wedding ceremony, giving away his godson and Lucius is naturally going to attend his Lord's wedding, so it is the prime chance to make sure the two wizards end up in each other company. Whether a locked broom closet will be involved is still debatable, for Narcissa has yet to devise the perfect plan that will leave her hands clean.

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It is dark outside when Harry descends the main staircase in his tailored wedding robes, wearing a smile that is partly timid, but mostly ecstatic. The deep colour of his robe and the silver trim are beautifully in tune with the Potter and Black crest embedded in the fabric with careful stitches. For once in his life, Harry has managed to tame his unruly hair.

Sirius waits for him in the parlour, his fingers trying to pry open the stifling collar of his own burgundy robes. The wizard has made good on his promise and has managed to trim his shaggy hair for the occasion. The ends of his hairbrush the edge of his collar, much to Harry's delight because the teen likes his godfather's wild mess of hair; it means that he isn't alone with his out of control hair.
"Look at you, Bambi!" Sirius exclaims when Harry comes into view. "You're going to give the old man a heart attack, kiddo."

Harry feels his cheeks heat up but he still has to defend his intended. "Tom isn't an old man; he's just mature and experienced."

"Still a pervert if you ask me."

"Well, at least he wanted us married before taking me to bed." Harry sniffs, annoyed at the man already. He smirks. "Let's get this show started; I can't wait for Tom to stick his key into my chastity belt. If you catch my drift, Siri." The teen's laughter echoes in the parlour as Sirius' face twists. Harry says with an easy smile. "Behave or I'll be very cross with you. I want this more than anything, Siri. I'm starting a whole new chapter, everything else is in the past and never to be repeated again. I played my part, I did everything I was required to do in order to fool Dumbledore and his pets and now I'm getting my reward. This is my night and I plan to enjoy every minute of it."

"Just keep the snogging to a minimum," Sirius harks with a hard look. "When I got out of Azkaban, I claimed you as my own. You are my kid, Harry. Not in blood, but in everything else that matters. I'm proud of you, Harry."

"I'm proud to be your kid, Siri. Just be happy for me, that's all I need."

Sirius sighs, but it isn't out of frustration or anger. It is the comprehension that he is indeed happy for the teen. "That's all I want, Harry."

"Now let's get me hitched. This robe might look nice, but it's a bloody furnace inside."

The ballroom is magnificent; a truly beautiful piece of art. The flower pieces of Neville's creation are placed strategically around the room to make it pop with splendour even more. Perhaps it would have looked different had it not been for Harry, because Tom hardly cares for decorations, but the guests are all in agreement that it looks perfect for a wedding.

Tom stands by the miniature dais created for the bonding ceremony. He smoothes his hands down his robe, trying but failing to hide that he is twitching. Dark Lord or not, he does not have nerves of steel when faced with such a drastic change and a future he has often pictured during lonely nights in a cold bed. He shoots a quick look at Lucius. The blond always makes a habit of outshining everyone, but he has enough self-preservation in his bones to never outshine the Dark Lord. Particularly on the man's wedding day.

Tom is a master at reading people, it is necessary to be able to read the faces of his followers and most loyal. He needs to know their every secret; what makes them crumble under pressure and what might crush them completely. Lucius never allows his mask to slip: it is a true challenge for Tom to catch even the smallest of cracks in the perfect expressionless facade. However, this time is not like all the other times Tom has tried to read one of his most favoured Death Eaters. He smirks and says in a whisper, "Your human is showing, Lucius."

The blond's silver gaze flits over to Tom's for a mere glance. His gaze is lazy when he drawls. "It's proper etiquette for a wedding."

"I was merely curious," Tom hums, looking ahead where the double doors are still firmly closed. When they are pulled open, revealing Sirius Black in all his glory, Tom privately snorts. From the corner of his observant eye, Tom can see a delicate shift in the blond's face. So small that it is hardly there, but Tom has known the wizard for two decades and to him, it is noteworthy enough. He knows that something is going on between those two, and Tom is about to comment, but then Harry
appears and links his arm with Black's.

An embarrassing warmth spreads in Tom's chest and makes his skin tingle when he drinks in the sight of the dark-haired wizard. Harry is a vision of wickedness but also emits a certain purity that the Dark Lord has not had for a long time. It is the smile that so easily forms on the young wizard's lips, the mirth in his green eyes, the way he trusts. Harry's willingness to be by his side and the elation he provokes in Tom. It is a delightful bonus that Harry doesn't want to be anywhere else.

Harry grins as he walks towards Tom. Everyone in attendance gets to their feet as Harry steps down the makeshift aisle that leads straight to the Dark Lord. As the teen passes Narcissa, the witch offers him a smile and kisses his cheeks. She whispers, "You look divine. The Dark Lord is spellbound."

The witch moves to stand next to her sister. It is a shock to see the witch in a flattering purple dress. Even her hair has been tamed for the grand event. Bellatrix also gives Harry's cheek a loving smooch when he reaches the dais. She looks like a proud mother...one that is happy to see her child marry an evil dictator.

Sirius glares at Tom but immediately stops when Harry elbows him in the side and mouths 'behave' with a mighty glare of his own. Sirius is reluctant to hand Harry over, like a child who doesn't want to let go of his teddy. It really doesn't help that Tom is the other, slightly meaner child who will never ever give it back.

"Siri, go sit with Neville." Harry hisses, never letting the smile slip from his face. "I'll take away all your squeaky toys if you keep intruding on my happy feelings."

Giving the man a small push, Harry takes Tom's outstretched hand and laces their fingers together.

Sirius goes to sit in the front row with Neville, Luna and Draco. He notices a glimpse of red behind him and grins when he sees Fred and George sitting a few seats away from Draco. Fred has a small sparkle in his hand and he is about to stick it inside Draco's collar when a hand comes out of nowhere and smacks the back of Weasley's head. Snape's narrowed eyes dig into Fred who winces and tries to edge away from the menacing man. George keeps a hand over his mouth, afraid to burst into giggles and get an Avada for his troubles.

Black's eyes take in his cousin, the sane one of course, and he notes that Narcissa seems to glow with happiness as if her own son is getting bonded to a homicidal Dark Lord. Her outfit leaves all the other witches to shame and for a moment, Sirius can see why people consider the Malfoys as the cream of the wizarding world. Malfoy is a smug git as usual and Sirius swallows down a tight lump in his throat.

As Harry stares into Tom's eyes, Sirius spots something in Lucius' gaze. Sirius never backs down from a challenge and doesn't look away, inwardly smirking when the blond casts his eyes in front of him.

The bonding part is over soon enough and as Tom places his hand over Harry's, a golden flash of magic sparks and wraps around their hands like a coiling snake. Several more bindings appear and tighten around the interlocked hands of the pair. Lucius speaks strings of a binding spell and both Harry and Tom smile when the magical binds sink into their skin and a glowing golden band twists around their wrists, appearing taut.

Tom recites the last part of his vows in Parseltongue, making Harry's eyes light up even more. It is ingenious because only Harry can understand the words and Sirius figures that the Dark Lord had said something really mushy or something inappropriate that he didn't want anyone else to hear. The blush gracing Harry's neck and cheeks confirms what Sirius already knows; the Dark Lord is a
massive git.

In truth, Sirius had accepted the relationship months ago, but accepting it and liking it are different things altogether and Sirius most certainly doesn't like that his godson is going to have sex with Voldemort. Harry has no business having sex with anyone.

When magic flares around the couple and sizzles in the room, Sirius snaps back into the present moment and sees Harry's beaming grin before he twists his limbs around Tom and kisses him. Dark Lord or not, Tom is still a man who can't help himself when a young amorous wizard throws himself into his arms and licks his lips like a hungry kitten.

Since it is all happening right under Lucius' nose, the blond has to clear his throat for the pair to separate. Harry's reply is to push at the blond, wordlessly telling him to mind his own fucking business. Bellatrix starts cackling in her own special creepy way when Lucius' eyes glint and his jaw clenches when he is shoved away by the teen.

People clap as they stand. The binding ritual is over and now they only have to sign a few papers that declare them married in the eyes of the Ministry; purely a formality but useful for the future.

Sirius sees his opening when Harry pulls his mouth from Tom's and simply beams in his face like a bright light bulb. Snagging the teen away, Sirius wraps his arm around Harry and hugs him, muttering. "What did I tell you about snogging, eh?"

Harry shrugs. "I'm married now, Siri. Don't have to listen to you."

"Married, but not old enough for a proper spanking."

Tom's arm slithers around Harry's waist and states with a not-so-innocent expression. "I will be the one doing the spanking from now on."

Sirius grunts as he makes a face. "I need a bloody drink."
Chapter Six

Wild Gryffindors in the night

Fred and George are digging into the caviar when Fred nudges his twin with a light smirk and gives a nod towards the Animagus. Sirius is standing in the back, nursing a goblet of wine, but he is anything but happy or in a mood for a party. Fred follows the man with his eyes and snorts when he notices Sirius' eyes turning into angry slits. Just across from him is a group of wizards, one familiar, but the rest unknown so far. The redhead doubts any of them matter to Sirius, the man's eyes are firmly fixed on Lucius Malfoy and him alone.

Fred spoons some food into his mouth and says, "Care to place a wager?"

George frowns. "What do you have in mind, brother dear?"

Slanting his head towards Sirius, Fred smirks. "I wager that Padfoot will snap and viciously snog Malfoy Senior in front of everyone. Let's say ten Galleons for starters."

"Accepted. I say Sirius will scare off anyone who goes near Malfoy and then drag him into a dark corner." George grins and shoves a piece of cheese into his mouth. He hums with a delighted smile. "The food's really good."

The boys decide to snack some more and wait for Sirius to crack and earn either of them some money. When the Lestrange brothers saunter over, already showing signs of intoxication, the Weasley twins decide to join them in their drinking. The four of them occupy a table. Fred produces various items for pranking and the table is soon littered with bottles and prank products. When Rodolphus tries to scoop some wedding cake onto his plate, Narcissa appears and yanks the plate away, but not before standing there with her hands poised on her hips and a scowl on her face. In the end, Rodolphus decides that it just isn't worth it.

Severus briskly walks around the ballroom, his robes flapping in a sinister way as if it is a form of art. He ignores everyone and marches straight for the refreshments. Narcissa is busy speaking with a group of witches, but quickly excuses herself when she spots Severus. Her smile looks thin when she reaches the man's side and snatches the second drink from the man's fingers, leaving the man to scowl at her no-nonsense expression.

Fred keeps a subtle eye on Sirius, who has yet to do anything but brood. Every now and then he does give a quick look towards Harry and his husband; probably making sure that they are still present and not shagging up against a wall somewhere.

Suddenly Rabastan declares with an amused quirk to his lips, "This ought to be good."

Fred shifts his gaze towards whatever Rabastan is eying and grins. "I think I'm about to become ten Galleons richer."

The wizards who have been conversing with Lucius are all gone and a new bloke has edged closer. He seems young -- not as young as some of the wizards and witches attending, but definitely in his
early twenties. Appreciative of the male physique, Fred rates the young wizard and finds that the wizard is definitely worthy of a shag. Handsome in a youthful way, with a nicely shaped face and light brown hair that curls slightly around his ears. Yeah, Fred can definitely see the appeal.

"Isn't that Nott's cousin? Works in the Ministry. Ralph something?"

Rabastan offers a nod. "Ralph Findley-Darlington. He's not Marked, but he claims to be a devoted supporter of our Lord's plans. Uppity little snot if you ask me."

"Well, I think that uppity little snot is trying his best to flatter Malfoy. He'll go blind if he flutters his lashes a bit harder."

"Lucius will play the game until it starts to bore him." Rodolphus chuckles. But then he asks Fred, "You said something about becoming ten Galleons richer?"

Fred is only happy to share and points towards Sirius with a slow smirk that has worked its way on his face. "I bet ten Galleons that Sirius would get pissed and have his wicked way with the pretty Death Eater over there."

"You have no idea, kid." Rabastan laughs. "The dog has been humping that wizard's leg for months. Hell, a year if I heard correctly."

"Seriously?" George asks, surprised but also curious. "Sirius and Malfoy?"

"Started shagging some time ago, but it's supposed to be a secret," Rodolphus muses and drags out the word 'secret' like it is something sticky clinging to the roof of his mouth. "Almost everyone knows; at least everyone close to them. I heard it from Draco."

"Wicked!" Fred pipes in. "Means Sirius will snap soon."

Rabastan nods towards the young wizard attempting to conquer Mount Malfoy. "What an idiot! Just look at that little twit."

"Luce is going to eat him alive; I mean if he is actually stupid enough to go through with this. Poor bastard doesn't even know it."

Fred frowns. "Brainless Gryffindors sitting over here. What are you talking about?"

"Look closely," Rodolphus smirks. When Fred glances over to the blond, the Lestrange goes on, "The bloke is pawing at Lucius."

"I take it Malfoy doesn't like that?" George asks.

Rabastan hums. "Just look at him and you'll understand."

Fred starts staring with open curiosity, trying to decipher what he is looking at. When George makes an understanding noise in the back of his throat, Fred ask, "What? I don't get it."

Rodolphus claps the redhead on the shoulder. "It's the fakest smile known in history. Lucius has him thinking that the flirtation was successful. Now watch."

Findley-Darlington looks terribly flushed; flustered even as he fidgets with his empty goblet. When he gives a stuttering smile, backing away towards the refreshment table, Fred spots a look so utterly bored and condemmatory flash across Malfoy's face that it makes the redhead snort out his drink. When the young man's back is turned, Lucius swiftly walks away without a single glance.
"Sirius is on the move," George comments as he sips his own drink. "Hand over those Galleons, Freddy."

Instead of going to the blond, who has now joined Narcissa and Severus by the window, Sirius stalks towards the young wizard. There is something blazing in his blue-grey eyes and Fred suddenly wishes he had brought a camera. It's going to be brilliant.

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After watching the party for a while, Sirius makes up his mind to leave. He knows that staying will only bring him further agony. He is about to approach Harry and make his excuses when he sees a young wizard in fancy dress robes walk out of the crowd, his course set straight towards Lucius. He isn't drunk enough to have blurry vision so he sees perfectly well that the wizard is young and not at all bad-looking. Not at all.

He grits his teeth when the bloke makes himself comfortable and actually places his paws on Lucius, touching his arm as if he can get away with groping a wizard without their permission. Except, Lucius doesn't do anything; he just stands there without hexing or insulting. Something ugly twists in Sirius' chest; a mixture of hurt and resentment wells up in him and threatens to overflow.

When he spots the little twink making his way towards the alcohol, Sirius really can't push it down and allows the cocktail of emotions and irrationality to surface and flow over.

Reaching the wizard, Sirius barks. "Oi!"

The wizard, although startled, only offer Sirius a haughtily raised brow. He then asks in a tinny voice, "And you are?"

"Your worst nightmare. Now piss off, because that one is mine." Black stabs his finger into the man's chest and punctuates his every word with a harsh jab.

"I beg your pardon?" Nott's cousin makes a rather unattractive face and sneers. "Did you just threaten me? The audacity of some people--"

Sirius only gives a sharp, predatory smile and says, cutting the younger man off, "That's Lord Black to you. Now be a good boy and fuck off."

Going pale, the wizard tries to be snide about it, but it comes out as a squeak. "Sirius Black!"

"That's right, points for paying attention," Sirius laughs with a feral grin and pats the man's shoulder in a rather callous manner. He pulls the younger wizard closer by his lapels and whispers. "You know, I didn't practice needlepoint in Azkaban. Just between you and me, kid...I'd love a good fight right about now."

Jerkaw away as if getting burned, Findley-Darlington's eyes dart around the room in a frenzy and he shoves a goblet of expensive bubbly into the wizard's hand. "My apologies, Lord Black."

"Smart choice. Enjoy the rest of your evening." Sirius casually says and waits for the younger man to skid off like a frightened animal. Which he absolutely does. Feeling lighter about it, Sirius smirks to himself and decides to spend some time with Harry before the Dark Lord throws him over his shoulder and barricades the bedroom for a week.
Sometime later, the mood of the wedding party changes. When the Carrows walk into the room, each dragging a struggling Gryffindor behind them, a silence falls on the room; only hushed voices break the stillness. The gathered company forms a half-circle when the two are deposited on the floor, right in the centre of Death Eaters.

Tom kisses Harry's temple with slow sweetness as the trembling Muggle-born screeches, tears making her face blotchy and wet. No one cares, for they are not expected to and frankly, it is a miracle that the Carrows have not killed them in the cellar already.

Some are watching Fred and George; after all, the bruised and battered redhead is their sibling. Quite a few are wondering if they will try to help him. The twins, however, stare blankly; both of their faces detached and emotionless as their younger sibling gets dragged in by the scruff of his neck like a disobedient puppy. Brotherly love is not going to save him, for Fred and George don't feel an ounce of it for Ron -- not anymore at least. Not after learning the truth about their youngest brother.

Tom murmurs into Harry's ear, "A present for you. I thought you might like the opportunity to start our life together with the removal of past annoyances."

"You read my mind, dear."

It is clear that Ron's arm is broken; the limb looks twisted and sports a purple hue around the elbow. Small scrapes litter the boy's hands and there is a deep laceration on his cheek; not deep enough to kill, but it will be leaving a nasty scar on the freckled face. Hermione Granger is in a slightly better state, mostly due to her being smart enough to keep her mouth shut and his demeanour docile. The Carrows probably overlooked her in favour of the rowdy Weasley. Though she does have bruises on her hands and a few rips in her jumper and jeans. The two Gryffindors had been walking hand in hand around Diagon Alley before a Stunner had knocked them both on their arse.

Ron takes in the wands pointed at him, but he still displays his brashness by spitting insults at Harry. He is dumb, but not dumb enough to completely miss the point. He already knows the truth, but just doesn't remember knowing it. "You sodding bastard! I knew it, I bloody well knew, didn't I? You're one of them, a Death Eater! It was only a matter of time before you lost your marbles and turned Dark."

A sharp blow to the side of his head knocks him on his stomach but that doesn't stop his snarling. Hermione is already scrambling to the boy's side, attempting to help the teen, but Ron roughly pushes Hermione away and hurls spit at Harry. The green-eyed wizard is too far away for it to reach him, but the thought still counts and Harry takes great pleasure in making Ron twitch in pain.

"I knew you weren't as stupid as you look." Harry smiles sharply. "You see, Ronald, the thing is that I didn't turn Dark. Perhaps it was something Dumbledore believed, but you shouldn't have put much faith in the ramblings of a senile git."

Hermione blusters. "Albus Dumbledore is the greatest wizard of our time!"

"Correction," Harry smirks, "was a great wizard. Not the greatest, surely you know that there are wizards far greater and more powerful than Dumbledore. I won't deny that he was skilful with a wand and very talented in the art of bullshittery, but he certainly lacked a certain grace. Not to
mention his failings as a Headmaster of a magical school. He was a disgrace, a pathetic old man. Though I have to admit that his blind faith in me was hilarious; you should have seen his face when he finally realised how badly he had fucked up."

Chuckles echo in the room and Bella makes a snorting noise when she recalls the incident on top of the Astronomy Tower. Hermione starts crying in earnest, but her face speaks of hate. It is the utter comprehension that she, too, has been fooled, and she cannot believe it.

"Bella, take little Miss Mudblood into the dungeons. Don't kill her, but feel free to rearrange her insides." Harry orders, never taking his eyes off Hermione. His green gaze is void of emotion as he admits, "Maybe you would have lived longer, Granger, but unfortunately for you, I despise obnoxious behaviour when it's not warranted. You are smart, I'll give you that, but no one likes to be reminded that they are less, especially coming from a hoity-toity Mudblood such as yourself."

Receiving a nod from Harry, Bellatrix yanks the girl up and drags her towards the door, muttering happily about her dirty blood and all the fun she is going to have. Hermione kicks with her legs and screams, but Bella is stronger and keeps a tight hold on the girl's hair.

Ron soon falls face first on the floor and the gritting of his teeth can be heard in the room. The Cruciatus has every nerve ending on fire; a white-hot pain scrapes his skin and every muscle in his body is taut with tension. Draco smirks when a well-aimed kick to Ron's face meets its mark perfectly, blood spraying from his mouth with a few teeth clattering out of his mouth and onto the marble tiles.

Crouching down, Draco pulls Ron's head up by the roots of his flaming hair and sneers with vicious care. "You are nothing but a little insignificant pest, Weasel. You should know that kicking the shite out of you will give me immense pleasure. And when you pass out from the pain, I will perk you up a bit so that I can do it again and again...until you choke on your last breath. I could tell you that you'll enjoy our time together, but I'd be lying."

"Draco," Harry calls out the blond's name in a mildly disapproving tone. When the Malfoy heir tosses Ron back against the cold floor and meets Harry's gaze, the green-eyed teen goes on, "We're going to cut the cake now, so can you please hurry it up or save it for later. I can't eat cake when there is blood on the floor. It sort of ruins the mood."

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"How are you liking married life so far, Pup?"

Harry jumps a little when he hears Sirius' voice and the man's hand on his shoulder, but at the same time, he feels a warmth spread through his chest as he thinks about the wedding ceremony and Tom's vows in Parseltongue. Grinning, Harry says, "Well, if the next fifty years are anything like the past five hours than I'm going to be very happy."

Sirius throws his arm around Harry's neck and pulls him close. "You should give him the slip now, take half his vaults."

"Are you implying that I married him for his money?" Harry presses his hand over his heart with a mocking gasp. "Maybe I only married him for his impressive girth?"

"That sounds like something I'd do, Pup." Sirius snorts. He smiles genuinely when he sees that Harry
is indeed glowing with happiness. "You have him eating out of your hand already. We'll just work up to getting him to admit that he's whipped. Do me proud, Pup."

"If that's you giving me your blessing, then I accept it wholeheartedly."

The Animagus shrugs but there is a small smile playing on his lips as Harry beams up at him. Then, as if a switch has been flicked, Harry's innocent smile turns playful and he hums, "My husband demands my attention."

"Coming here too plebeian for him?" Sirius inquires with a raised brow. When Harry makes a delighted noise, Sirius scrunches up his nose. "Is he sending you dirty thoughts?"

Harry laughs. "Come on, let's join the others."

Some have already left, but the Inner Circle is still present. Severus stands next to a potted plant that covers half of him and almost reaches the man's head. A number of people are still slow-dancing but immediately take it somewhere else when the Dark Lord's menacing gaze locks on them.

That's where Harry finds him; standing in the shadows with a goblet of wine. Perhaps they know, but most seem ignorant about their Lord's presence and act relaxed. The green-eyed wizard leaves Sirius with Narcissa and decides to join Tom in the shadowy corner.

"They seem besotted," Narcissa states in a wistful manner as she stares at Sirius.

The witch's gaze doesn't waver and Sirius grows annoyed. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Narcissa hums. "Like what?"

"Like I'm supposed to know what you're talking about," says the Animagus.

"Don't you?" Narcissa challenges and her eyes drift across the room where Rabastan is conversing with Lucius. Deciding that Sirius needs a push or rather a hard shove, the witch speaks out, "Well, are you a Gryffindor or not? There are plenty of empty rooms in this Manor; simply pick one with a bed if you want him to pay attention."

Sirius isn't sure if it is a joke or not, but he can't ask anyway because the witch is already halfway across the room, swiftly gliding towards the other guests. An overwhelming need to punch a wall washes over the Animagus but he settles for running a hand through his hair. From the dark corner, Harry sends Sirius a small wave and then he and the Dark Lord leave the room.

Knowing exactly where the couple has gone, Sirius mutters under his breath. He sees baby Malfoy with the light-haired witch. Sirius recognised the witch at first glance. He sees the Longbottom boy sitting among the Weasley twins and a few younger wizards who are most likely little snakes. Harry had mentioned the younger folk, but there seems to be a rather large blank space where the names used to be.

Then he spots the young wizard from earlier and smirks as he scurries away in the opposite direction as soon as he lays eyes on Black. Since Harry has left him alone with the Slytherins, Sirius Black feels his inner Marauder scuffling about, wanting to break free. Maybe slip something into Snape's drink or charm the Dark Lord's sitting room to look Gryffindor red and gold.

There is a cracking noise and then a fizzing sound, sparks of vivid pink and blue erupting from the other side of the ballroom. Fred and George have already started the pranking without him. As more fireworks gets released into the room, some even reaching the ceiling and others shooting in various directions on the floor, Sirius sees Snape downing his drink and the dark scowl on his face means a
mighty tongue-lashing for the redheaded heathens currently trying to set the room on fire with sparkles and little bombs that go off one at the time. With prowling moves that would make any vicious cat proud, Snape sets his sights on the redheaded wizards and stalks over to them, fully prepared to hex them.

Seeing his chance, Sirius approaches the blond wizard. Lucius doesn't notice him and that is just perfect. Grabbing the blond by the arm, Sirius only offers a devious smirk before conjuring an image in his mind and Disapparating away with an almost unnoticeable pop.

The room Sirius has Apparated them into is dark and he isn't completely sure where he is; it's not like the Dark Lord allows him to roam his manor freely. Harry had taken him on a tour so he does remember the location and layout of some rooms. Apparently, this room isn't off-limits to him. With a quick spell, a little lamp by the window lights up, and he realises that it is one of the sitting rooms he knows well.

"Are you insane? You could have splinched us!"

Sirius gives himself a quick examination and says, "All the important stuff is still where it should be." Lucius looks furious. Sirius realises that he fucking loves it when Lucius is livid enough to maim him. The Animagus smiles. "You didn't lose a single hair and you have both of your eyebrows."

With a snarl, Lucius moves towards the other wizard, but instead of taking a slug at the man, he marches past Sirius. A spark of panic in Sirius' gut has him moving and he steps in front of the door and mentally prepares himself for the hex he knows is coming. However, nothing happens; though, there is a heavy silence that proves even worse than a physical blow.

"Get out of my way, Black."

It is a low hiss and would make lesser men tremble and scuttle away as fast as their legs could carry, but Sirius takes it as a sign that he has managed to annoy Lucius enough to get a reaction out of him. He always loves reactions, especially the ones making the mask on Lucius' face fracture just a bit. He says, "No, we're going to talk. I didn't risk leaving my bollocks behind so you could storm off."

"I can easily arrange that."

Sirius knows that the blond is just a moment away from cursing him, but he has to at least try. "And damage the parts you like best about me?"

"Black, you and I have nothing to talk about," Lucius draws out the words as if explaining to a child. "It was made perfectly clear to you."

"Black, you and I have nothing to talk about," Lucius draws out the words as if explaining to a child. "It was made perfectly clear to you."

"I didn't see it right away. I had to think about it for a few weeks, had to nurse my bruised ego back to its former glory. Now, though? I can see right through your bullshit because you're so bloody obvious, Luce."

"See what exactly?" Lucius sneers, letting his evil pour through with gusto.

"You want me just as much as I want you; the only difference between us is that I didn't feed you some absurd line about this not meaning anything," Sirius smirks before crashing his lips over the blond's. Nothing is ever calculated with Sirius, so he just follows his gut and hopes that it will pay off. When every part of his body explodes in pain, a crackle of fire licking at his skin, Sirius knows
that he is being cursed. Painfully so.

Logically, he understands that it is the Cruciatus raking through him like wildfire, but despite the pain and the slight closing of his lungs, he doesn't stop. Many thrash about in immense pain when the curse consumes every little nerve in their body, and even those who have been under it before have trouble fighting the urge to scream out in agony, but Blacks are made of stronger stuff. Instead of falling to his knees, Sirius slips one arm around the blond wizard and roughly hauls him closer as his other hand slides behind Lucius' neck.

Even cast without a wand, the Cruciatus hurts like nothing else, but Sirius pushes against the pain with every ounce of will in him. When the aching eases up and the fire in his muscles cools down a bit, Sirius feels the wizard in his arms relax. The ghost of pain is still present, but Sirius can breathe again and his muscles are lax enough for him to move without a problem. Trying to snog someone while being tortured is a novel experience for the Animagus.

"That wasn't very nice," Sirius mutters as he drags his mouth down the blond's neck. He still has his arm wrapped around the wizard's middle and the other is slowly making its way down his back to join the other. "You treat all the blokes who kiss you with the Cruciatus?"

As if breaking some sort of enchantment, Sirius' words make the blond push against the other. The arm around him keeps a tight hold, making it hard to take a step back and away from Black. "Let go of me."

To Sirius' ears, it sounds weak at best and he smirks in his own infuriating manner, "Now why would I do that?" Lucius averts Black's eyes and that only fuels the wizard's desire. "I have you exactly where I want you. You can curse me all you like, but you and I are having that talk."

"I don't particularly care for your wishes, Black."

"If we're being honest here then I have to say that I don't really give a toss about what you want right now either," Sirius says indifferently. "Now you look me in the eye and tell me you don't like my arms around you. I dare you to lie because even though I may not be the best of liars, I can spot one a mile away."

"How presumptuous of you," Lucius sneers, but as the arm around him tightens, he loses the sneer and growls under his breath. Making a quick decision, the blond wizard allows all the tension to leave him, making Sirius' grip loosen just a bit. Since it is a game for two, Lucius focuses on creating an illusion and traces his hands down Black's shoulders to his elbows in a tender gesture.

Sirius smirks and tips forward, enough to graze his lips over the shell of the other's ear. He chides in a honey-laced tone, "Not going to work, Luce."

"What do you want from me? I've said all I had to say to you."

"I haven't, so shut up for once in your pampered life and listen!" Sirius barks out, getting impatient. "Why is it so hard for you to believe that I want you? And I'm not just talking about the exceptional shagging. I used to hate everything about you, everything you represent, but now I can't even remember what it was that I hated so much. Now...well, now I just want you as you are, with all your flaws included."

Lucius scoffs. "You would, Black, apparently having no standards."

"I'd like to think otherwise. My standards are pretty damn high, you know," Sirius counters, "You're the best there is, so I must have excellent taste."
"Azkaban must have damaged your mind beyond repair, Black."

"Your insults only make me warm inside." Sirius laughs and releases the wizard, silently pleading for him to stay. When Lucius doesn't immediately make a run for it, Sirius speaks in a more composed tone, "You want this, I know you do. I just can't figure out why you want to fight it. We fit, you and I, even if I said that we'd never be well-suited for each other. You'd rather end a good thing now than let it become even better."

"Why can't you just leave it be?" Lucius argues.

Looking at the blond as if he is dim-witted, Sirius snipes, "Oh, I don't know, maybe because I love you. Morgana's tits, how can someone so intelligent be so fucking stupid! My heart has been involved since the beginning; I just didn't realise it before. It was never just a way to get off."

The outburst cracks the cold mask and Sirius sees a glimpse of everything before Lucius turns his back and makes an attempt to collect himself. Sirius won't allow him such luxury and sidles up to the man in an instant. Physical contact always works between them and Sirius does what he knows will not fail him. Pressing himself into the blond's personal space, Sirius growls. "Don't you fucking dare! I want to see you, all of you, and you can curse me until the sun comes up. See if I care."

Sirius really doesn't care; he can probably take another torture curse if that gets him somewhere. He half expects it, but no curses come; instead, he feels soft lips brush against his own.

He knows that the sitting room has an armchair and a tiny settee next to the bookcase, but choosing the most suitable spot is not a priority. There is also a lovely rug on the floor, all feathery and perfect for the event. Deft fingers make quick work on the clasps of his robe and he shrugs it off. When his arms are freed once more, Sirius hooks an arm around Lucius and pulls him close as he stumbles towards the middle of the room. Something rips and buttons chink as they fall on the floor, some disappearing under the chairs and some rolling as far as the bookcase.

"This better not be a one-off," Sirius warns as he pulls away enough to get some air before attacking pale skin with his teeth.

"I have recently discovered that there is no such thing when you are involved," says the blond, a strange buoyancy in his voice. He looks perfectly wrecked.

Sirius will not be able to handle another rejection. "I mean it, Lucius...I won't let you walk away again."

Trousers get ripped open and some items vanish, never to be found again. There is a puddle of clothing on the floor beside the wingback chair and someone's wand clanks on the hardwood floor along with the clothes that now lay in a heap. A house-elf nearing the room for a dusting sharply turns into another corridor and titters as she hears thumps and noises.

Sirius quickly finds himself on his arse, the back of his head aching somewhat when it makes contact with the hard floor in a rather painful manner. There is a pleasurable weight on him, sinuous limbs caging his legs and the wispy ends of blond hair tickling his chest as Lucius tilts himself forward to coax Sirius into a kiss. Not that Sirius needs much coaxing, but he definitely appreciates the rest that comes with it; mainly the naked form of his lover draped over him like the finest silk. He feels himself tingle all over; it's like magic licking at his skin.

Slow is not something Sirius is able to do when Lucius is involved, yet he is willing to try, for it is his to savour this time around. Then again, he doesn't really want to waste time on tender enticement and romance. He wishes he could see the blond dipping his fingers inside himself; the sight would
surely push Sirius over the edge. There is simple enjoyment in seeing a look of unholy pleasure on Lucius' face as he sinks down on three finger and *keens*.

Sirius makes a heavy noise as he watches. He fears being incinerated by his own need and growls. He wants to take over and pulls the wizard down with a hand behind his neck. When he thrust up, driving his entire length into the compliant body clinging to him, Sirius shudders. Lucius trembles around him, above him.

Black drags his hands over the lithe legs pressed against his sides. He wants to tempt the blond wizard into letting go. Into yielding. "Fucking hell, Luce. You were made just for me."

Lucius is beyond speaking, and Sirius loves the expression of sweet sin on the blond's face, the god-lent grace in his movements. It's making it difficult for Sirius to keep a steady pace, to keep it *slow*. He falls right in. It is a new sensation for Sirius -- this type of joining. His entire body is one thrust away from snapping in two; just one glorious plunge away from marking Lucius as his for good. He can taste the moment already; it sits on his tongue like a something sweet. For just one moment, Sirius gives himself over to whatever power guides him and inhales deeply. He smells the burning candles, a lingering scent of wine, and something purely Lucius. A tormenting whiff that clings to the wizard's skin and pushes Sirius closer to absolution.

Twisting his fingers into spun-silk, the dark-haired wizard pulls Lucius against his chest and slides his tongue into the willing mouth. He knows that he isn't going to last long and swallows each moan as the blond wizard quivers around him.

Then Sirius' world explodes, making his vision go white for a moment. Lucius is pleasurably boneless and Sirius gently lowers them back on the plush rug. He nuzzles a spot on Malfoy's neck that seems particularly sensitive.

"Made you see stars, didn't I?" Sirius teases in a husky whisper, a smirk belonging to a deviant forming on his lips.

Lucius blinks his eyes open like a lazy cat after a nap in the sun. The intensity of pale moonstone throws the Animagus off for a moment; it is a sight more awe-inspiring than any other.

Content, the blond hums, "Shut up, Black."

"You really say the sweetest things sometimes," the Animagus lets out an amused chuckle. He reaches out behind himself and finds a robe, presumably his own, and draws it over the two of them. Covering them as best as he can, Sirius lifts himself up and rests on his elbow. "Don't get me wrong, I greatly enjoyed your evasion tactics, but we didn't finish our conversation. Mind telling me why you're being so stubborn?" Lucius casts his eyes down, avoiding Sirius' questioning gaze. Hooking his finger under the blond's chin, Sirius forces him to look up. "Out with it."

With a heavy sigh, the blond wizard relents. He cannot hide anymore. "I've never had a proper relationship. My marriage to Cissy is the only constant; she has been a stable source of affection and companionship for years and I do love her, but I have never been in love."

"I haven't had a proper relationship either, not really," Sirius replies with a half shrug. He knows what being on his own feels like. He understands having one's emotions so twisted up inside that nothing makes sense.

"In my experience, lovers always want something," the blond continues dryly.

"Do you think I want something?" Sirius asks, but he is more curious than accusing. "Because I do
have a name of my own, vaults filled with gold, a rakish charm and a certain notoriety."

Lucius shifts and nestles closer to the dark-haired wizard. "I think you want something I have never
given to anyone."

Laughter bubbles in the Sirius' throat as he mused, "You gave me your arse already, so I can only
assume you mean your heart. I do want that, Luce."

After a moment of comfortable silence, Sirius perks up and sees the rumpled state of the blond. He
grins. "So are you going to stop being an idiot about giving us a shot at this?"

Lucius wandlessly summons his clothes; what is left of them anyway. He doesn't look at Sirius when
he speaks, "I seem to want you, for some unfathomable reason I cannot comprehend, and it would be
pointless to deny myself. A Malfoy always--"

Sirius shuts the blond up with a kiss. "I think that's the closest I'll ever get to 'Yes, Sirius, I'd love to';"
As he gets to his feet, Sirius feels a bit weak but that's usually the case after such an intense activity.
He shoots a look around the room and successfully locates his slacks. "Can't wait to tell Snivellus."

Lucius grimaces when he finds his shirt, three buttons missing and a tear in the expensive fabric. He
tosses it aside and remarks, "You're an animal, Black."

"Yeah, I've been told," Sirius wiggles his brows. He lifts up the remains of his robe and snorts. "You
did a fine job with my robe; completely ruined it."

"We could simply Apparate to Malfoy Manor; I see no reason to rejoin the party. The Dark Lord is
long gone with his virgin bride."

"I'm very grateful for Voldemort's prudish sense of nobility," the Animagus prompts, "Harry was far
too eager to let Voldemort into his pants."

Lucius transfigures one of the settee cushions into a shirt and as he catches the other's raised brow, he
says with a dismissive shrug, "The Dark Lord will hardly miss it. Rodolphus has taken at least five;
he has a habit of losing his attire whenever there is a gathering. The elves obtain new ones every
now and then."

"In that case," the man smirks, grabs one of the pillows from the armchair and transfigures it into a
deep red shirt that matches his robe.

They dress in a hurry and without saying much. Before they manage to leave the room, Sirius stops
the blond. "Just so we're clear." Then he proceeds to snog the blond with vigour, certainly not caring
for modesty.

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The halls of the Dark Lord's manor echo with merriment, loud voices, and infectious laughter mixing
with singing. The ballroom is empty and the elves are already busy with cleaning it.

The noise is coming from the large sitting room. Sirius stands in the doorway, his expression
bemused when he takes in the sight. Rabastan and his brother are sitting together, laughing and
sharing a bottle of wine between them. The Weasley twins are sitting on the floor with some of the
younger wizards and witches; all of them friends of Draco and Harry. The blond teen is sitting among the rest, Luna comfortably settled between his legs and resting against Draco's chest with a dreamy smile. In the middle of their sitting circle is an almost empty bottle of Firewhiskey, shared by the group.

Snape and Narcissa are absent. Bellatrix, however, is present and has her arm around Rodolanus' neck. She keeps giggling uncontrollably but has a knife in her hand, once again confirming that she is a bizarre specimen of a witch. Then she jumps to her feet and disappears through the door by the bookcase in the back, muttering something about dirty rats and target practice. Some members of the younger generation suddenly cheer and Sirius finds a few pairs of eyes on him; in fact, more than a few pairs. Fred fishes out a small pouch and hands it to Rabastan, who then grins and pockets it.

Lucius appears, gives the room a brief glance and then leaves without saying a word. The Animagus is about to follow when Rodolphus hollers his name. "Black! Where the devil have you been? There's barely any wine left."

Fred smirks. "Come now, Padfoot. Tell your mates where you were for the past hour?"

"Yeah, don't be shy," George says in a silly croon.

"Did you conquer luscious Malfoy terrain?" Fred questions with a sly grin.

Draco reaches out and smacks the redhead. "Shut your mouth, Weasel!"

Sirius crosses his arms. "How many bottles have you two had?" George looks pensive for a few good moments and Sirius smirks. "If you have to think about it for more than a minute, I'd say you've had enough. Same goes for Fred."

"Mister Black, maybe you'd like to join us for a game?"

Sirius eyes the dark-skinned teen sitting next to Draco. The boy is handsome, despite his youthful face and seems taller than Draco. The Animagus recalls the Lady Zabini and her multiple affairs and marriages; the teen sitting before him shares the witch's cheekbones and eyes. This is probably Blaise Zabini, a fellow Slytherin of Draco's. "I like you, kid."

"It's only right to address your elders properly," Blaise says with a hint of a smirk playing on his lips. "And there it goes," Sirius grumbles.

Pansy Parkinson claps her hands together like a small child and says in a piercing voice, "How about a new game? It's a Muggle drinking game Pucey's brother told me about."

"A Muggle game?" Draco sniffs disdainfully.

Luna's eyes glitter. "I'd like to play."

"The lady has spoken," Fred says. "Draco, suck up your snotty pride and play the game. You don't want to be a wanker in front of lovely Luna, now do you?"

"Since it's a drinking game, we need self-refilling glasses. I taught myself a charm to make this game easier, so the glasses will be filled after each round if there is a need for a refill. The game itself is simple, it's called 'Never Have I Ever' and the point is to ask embarrassing or raunchy questions," Pansy explains with a giddy smile and takes out her wand. She transfigures the glasses and charms them. "To make it more interesting and to make sure no one cheats, the glasses are charmed. So you have to drink, even if you would rather not admit to some sordid secret. I'll start by stating something
I have never done and if one of you *has* done it, that person has to drink."

"Do we set some sort of restrictions?" asks Blaise. "Or is nothing off-limits?"

"What are you? A Hufflepuff?" Rabastan asks with a snort. "I say let nothing be out of bounds."

Fred and George both grin identically. "Hear, hear!"

Pansy cocks her eyebrow. "Is Firewhiskey acceptable?"

Everyone nods in approval and all the glasses are instantly filled to the brim

"Who gets to go first?" asks Luna.

Everyone shrugs and Blaise points at his friend. "I think Draco should go first."

The blond seems uninterested but gives a suffering sigh. "If I must. Let's see...Never have I ever been attracted to a Weasley."

Blaise downs his drink and Draco's eyes almost bug out. "Really, Blaise?"

The teen wipes his chin and laughs good-naturedly. "We're not all ginger-phoebes and one of the older ones does look exceptional in leather. Saw him in Gringotts a few weeks ago."

"Bill does have a certain charm." Fred muses. "Sadly, he only uses that charm on women... I think."

"Me next," pipes George and says with a slow grin, "Never have I ever skinny-dipped in the Black Lake." Almost everyone raises their glass and George groans, "You mean I'm the only one who hasn't? And here I thought I'd humiliate Fred."

Rodolphus smirks. "Never have I ever fancied McGonagall."

With a grim look, Rabastan downs his glass and mutters. "Bastard."

"There seems to be a story here. Care to share?" Pansy looks way too eager as she leans in.

"No, I do not care to share," Rabastan gives a snide reply and glares at his brother.

"When we were at Hogwarts, Rab had a crush on her. Granted, she was a right fox back then, some odd twenty years ago."

Sirius poorly hide his laughter when Rabastan mumbles curses under his breath. The Animagus straightens up as it is his turn and says with an easy smile, "Never have I ever fancied Snape."

Pansy, Blaise, Theo and Fred all lift their glasses.

"All of you?" Sirius is truly baffled. "Why would you fancy that slippery git?"

Pansy snickers. "He's intense, in a scary sort of way."

"Very menacing," Blaise adds.

"He has rather distinguished looks," says Theo.

Fred simply shrugs. "I bet his all sexy under those black billowing robes."

"The youth of today," Sirius looks slightly ill and both Rabastan and Rodolphus agree with him.
"Okay, who's next?"

Luna smiles and says, "Never have I ever given anyone a lap dance."

Surprisingly, it is Theo who downs his glass and sighs with a slight wince, "It was a stupid dare."

"I think I remember," Blaise ponders. "It was Crabbe's birthday and Pansy dared you to give the birthday boy a lap dance."

Theo makes a face. "Pansy blackmailed me."

"That I did, darling. I have dirt on all of you, never forget that." Pansy looks around the circle. "Who wants to go next?"

Fred proudly clears his throat and says with a mischievous expression. "Never have I ever shagged the luscious Lucius Malfoy."

Only Sirius drinks. Fred gives his brother a high-five and they both look diabolically amused.

"At least those two can stop betting on it. And not swindle Galleons out of each other," Rabastan points out. He turns towards the twins and says, "I did tell you both, didn't I?"

All the younger wizards and Pansy continue to stare at the man with wonder and a touch of confusion. Draco is the one who speaks, "Do you think Harry would mind if I start calling you 'Dad'?"

"I think I've had my fill because surely your father isn't sleeping with this tasty piece of man right here. Because how is this fair? It's a *travesty*, a cruel cosmic joke. When is it my turn? When will I be swept off my feet by some hunky eye-candy?"

"Darling, you are indeed smashed," says Blaise as he pats the girl's shoulder.

"You'll get over it, Pans," Theo smirks and goes on with the game. "Never have I ever fantasised about anyone in this room."

Luna and Draco both drink, prompting Pansy to groan, "Boring. We all knew that already. I'll go next, let's see... never have I ever fancied the Dark Lord."

Theo looks slightly panicky as he is forced to drink. *Again.*

"Theo, you sly prat!" Pansy shoves the teen and giggles.

"It's not like I fancy him now; I mean it was only ever a silly crush. I haven't even been in his presence more than twice, so it's nothing." Theo appears flushed and a little embarrassed, but soldiers on without running out of the room.

Sirius takes a drink just because he wants to. "I'll leave you kids to it. I have somewhere to be, a certain wizard to keep happy."

He gets to his feet and almost runs into Severus who is now standing in the doorway. The wizard raises a brow. "You still have all your limbs attached...what a pity."

Sirius isn't bothered by the man's unpleasant attitude and smirks. "I'm about to become a permanent fixture in your life, Snape. Nothing you say can possibly change that and no matter how much you'd like to take a shit on my good mood, it's won't work. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll be joining Lucius in his bed. We'll probably make a lot of noise -- all night long. Think about that." He adds with a
Sirius saunters past the man with a cocky smile and starts whistling a cheerful melody, irritating Snape further. The man is about to exert his wand and send a curse, but Narcissa comes soaring down the staircase and her cool eyes pierce him before he can even raise his wand. She doesn't mind the people in the sitting room and enters the room, her eyes immediately finding Draco and Luna cuddling on the floor. However, she decides to leave them be. Entwining her arm with Snape's, she says. "Don't look so sour. Tonight is a night of festivity; you can continue your glowering tomorrow, but I want none of that now."

Snape smirks to himself. A wonderful night with his hand? The diseased dog could not be more wrong.

"Must you be everywhere, Black?" Severus grumbles as he enters the dining room on a particularly nice morning.

Sirius shoves a piece of toast into his mouth and looks smug. He doesn't need words to annoy Severus; it is a particular talent of his. Snape takes a seat, as far as possible, and waits. He won't be able to stomach any breakfast with Black sitting there looking so self-satisfied.

Thankfully, Narcissa arrives just in time to chase away his murderous thoughts. She settles behind the table and smiles as if nothing is amiss. She dunks some sugar into her tea, stirs it, and then sips it without letting her smile slip.

Draco walks in with Luna in tow and as he helps her into her seat, he glances at Sirius. His expression remains neutral as he realises that he is going to see Black more often now that the troubles between his father and Sirius have been resolved. Of course, he can't be sure of anything yet, but he has a feeling that whatever had been broken is now mended.

Luna tucks a piece of hair behind her ear and wishes everyone a good morning.

"Don't you have a home to go to?" Snape gives an acidic reply.

Luna's smile is as whimsy as the rest of her as she asks, "Doesn't everyone?"

Severus feels the need to respond, but one look from Narcissa douses his insults and he shuts his mouth. He stops paying attention to the girl when Nargles are mentioned, but Draco seems to be hanging on her every word.

Narcissa asks, her voice breaking the awkward silence, "Have you heard anything from Harry?" It isn't directed at anyone specific but rather meant for everyone.

Sirius huffs, looking out of sorts. "You'd think that after a few days of shagging, they would find time to send one lousy owl -- but no, haven't heard a word from my own godson."

"They are newlyweds, Sirius," Narcissa points out, "the Dark Lord can and will spoil his spouse if he so pleases."
"Harry is always thinking about others, but never himself," Luna hums, "He deserves this, don't you think?"

Sirius agrees but that does not mean that he has to like it. "Yeah, of course, he deserves it and he's happy; happier than I've ever seen him. Doesn't mean I don't worry about him."

"Stop complaining." Severus sneers at Black. "People don't always take their pets with them."

Sirius smirks and aims a barb at the man, "Then why are you always here? Someone airing out the dungeons?"

Luna snickers as the two continue to glare at each other over the table. Narcissa clears her throat, clearly not amused. "Wizards, I ask that you act your age and stature."

"Or settle it in the duelling room," Luna suggests with a smile. Draco splutters as the witch keep eagerly eying Sirius and Severus, waiting for them to make a move. It would certainly be amusing to watch.

"As if Black could land a single spell," Severus smugly states. "But I'd love to rough him up just for the fun of it."

"You're on, Snivelly!" Black snarls. "Give me a date and a time for kicking your arse and I'll be there."

Severus grits out. "One hour, Black. I'll meet you in the Dark Lord's duelling room. I imagine you can find it on your own."

He stands and sweeps out of the room without a backwards glance. Narcissa sends a reprimanding look over at her cousin. However, she is curious to find out how it will end or rather who will end up under the Healer's care first.

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There is a narrow catwalk in the middle of the room. The walls are covered with shielding spells and the large floor-to-ceiling windows are protected with cushioning charms to prevent any unfortunate accidents or damage. Snape stands at one end of the podium, having shed his robe and wearing a comfortable duelling outfit that leaves plenty of room for him to move. The smile on his face is sinister, touched with morbid glee, for it is a happy day. Moreover, it is a day he has been waiting for years, ever since he had met Sirius Black and dubbed him a harebrained cretin of the highest degree. All those years of pranking and humiliation; those memories arouse his rage now as he waits for the wizard to make an appearance.

They also have an audience; Draco's blabbing coupled with Narcissa's has resulted in half of the Inner Circle making their way over. Rabastan and Rodolphus are placing bets while Bellatrix skips around the room, observing Snape. When the double doors bang open, revealing an almost too jovial Sirius, Snape's stiff back stiffens even more and he smirks in his own baleful way. He sneers, "Decided to show up after all?"

"Wouldn't miss it for anything, Snape," Sirius says as he climbs on top of the dais and faces the wizard. He shrugs off his robe and rolls up the sleeves of his shirt. He sees the gathered spectators and grins. "Did you gather all your Death Eater chums so that they could see you get your face
kicked in?"

"I will take great pleasure in wiping off that smirk."

Narcissa clears her throat. "Wizards, please -- at least have some decorum. I will state the rules."

"Cissy, there are no rules," Sirius states, glaring at Snape, "The only rule is that we keep it magical. Though, I doubt your greasy boyfriend would even know how to fight without magic. Just look at his scrawny arse."

Not taking the bait, Severus directs a nod at Sirius, brandishes his wand and gets into position, ready to begin. Sirius twiddles with his wand as he moves into place. Narcissa has no other option than to back away since neither of them will to listen. A heavy silence falls on the room and all eyes turn towards the duel about to take place -- and seeing the thunder crackling across their faces, everyone takes a step back for good measure.

Both wizards offer a short bow, and a mere blink later spells start to fly. Severus sends a Leg-Locker Curse, which Sirius deflects and the man, in turn, responds with a Body-Bind Curse that the Potion Master avoids. An orange blast tears itself free from Snape's wand, but Sirius manages to put up his shield just in time. He immediately retaliates with a jet of blue. "Expulso!"

A wandless shield charm in place, Snape roars, "Sectumsempra!"

Sirius ducks and grins. "Lacero."

The curse shoots past Snape's head and the man sends his own curse, fully meaning to blast the wizard into oblivion. Curse after curse, hex after hex, but not a single hit. The room is filled with red, blue, yellow and every colour in between as the duel gathers force. When Severus blasts Sirius into the wall, he counts himself the winner, but before the Animagus can make contact with the wall, he shoots a curse at Snape that knocks him over. Unable to let go, both surge back on their feet and simultaneously aim a curse at the other.

"Crucio."

"Eviscero."

One spell hits a shield and the other bounces off a wall; that only enrages them further. As the curses grow darker and more deadly, Snape sneers. "I'm going to rip you apart, mutt!"

Sirius casts a Protego as Snape hurls a jet of purple his way and laughs, "Doesn't seem to be your area of expertise, Snivellus."

"I will blast your flea-ridden rear back to Azkaban!"

As the two continue relentlessly, Narcissa marvels over the fact that her cousin is as skilful as Severus, and in some cases, even better. The duel has already lasted for more than thirty minutes whereas most duels end fast; it is encouraged to quit while you are ahead and conserve magic. However, the burning hate between the two wizards only adds fuel to it and neither of them is willing to stop. A countless of hexes get shot back and forth, never doing any real damage. Narcissa notices how everyone keeps staring, some in awe and some in confusion. It isn't widely known that Sirius Black is a dangerous opponent if provoked.

Even Bellatrix observes with hooded eyes; a glint of respect in her dark eyes as she takes in the clash before her.
A flare of bright magic and the gasps of her fellow viewers distract Narcissa. She turns to look and she sees both wizards still locked in a fight but the drapes to Sirius' left are on fire, while the wall behind Severus has a rather ugly scorch mark blackening it. One of the windows has been blown apart despite the protection around the room.

Severus sends a curse that melts skin while Sirius uses one that can shatter every bone in the body, yet neither meet their target thanks to the shielding charms, but keen eyes can spot that both men are exhausted -- magically and physically. A duel is always taxing when one has a strong opponent.

That, however, does not mean that the curses and hexes will be milder; if anything, they get deadlier and more gruesome. Severus wants to see Black's blood boil and the other wants to see the Potion Master's internal organs explode in a gory spectacle.

No one really pays attention when Lucius walks in and sees the duel of death. Draco notices his father and right away knows to take himself somewhere else. The elder blond does not seem pleased; not in the slightest. It just goes downhill from there as some of the curses being exchanged reach his ears.

The small audience has started to murmur among each other because it is clearly getting out of control. Whispers break out amongst the group. One of the Carrow siblings asks, "Are they trying to kill each other?"

"What the bloody fuck does it look like they're doing?" Greyback barks back.

Despite the spells around the room, the wayward and random curses are starting to break the enhancements and everyone has to take another step back; unless they want to get hit by a stray curse.

"He's magnificent," Narcissa muses as Lucius joins her. The witch's eyes are firmly on Severus.

Lucius only has eyes for Sirius. He has seen him in magical fights before but never like this; never so eager and concentrated. He can curse with a grin on his face and manage, but all of his senses focused makes for a spectacular sight. Both of the wizards on the dais look ready to collapse; but knowing them, neither Severus nor Sirius want to be the first to give in.

"How long?"

Narcissa thinks about it and says, "Long enough. But I think interrupting them now would only end badly for both of them."

Severus has a cut on his cheek and patches of his sleeve are charred and torn. Sirius has a few slashes on his arms and a piece of glass in his neck from the exploding window. Both look to be sweating and heaving, their vision starting to blur somewhat and their legs weak like a that of a newborn calf.

The witch beckons her son over and tells the teen, "Send Mitsy for a Healer. Tell her to be quick about it."

"But I want to watch; it's rather entertaining." Draco lets out a small whine, trying to look over his shoulder.

Rabastan, having overheard, steps forward. "Best show I've seen in a while. Too bad our Lord is not here to see this."

Rodolphus stalks over as well. He doesn't look all that entertained. "Someone should get them to
They don't have to wait long. A loud thump echoes in the room, followed by Sirius' bark of laughter. Severus is on his back, twitching and seemingly ready to retch. The Animagus cannot help himself and gloats with a tired yet infuriating grin, "Defeat by Tickling Charm. Hah! In your face, you smarmy, slippery git! In. Your. Face."

Severus, albeit struggling, manages to end the infernal charm and sits up, wearing one of the darkest scowls in history. He inspects his injuries and sneers when he locks eyes with Sirius, who is now sitting on the edge of the catwalk with a smug smirk.

Even though it is a painful thing to admit, Severus has to give the dog some credit. He is virtually unbeatable; only the Dark Lord himself can win a duel against him. And being completely honest with himself, Severus knows that Lucius can as well. He can live with that -- being bested by the Dark Lord himself and one of his best friends doesn't hurt as much as being outdone by a mangy mutt. That is unacceptable, not to mention exceptionally humiliating.

Before he can get his legs to move, Narcissa hurries to his side. She looks less than thrilled. She doesn't speak and for that Snape is grateful.

The summoned Healer spots Severus and he walks over to him. Snape has no need for healing and snaps at the man. "I do not need tending to, seeing as I am capable of healing a small cut myself."

The Healer frowns and grumbles, but moves away. Sirius is happy to let the wizard heal the nasty slashes on his arm and remove the glass sticking out from his neck.

"Oi, where's my money?"

Rabastan groans as Fenrir Greyback saunters over, having stayed in the back. He grins, all teeth and voracity, as Rabastan hands him a small pouch of Galleons. Out of all the Death Eaters present -- and of the betting variety -- Greyback is the only one who had placed a bet on Sirius emerging as the victor.

Rabastan is curious and asks, "How'd you know?"

"Didn't, just a lucky guess." Fenrir shrugs. He gives a nod towards Sirius. "Unpredictable, that one. Wild too. The man fights with his whole body, throws himself into a fight completely with nothing held back." Greyback isn't a wolf of many words so he stalks away, his winnings tucked in the pocket of his trench coat.

Rodolphus sees the werewolf leave and walks up to his brother. "I guess the moral of the story is that you should never underestimate a Gryffindor."

The brothers leave soon after, as do most of the spectators. Only a few remain. Narcissa hovers around Severus, not quite fussing, but still close by. Bellatrix hasn't said a word yet, but there is a meaning behind her silence; one that speaks of appreciation. She is proud as if she only now acknowledges Sirius as a part of her family. Lucius remains standing near Sirius but doesn't move to touch him just yet.

Sirius, all healed and patched up, lets out a tired sigh as he slumps backwards. He is pleased to have won and he is pleased to see Lucius standing by the podium. The wizard remains flat on his back as he muses out loud, "I need a drink."

From the other end of the podium, Severus snipes, "I hope you choke on it."
Sirius laughs. "Don't be a sore loser. Besides, you nearly blew my ear off."

"I was aiming for your face."

Getting up on his elbows, Sirius smirks. "And deprive the world of this handsomely crafted visage? We can definitely do without yours though."

With his wand pointed at Sirius, Snape clambers to his feet and sneers, a curse on his lips. "\textit{Sectum--}"

"\textit{Accio Severus' wand!}" Narcissa's shrilly voice breaks the hostile moment and as she expertly catches the wizard's wand, she growls. "Severus Snape! Just what do you think you're doing?"

Sirius looks to be holding back laughter when his cousin's cold blue eyes bore into Snape.

"Cissy--"

"Don't 'Cissy' me!" the witch warns. "You can have your wand back when I say you can have it back."

Then she is marching away, but not before she stops before Sirius and says, "This is your doing, Sirius. Children, the both of you!"

Severus sneers one last time at Sirius and follows Narcissa out, trying to get his wand back now rather than later. Sitting up, Black comments with an innocent look. "Was it something I said?"

Bellatrix taps a finger against her chin, the picture of contemplation. "Not bad, Cousin. I wanted to see your insides, but this was so much better than what I had it mind. You might be a proper Black after all."

Sirius offers a sardonic smile, saluting. "I'm glad to have provided amusement, Bella."

The dark-haired witch smirks to herself and leaves the room. As she disappears around the corner, Sirius grabs Lucius' arm and pulls him close. The blond settles for a spot between the Animagus' legs. Almost face to face, Sirius slips his fingers behind Malfoy's neck and crashes their lips together in a searing kiss. Sirius' eager hands travel lower and smoothly slide around the blond's waist. Exhaustion clings to his back and there is a terribly tingling sensation all over his body, but nothing can keep him away from a proper snog. All he needs is those yielding lips on his. A particularly keening moan escapes Lucius as Sirius thrusts his tongue inside.

Draco, who is still standing behind them, clears his throat. He looks positively mortified. "I'm still here, you know."

"Then go away." Sirius has far better things to do and gives Draco a dismissive wave towards the door. He doesn't particularly care if Junior stays or leaves. With an annoyed huff, Draco throws up his arms in defeat and slams the door on his way out.

"As lovely as this is," Lucius drawls as he pulls away, "you are expected in the sitting room. You have a visitor."

"Pup is back?"

"As I understand, they had to end their honeymoon early because there have been rumours about another Harry Potter sighting and the Dark Lord did not wish to take any unnecessary risks with the Order. Now that they know he's not with the Dursleys, the Order might try more rash tactics to get
"He wants Hogwarts secured as soon as possible, right?" Sirius surmises and when Lucius offers a nod, the Animagus goes on, "Mad-Eye and Shacklebolt are probably hiding out there. According to Bill, they tried to take over the Weasley residence, but their plan didn't go over so well with Molly Weasley."

"Isn't the youngest Weasley boy in the dungeon still?" Lucius questions.

The Animagus recalls Harry's viciousness and hums. "Most likely. Knowing Tommy, I'd say that the chances of him getting out alive aren't all that good. Ronald was and always will be a jealous brat. Clinging to Harry for fame and glory ever since Harry boarded the train in King's Cross."

"There is a reason we dislike Weasleys."

Sirius gives an indifferent shrug. "I don't dislike all of them. The twins support Harry; they're very loyal, clever and here they get the recognition they deserve. And Bill's a mate, looks great in leather. If I wasn't taken--"

The blond's eyes narrow and a delightful shiver runs down Sirius's back. "Merlin, Luce...I'm joking." He gets to his feet and says, "Come on, let's go see Harry and that bastard he married. And afterwards, I'll pin you to the bed and we'll celebrate my hard-won victory."

"Hard-won indeed."

Sirius only grins.
Chapter Seven

Set fire to your torches

The Dark Lord really isn't a great adventurer; being outdoors is an adventure in itself. He prefers to swim in the indoor pool or soak in the tub. But Harry wants to go for a dip in a more natural body of water. Tom was not prepared to spend time among Muggles, but he swallowed the urge to sneer because Harry wanted to experience a bit of freedom.

Having no real experience with such matters -- it being Tom's first honeymoon and all -- the man had asked Lucius to organise some of it. Although, he had glared at the blond for a few moments because having contacts in the Muggle world isn't exactly something a pure-blood like Malfoy should practise. Then again, Harry is happy and that allows the Dark Lord to be less uptight about it.

The yacht Lucius had organised for them is blindingly white against the blue of the waves. Sleek and sharp, the vessel seems predatory; prowling in shallow waters, nothing unassuming about it. The sun is scorching and the air feels balmy -- perfect weather for a nautical voyage. Harry has always liked the sea, in particular when it is restless because something stirring and trembling under the surface appeals to him. But what he likes best is being stuck on an expensive cruiser in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea with a dangerous animal who might pounce on him any given moment. Harry is eager to let his husband ravish him under the stars.

"We will be returning to the house in a little while," Tom says, moving to stand behind Harry. The younger one is admiring the pale indigo sky that bleeds into the glinting blue sea. "I suspect you wish to go swimming in a body of water that isn't filled with teeth."

"That is generally the function of a swimming pool. I know I said that an indoor pool is stupid when you can go to a private beach, but the water is surprisingly cold." Harry hums, his eyes closed. He feels an overwhelming sense of peace. "Will you be joining me?"

"Perhaps."

Harry turns around in Tom's arms and says, eyes gleaming, "Maybe we can skip that altogether and move straight into the bedroom."

The urge to throw Harry over his shoulder grips the Dark Lord but he still has some patience left in him. "I want you to enjoy our time together. We will return home in a week and I wish for you to only have good memories of this little interlude."

"Are you kidding?" Harry snorts. "This is the best thing that has ever happened to me, Tom. And I don't just mean this nice boat or the villa -- being married to you is the best fucking thing ever."

"We have been married for two days, Harry. You might grow to dislike it. I am not an easy man to love."

"I knew that when I accepted your proposal and I knew that when I married you," Harry says, his carefree expression turning serious. "There are no guarantees in life. Sometimes shit happens and that's that. I'm fairly sure that I won't dislike being married to you; unless you make me sleep in a
cupboard."

Tom growls, bringing Harry closer to his body. "I hate those Muggles. Why can't you let me slaughter them?"

"Because even though they were horrible to me, they are my relatives and I don't think my mum would like it if I have her sister killed. Maybe Vernon, but Petunia and Dudley share my blood."

"Your kindness is sickening. It makes me want to set something on fire." Tom grimaces. "Can I set their house on fire? Or maybe torture them for a bit?"

"No, forget about it." Harry shakes his head. "I don't want them in my life. I don't want to think about them ever again. But I don't want them dead either."

"If that is what you want, I will respect your wishes."

Harry smiles. "What I want is for you to make love to me."

Tom looks around and frowns. "I do not consider this to be a sanitary place for--"

"There is a bed, you know," Harry points out. "A lovely bed just for us, with a bottle of chilled champagne and a bowl of strawberries. Why not indulge a bit before we get back to the house?" The wizard cracks a wicked smile, his fingers drawing circles against Tom's arms. Harry feels a surge of excitement when Tom's eyes darken, his breathing getting more laboured as his young husband slides his hands down his chest.

The touch of lips is warm and thrilling. It makes Harry's skin quiver with need, turning the blood in his veins into liquid fire. A man overcome by lust, Tom pushes Harry against the railing, sliding his tongue deeper and his hands down the other's hips to keep him in place. Not that Harry wants to leave. Disapparating into the bedroom below, Tom releases Harry and then pushes the younger wizard on the bed.

Crawling over Harry's body like a beast in a rut, Tom ignores the hardness in his trousers in favour of defiling his husband's mouth. The low whimpering sounds only add fire to the Dark Lord's determination to consume the tantalising minx who has thoroughly ensnared him. He grabs two fistfuls of Harry's shirt and rips it apart, indifferent to the buttons flying around him. There is no grace in the way they move; there is just primal need and hunger waiting to be sated. There are no affectionate touches, no smooth caresses of a dedicated lover. It is like bloodlust -- blinding and senseless.

Tom moans deeper when Harry straddles his thighs, sitting on his lap and torturing the wizard by adding pressure on his confined hardness. Tom's shirt gets yanked out of his trousers and Harry roughly pushes it down his shoulders. Tom's hands are far too busy raking down Harry's slender form to help with the task.

The Dark Lord feels teeth against his neck and he welcomes it wholeheartedly as he slides one of his hands into the green-eyed wizard's hair and grips it tightly. The sway of Harry's hips presses down on Tom's lap, a teasing slide against his already slick cock that wants out of its cage.

Tom sees the raw need in vibrant green eyes, begging him for the gift of deliverance. He wants to release the demon inside and grant it life. Mouthing kisses down the sun-kissed expanse of skin, Tom gently pushes Harry flat against the bed again. He trails the tip of his tongue down the wizard's stomach, feeling the muscles contract and shudder in anticipation.

"Tom, please..." a wrecked moan leaves Harry; it is like a debauched prayer. His name sounds like
an unholy whisper as it passes over the wizard's lips.

The Dark Lord's groin twitches in agonising pleasure. Quickly, he rids himself of his trousers and then removes Harry's shorts. As he glides his hands down the other's legs, Tom smirks at the fact that his lovely husband is not wearing anything underneath. Harry spread his thighs apart, inviting and hot all over.

Careful not to touch the straining cock against Harry's belly, Tom plants a few kisses on the other's hips and stomach, but he never touches anywhere else. He can kiss every inch of Harry and do so for a long while, but he finds it difficult to ignore the keening noises and the glistening rosy tip of Harry's cock just a breath away from his lips.

Patience vanishes and it leaves Tom almost hollow inside, but desire fills him up to the brim. His lips stretch around the head of Harry's cock and Tom brings his fingers around it. Gripping it gently, he laps the underside of it, savouring each taste that is uniquely Harry. He has almost no any self-control left in him as he swallows Harry down like a starving beast. Harry yields to Tom's fervent touches and the trickle of something hot as it pools in his gut. He stretches out on the bed, feeling too warm and sensitive.

Tom strokes the trembling skin and tensing muscles, soothing and torturing at the same time. He wants to consume Harry; break him apart and put him back together again. He can feel that Harry is close to losing control and that is what he craves most of all in that moment. Each whimper belongs to him; it makes the magic in his veins rush and throb.

"Tom...I swear to Merlin...stop teasing--" Harry chokes and lets loose a hoarse cry as Tom pushes two slick fingers inside Harry and twists.

Tom draws his mouth away from Harry's cock and smirks, "You were saying?"

"Sodding bastard!" Harry wails as Tom works him open. He dangles on the delicious edge of tenderness and yearning. He feels a spreading fire, violent and sweet. Another finger joins the rest and Harry shakes with pleasure. He wants to push away from the bed and scale the walls because the shivering inside makes it hard for him to breathe. It is difficult to think about anything else.

Tom slithers on top of the younger man and presses close. He plucks at Harry's strings like a magnificent cellist and whispers, "When we get to the house, I will take you against a wall. You will wrap your legs around me and hold on to dear life as I press deep inside you. You will feel me for days; you'll ache for my cock to fill you each time you sit down."

Harry cannot even open his eyes. He knows that Tom isn't very vocal during moments of sublime intimacy, but Harry enjoys the man's voice more than the words that spill over his lips. It is his smooth, sultry voice that makes Harry snap. The younger wizard buries his face into his husband's neck, his guttural cry muffled by it. It feels like standing to close to an explosion -- Harry's ears ring and everything is slightly out of focus. The world tilts before his eyes as Tom withdraws his fingers and wraps them around Harry's spent cock.

Harry doesn't speak. He's too tender to move. Everything prickles; it's like tiny needles poking holes in his sweaty skin. Tom gathers him close and kisses his brow, his cheeks, his chin -- the feather-light touches from Tom's lips bring a smile on Harry's face. But he feels troubled; while he's a pleasant pile of putty, Tom is not.

As if reading his husband's mind -- which actually isn't all that implausible because Tom's an excellent Legilimens -- the Dark Lord assures the younger man, "I will take you properly once we get back to the house. And it will be all the more gratifying for me."
"Sounds completely fake, but I won't argue with you. I'm far more interested in a nap right now."
Harry smiles as he cuddles closer. He lets out a deep breath and closes his eyes.

Tom presses a kiss on Harry's forehead and pulls up a sheet to cover the wizard's body. He has plans for later and they do include making love to his husband in various rooms around the villa he has rented for the occasion. Strangely enough, he has not bothered to think about anything tyrannical or matters related to overthrowing the Ministry. Of course, they will return to it, but he rather likes having Harry in his arms. He didn't think it would please him to be idle, but he feels like it's not such a waste of time with Harry by his side.

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Almost five days after the wedding ceremony of his best friend and the Dark Lord, Neville sips his cooling tea, keenly watching said friend fume. Harry has a light tan, nothing too noticeable but it is clear he has been out in the sun. The honeymoon -- which had to be cut short thanks to some stupid people -- has done Harry a world of good. However, parts of it had angered the teen to no end. He has already delivered a mighty rant over the matter, forcing poor Neville to follow it

"-- and I didn't even get to go for a swim! I was planning to but then we had to leave in a hurry because, apparently, I'm not allowed to have a good time. I can't even spend some quality time with my fucking husband without someone fucking it up." Harry finishes, huffing with annoyance.

Neville looks amused as he places his teacup on the table. "I didn't understand a word you just said."

Harry's eyes blaze but then the fire calms down and he stops his walking around the room in agitation. "Fucking Order, fucking things up for us. Again!"

"Have you heard that the Minister has ordered all magical militia groups to disband."

Harry's eyes widen a fraction, mostly in delight, but it is short-lived because he remembers how the Order works. "It won't stop them; they'll just burrow deeper and continue with Dumbledore's dirty work." Harry muses with a frown. "Now that Siri kicked them out, their little operation has been moved, but no one would be willing to help them and risk getting caught aiding outlaws."

Neville proposes, "McGonagall would and she has the perfect place to hide them. You know how Ron told everyone about you being dark and insane? Well, he wasn't the only one spreading those rumours. A lot of students are gossiping about it and the whole of Gryffindor House believes it."

"Who has the biggest mouth?"

"There's a long list of those with loose lips. Mostly, Dean Thomas. I think he believes that he's continuing Ron's work and he has a number of other Gryffindors spreading the word about you being the next Dark Lord or something. Some Ravenclaws are in on it too, but mostly it's just the lions. Some didn't come back for their final year, too scared or smart enough to keep away. Parkinson has been rallying the snakes to take part in extra lessons similar to the DA you started in our fifth year."

Harry smirks. "She asked permission to use the idea and create something for the Slytherins. They are targeted by the others."

"It's pretty bad now that McGonagall is in charge -- not that it was any better before -- but she hasn't
done anything to stop the fights. She can't handle it or maybe she simply doesn't care. The animosity has grown into full-blown duels in the Great Hall.

There is a dangerous gleam in Harry’s green eyes when he speaks, "When the time comes to take Hogwarts, Gryffindor House will be the first to burn."

Neville is curious. "What about the professors? Anyone worth saving?"

"I know Sprout and Flitwick are not taking sides; both are neutral. If they are given the option to stay and teach, they will, even if the school is under Voldemort's rule." Harry points out. "Poppy and Slughorn will be told of the takeover in advance."

"Madam Pomfrey?" Neville looks shocked. "You're saying that Pomfrey is a dark witch? But she's so nice it hurts!"

"Being a Dark Lord supporter doesn't mean you can't be nice," Harry tells Neville with a smile. "She did it all under Dumbledore's nose; that old fool never suspected a thing."

"So that sweet, doting nurse image is just a load of bull?"

"No, she really is sweet and kind. Just sometimes she turns into a mean Horntail when the situation demands it. She beat me over the head with her wand when I wouldn't take the potions she gave me but afterwards, she gave me some sweets that she keeps stashed for the first years."

Doubt is all over Neville's face, but he trusts Harry's word. It shows because Harry is about to add something to ease the teen's suspicions, but he doesn't get a chance. A booming voice nears the sitting room and Harry prepares himself for the onslaught.

"Harry James Potter!" Harry grins when he spots Sirius bounding in, a scowl on his face. The Animagus barks. "Was it really so hard to send me a bloody note? I've been worried sick."

"Riddle." Harry corrects with a smile he knows will annoy the hell out of the man. "It was only a few days -- and as you can see, you didn't have to worry. I'm fine."

"Pup, you went off Merlin knows where with Voldemort, and you don't think I had a right to worry? Mental!"

Harry snickers and replies, "I was with my husband. Now give me a hug and stop making such a racket, Siri."

Pulling the green-eyed teen into a crushing hug, the wizard lets go of his bad mood. Then Sirius notices the boy sitting on the sofa. He's sipping tea with an amused expression. "Shouldn't you be sitting in a Charms class or something?"

"Siri, don't be rude." Harry shushes the man and then says, "Neville's on a little holiday."

Making a noncommittal noise, Sirius slumps into the nearest seat and sinks into it with a groan. "Don't mind me, I'll just sit here until the ringing in my ears fades away."

"You don't look so good," Harry notes, seeing the paleness of his godfather's face. "You're not sick, are you?"

"Just a mild case of Snape," Sirius blows out in a sigh and goes on, "Had a duel with him."

Neville blurts out. "And you're alive?" He immediately blushes when Sirius's glares at him.
When Harry raises a brow as if to ask the same, Sirius mutters. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, Pup."

"Snape's kind of awesome with a wand, even though he is a snarky bastard." Harry adds with a quick grin, "Not that you're not awesome, Siri. So did you win?"

"Obviously," Sirius smirks. "Snapey is sulking somewhere, trying to overcome the shame of being beaten by me, a Gryffindor. A Tickling Charm landed him on his back like a first year."

Harry starts laughing; an almost hysterical edge takes over his voice. Tears leak from his eyes. "That's bloody brilliant!"

"Greatest moment of my life." Sirius hums in agreement. "I want that one my gravestone."

Neville doesn't dare laugh when a dark-haired wizard appears in the doorway. The Dark Lord is sort of scary -- even with a handsome and youthful human face.

The man's smooth drawl breaks the moment. "I do hope those are tears of mirth."

Harry is still chortling, his face beaming with glee. "Oh, Merlin! Tom...A Tickling Charm -- bloody brill!"

Neville translates for the confused Dark Lord. "It seems Sirius here duelled Professor Snape and overpowered him with a Tickling Charm."

Drawing his cackling husband into his arms, Tom sends a nod to Neville as a small token of his appreciation. He captures Harry's chin between his fingers and says, a small smile playing on his lips. "You will not mock him about it."

Harry snaps back into reality, his laughter instantly stopping, "But that's a constant source of entertainment for me; you can't take it away!" Tom's gaze doesn't waver and Harry hisses, his voice pitched low. "If you take away Snape, there will be no more husbandly duties. If you want me to suck your cock again--"

Tom presses a hand over Harry's mouth and says, his voice tight and urgent. "You may torture him to your heart's content."

Harry's eyes seem to smile and as Tom takes away his hand, the teen sweetly counters, "See? I always get what I want."

The Longbottom boy is silently gawking at them, trying to not be blatantly obvious. Black's face is set in glower most likely due to the words he had most assuredly heard. "There will be a meeting tonight."

Harry perks up at that. "What sort of meeting?"

"Inner Circle, but it is likely that Scrimgeour will be here, for he holds the key to a peaceful Ministry takeover," explains the wizard. "And before you ask, you may attend if you wish."

The green-eyed wizard is about to twist his arms around Tom's neck, ready to pull the Dark Lord into a snog, when Sirius clears his throat, pointedly glaring at his godson. In order to dampen the lustful mood, Sirius states, "Moody and Shacklebolt are not done yet. There are Aurors loyal to them and the Order, spies in the Ministry, not to mention members outside the Ministry. They are recruiting, no matter what the Ministry says. Bill mentioned that they have been recruiting students."
"No one has really seen Harry since Dumbledore's funeral. When he didn't turn up for his seventh year at Hogwarts, a lot of students started spreading rumours that Death Eaters took him and that he's being kept as a prisoner. Some even think Harry's dead," Neville says, backing up Sirius.

"If they're hiding in Hogwarts, I don't think it's safe for you to be there, Nev. Luna as well. They're not stupid; they had eyes on me even before Dumbledore's death, so they know you and Luna are my best friends. I don't want the Order to get to you just because they think you might know something or simply because they think you are a threat."

"Don't worry about Luna; she didn't come back this year," Neville tells the green-eyed teen. "Gran wanted me to stay home, but I thought that being there might be useful somehow. Tonks and some Auror showed up one morning, asking about you."

"They were most likely sent straight to you when they didn't find Harry with his Muggle relatives and Mad-Eye knew I'd be a dead end too."

"I think we need more eyes and ears in Hogwarts, aside from Slughorn and Poppy," Harry suggests. "Lucius can check with the Board of Governors, see if they can be swayed to place someone there or replace a teacher or two."

"Over the years, we have successfully infiltrated the Board of Governors and many sitting there today can be swayed in whatever direction I want. Your idea has merit, and I'll have Lucius convey my orders to place someone there to overlook the school and perhaps help us."

"McGonagall can't refuse," Harry smirks a little. "She knows that the Board can sack her. She's the Deputy Headmistress; the Governors put her in charge, but it is a temporary position. At least until a new Head can be elected. So either she refuses and gets sacked, therefore failing the Order she so strongly supports or she accepts the Board's plan and risks exposing the Order's new hideout. It's a win-win if you ask me."

Tom asks, his brow raised. "And just how do you know she is only the temporary Headmistress?"

The teen says with a small shrug, "All the professors are gossiping about it, wondering why she wasn't offered the job permanently."

"I couldn't give her ruling over the school. The wards around Hogwarts are weak. They have been failing ever since Dumbledore's last breath; with each day that passes. She cannot create new ones. She can only try to keep the old ones alive, for she isn't the true Headmistress. Only those who have signed the magical contract can set the wards and communicate with the school, yet she is only a short-term solution. So when we take Hogwarts, there won't be a single protective ward to keep us out. She knows this and that's why she allowed the Order to settle there, but they won't be able to protect the school."

Harry chuckles. "That's wicked. I love it when you go on a power-trip."

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The joke shop is open and business seems to be booming, and despite Hogwarts being in session, plenty of grown-ups love the Weasley merchandise and the door is constantly opening and closing.
Fred is helping customers in the back area, three middle-aged ladies hoping to find something to prank their husbands with when George gives a sharp nod towards the front. Tonks has just walked in, her gaze darting left and right. She looks wary, constantly sneaking looks over her shoulder. Fred knows why the witch is looking for them and he shares a look with his twin, both making sure that they have the same idea.

Tonks spots Fred first and walks over with a frown. She waits for the witches to move along, and when she is sure that they are alone, turns to Fred, “You and your brother have been avoiding the missives. The Order--”

"The Order has nothing to do with us, Tonks." Fred cuts her off with a thin smile. "We're not interested in whatever Moody and his lapdogs have to say. Have you ever seen us sit in on a meeting? No, I don't think so because we've never been in the Order and we don't plan on ever being members."

The witch warns. "I'd be careful if I were you. Your family is already causing trouble and refusing to do their duty. After Sirius turned traitor on us, your father refused to let us have meetings in the Burrow. We need everyone, the war--"

Fred hisses out, the word duty making him furious. "The Order is a bloody joke; a bad one at that!"

George, having heard the witch, comes closer and growls at her, "We're not going to lift one finger to help the Order. As for our family, I suggest you take your own advice. Be careful, Tonks. Mum's completely barmy, but even she wouldn't risk letting you hide out at the Burrow. You were just stupid enough to ask."

"Last I heard, the Ministry cautioned all vigilante groups to cease their activities; groups like the Order and if you're here trying to enlist us, I'd say the Order is buried neck deep in shit."

Of course, it is written all over the witch's face and the twins know they are right. She grabs Fred by the arm and pulls him closer, her eyes narrowing, "Look, personally I wouldn't even think about you two as possible additions to the Order, but we need to know where Potter is. No one has seen him since the funeral, his Muggle relatives know nothing either. They say they haven't seen him for a while. There's been talk of him being captured or dead, but the boy is probably hiding somewhere, too scared to take responsibility. Now is the time to strike. There haven't been any attacks lately, so they must be up to something big and the Order won't let that happen."

"Are you fucking kidding me? Responsibility?" Fred seethes, yanking his arm back and sticking his finger into the woman's chest. "Harry doesn't owe you people anything; he doesn't have to do anything and you know it! A bunch of wizards and witches placing all their hopes on one teenager. How pathetic can you get! If you want to win the war, do it yourself."

"If you came here to ask about Harry, you've only wasted your time. Even if we did know anything, we would rather die than betray him. You can tell Shacklebolt and Mad-Eye exactly that. Now piss off."

The witch takes a step back, seeing that both boys are dead serious. She feels apprehensive but spits out, "If you see Sirius, tell him to watch his back. He turned traitor on us. Never took him for a coward, but he and Potter are the same, they'd rather hide than fight."

"Maybe they were smart enough to quit while ahead. You're the one stuck on a sinking ship, Auror Tonks," Fred laughs, "and it's you who should watch your back. You can pass that around when you're all sitting around a table with your heads in each other's arses."
The young Auror looks fit to kill but instead, she sends a sneer at the twins before stalking out.

"What the hell just happened?" George mutters as they watch Tonks leave the shop, disappearing around the corner. "We better tell Harry."

Fred nods. "If the Order is looking for Harry, he needs to know. Sirius too. Never know with Moody and his lot."

George runs a hand through his hair and speaks with a slight smile. "The Dark Lord better get a move on."

"Harry has kept his new hubby busy."

They both smirk at that and George states. "I don't know about you, bro...but I have a bad feeling about what just happened. They're getting desperate."

"And we just pissed them off," Fred concludes with a grim look. "We need to watch our backs as well."

"I wouldn't put anything past Mad-Eye."

*****

Many have already gathered in Riddle Manor, waiting for the Dark Lord to arrive. The Carrows are standing by themselves, conversing in low tones. Dolohov, Rookwood and McNair have formed a trio by the window. Crabbe Sr. and Goyle Sr. stand in the back with Travers and Yaxley.

Everyone straightens up when footsteps approach, believing it to be their Lord, but when Severus marches in, they all relax again. The Lestranges arrive next. A few chuckle when Sirius Black arrives with Narcissa, the wizard wearing an infuriating grin, and shooting smirks at Snape. The grim-looking man has a monumental sneer on his face, and those who had seen the duel understood why.

They are all taken by surprise when their Lord comes in, wearing a deep scowl. Bellatrix is first to notice and immediately bows to him, but unlike the others, she doesn't kneel down before him. Neither do Snape nor Narcissa; both of them just lower their heads in a curt bow. From the corner of his eyes, Rabastan spots Sirius leaning against the fireplace, making no moves to bow or kneel. Instead, he just grins.

Tom glares at everyone. Just for the sake of showing his dominance and enjoying the cowering wizards before him. He misses torturing them. They all know that when he is in a bad mood, someone will likely suffer.

"Stand," he orders and gives a lazy wave of his hand. The room is designed for meetings and he had even made a seat for himself in his insanity, hoping to one day use it as a throne. But that was a long time ago; before he had been defeated by a little brat. Speaking of brats, Tom's frown intensifies when he recalls the previous moments. It is completely unacceptable on Harry's part to leave him wanting in such a manner. In fact, the brat has teased him all day, flashing him those coy smiles and offering small touches. Walking around in nothing but a shirt and boxer. Damnation!

"My Lord?"
Tom feels eyes on him. Not one pair but many, almost a roomful of them. He hadn't even noticed sitting down. He clears his head and sits up straight, but his fingers remain clutching the armrests. That sexy imp has him acting like an insipid schoolgirl again.

Just as Tom is about to speak, Harry wanders in. He is wearing something Muggle, for which Tom is thankful for. *Less temptation.*

Seeing everyone standing in silence, Harry says, "You didn't have to wait for me." He doesn't see any chairs or anything remotely seat-like, so he does the only logical thing and plops himself down in the Dark Lord's lap, squirming to get comfortable. When he settles down, he smiles. "You can start now."

"Impertinent brat." Tom hisses but doesn't try to remove Harry. "Perhaps you would like to conduct this meeting for me?"

"Can I make them do cartwheels?" Harry asks.

"You could try the Imperius Curse," Tom suggests.

Some start to fidget when Harry draws out his wand, gently tapping it against his thigh while letting his eyes roam around the room. Only Sirius knows for sure that the young wizard is playing with the Death Eaters. They all know Harry Potter, the Light's Saviour, but only a few know the teen as the Dark Lord's spouse and equal. Harry can be as vicious as Tom, but he wishes to stay fairly neutral and let the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters do the dirty work.

There is a crack of Apparation in the hallway and Lucius walks in with Rufus Scrimgeour in tow, the latter looking stressed and a bit cautious. The blond Death Eater offers a small bow to his Lord and his young husband before moving to stand next to Severus.

Scrimgeour takes one look at Harry and his eyes widen comically. When Harry flashes him a smirk, the good Minister gawks but he is smart enough to bow to the Dark Lord.

"Rufus," the Dark Lord greets the man, his tone almost amused. "Report."

"My Lord, the Ministry has been successfully infiltrated. Almost all the departments are being supervised by Dark loyalists and they await your commands regarding the takeover. We have a majority in the Wizengamot as well. However, Pius Thicknesse, the current Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement shares the same ideals as the last Head. I was unable to place the Imperius Curse."

"No matter, you have done well." Tom gives a flippant wave of his hand and then wordlessly dismisses the man, sending the Minister to stand with the rest of his Death Eaters. The Dark Lord calls out, "Dolohov, Yaxley!"

The wizards hurry forward, bowing their heads.

"Find Pius Thicknesse. Make sure he gets placed in a comfortable cell in the dungeons until Lucius pays him a visit. Dear Pius will have a part in our invasion, whether he likes it or not," Tom orders. Within a few moments, Dolohov Disapparates away with Yaxley. Tapping his fingers against the armrest, Tom continues with his speech, "Tomorrow at noon, we will take the Ministry and start shaping it for the better. You all know what to do, and you also know I won't tolerate failure nor ineptitude. Kill only if it is necessary." A moment later he adds, "That was meant for you, Bellatrix."

The witch pouts but doesn't argue.
"I have a request," Harry murmurs into Tom's ear. When Tom gives a nod, the teen speaks up. "Dolores Umbridge will be brought to me. Alive and unharmed; I don't want anyone taking away my fun. She'll be fairly easy to spot, just look for an ugly pink toad."

Bellatrix rubs her hands together and smiles gleefully, fully intending to capture the pesky witch for Harry. She loves a good chase.

"My Lord, if I may--" Rufus hedges, curiosity burning through him. Tom offers him a nod and the wizard inquires, "Why is Harry Potter here?"

Harry huffs. "Harry Riddle. Why can't you people remember that!"

"To answer your question," Tom explains, looking straight at the petrified Minister, "Harry is sitting here, on my lap, because I won't have my husband standing."

The man seems bewildered, but he tries to hide it and not seem disrespectful. "In that case, I offer my congratulations." He bows his head in a show of respect before going on, "As it happens, I have some news that directly involves Mister Pot--Riddle. Dumbledore's will has turned up."

"Old Dumbles left me something?" Harry perks up. "That's nice of him. I didn't get him anything."

Tom is curious himself and asks, "What was in the old man's will?"

"He left a few items to various people." Rufus clarifies and fishes out a parchment from his inner pocket. "To your husband, he left the Golden Snitch he caught in his first game of Quidditch. He left a children's book for one Hermione Granger and the Deluminator, a device of his own making, to one Ronald Weasley. Since both Granger and Weasley are nowhere to be found, those items cannot be presented to them." He pauses for a moment and adds, "He also left items for Alastor Moody and states that 12 Grimmauld Place shall remain in the use of the Order of the Phoenix."

"You might want to run that by me again," Sirius steps forward, a disbelieving frown on his face, and barks out a with a rough laugh. "Because last I checked, Grimmauld Place belongs to the Black Family; therefore, it belongs to me. Dumbledore had no right to it."

Rufus is reasonably surprised to see Sirius Black, but he isn't all that shocked. The wizard is a Black after all. The Dark Lord had ordered his pardon and now Rufus knows why. He addresses the man, "Mister Black, I assure you that the Ministry is well aware. All existing records state that the property belongs to the House of Black and Dumbledore's claim to it has no weight. His will was made prior to your pardon, so I assume he thought that your rights to it were immaterial as a wanted criminal."

"Sounds about right. Dumbledore was all about the greater good, and that included shitting on everyone else who got in his way."

Rufus agrees wholeheartedly.

After sending the Death Eaters away, Tom calls Scrimgeour, Severus and Lucius into his personal study, leaving Harry in the company of his godfather and Narcissa.

Harry notices Sirius staring at the study door with a resigned look. He is curious and asks, "What's wrong?"

Sirius shakes his head and conjures a blank mask. "Nothing is wrong. I'm just thinking about what Rufus said about the will. If Dumbledore hadn't forced my hand, I wouldn't have allowed them to conduct their little meetings there in the first place, but he told me that it was the least I could do. That if I refused, I couldn't be of any use and it was more than likely that the Aurors would find me.
Made it sound like I had no choice. He had me on a bloody leash."

"Forget about him," Harry suggests with a smile. "He's rotting in the ground and you don't have to hide anymore. After the article in the *Prophet*, everyone realised how wrong they were and even Fudge made a public apology. You're a free man now."

"I can't get twelve years of my life back."

Narcissa soothes her cousin. "True, but you can spend the rest of your life making new and better memories with the people you love."

Harry is unaware of the hidden meaning in Narcissa's words, but for Sirius, the message is loud and clear.

*****

"Why did Dumbles leave me the Snitch? And why leave anything to Weasel and Granger? He was definitely scheming, that's a given, but what I don't get is why those two? He had them keeping an eye on me since my second year, reporting back to him. Did he really trust them to keep me on the straight and narrow for long?"

Tom is deep in thought, only hearing snippets of Harry's speech. He slips out of his thoughts when he feels Harry come up behind him. The teen wraps his arms around his middle, pressing his face into his shoulder. His fingers start toying with the waistband of Tom's pyjama bottoms until one hand slips inside.

"Dumbledore's secrets are unravelling."

Harry makes an annoyed sound and says, "Don't talk about Dumbledore when I have my fingers around your cock. You'll put me off sex forever--"

Tom twists around and has the teen in his arms before Harry can finish what he wanted to say. He presses their bodies together and pushes his nose against Harry's neck. The younger man smells of fresh mint, having just showered. "You've been driving me insane all day, walking around and enticing me with your delicious arse...wearing those tight t-shirts...rubbing against me."

"You should let me sit on your lap more often," Harry says with laughter bubbling in his voice, "Imagine all those meetings -- me naked in your lap, grinding against you. You'd probably get off on it."

A growl rips free from Tom's throat and he lifts the lithe wizard up, smirking when Harry's legs automatically clamp around him tightly. He slams their mouths together as he carries the teen across the room and dumps him on the bed, ignoring Harry's protests. Tom feels a surge of blistering lust when Harry's legs generously fall open. Inviting his husband to ravish him. And Tom pounces on Harry without any thought, all sort of higher brain function slipping away.

Settled between Harry's thighs, Tom softly nuzzles the body under him. Roughly, he grabs the hem of Harry's loose-fitting sleeping shirt and pulls it up and over the teen's head. Falling back against the bed with a thump, Harry lets out a happy sigh when Tom catches his lips in a kiss. Tom takes a moment to admire his young husband, dragging his eyes over Harry's slim but well-toned body. Physically, Harry has always been appealing, even more so now when Tom has claimed him as his
husband and equal.

"Are you leering at me?" Harry asks with a quirk of his lips. He spreads out his arms and locks them behind his head. His husband's searing gaze makes him feel a bit giddy.

"Can I not leer at the wizard I call my own?" Tom muses, his lips pulled into a smile. He nips at Harry's neck as he goes on, "Can I not admire the body that fills me with desire?" He trails his lips down Harry's chest, flicking his tongue over a nipple, hardening it. He utters a laugh when Harry's stomach clenches and his skin pricks. "Can I not touch what is mine?"

Harry squirms when Tom places a kiss on his jutting hipbone. His hands come to rest on his stomach. "Don't tease me, Tom..."

Tom Riddle, bastard extraordinaire, does not listen and hooks his thumbs under Harry's pants, gently drawing them down. The green-eyed youth makes a pleased noise when his husband's hot mouth surrounds his hardened cock, sucking it down with a lazy grin. Harry watches, captivated by his husband's administrations. The look of utter devotion in his eyes, the concentration dancing on his face, the shining love. It makes something flutter in Harry's chest; something revered.

Keeping his lips wrapped around the hard flesh in his mouth, Tom traces his fingers down, gently pushing against Harry's puckered hole with the pad of his thumb. That causes Harry to arch off the bed with a needy whine. He sneaks his fingers into Tom's hair, clutching at the strands. Pulling off with an obscene pop, Tom licks his lips.

Harry is eager to suck on the offered fingers and twirls his tongue around them. Tom's eyes darken as he stares transfixed. Harry grins with mischief, sucking the fingers down as if it is a delicious treat.

"Enough!" Tom barks, a bit breathless and voice gravelly with desire. He holds back a growl when Harry releases them with a gleaming look in his eyes. The sight is downright dirty but Tom is too far gone in his lust to care and Harry is, in fact, a very dirty-minded wizard.

Harry lets out a low and pitiable moan when the slick fingers touch his opening, teasing and slowly pushing inside. The Dark Lord is tender as he presses on, working to relax his husband. He slips his fingers in and out for what feels like an hour, torturing Harry with the slow movements. The tight fit is still present, even after a week of Tom trying his best to bury himself in Harry whenever the teen wants it. And Harry wants it a lot. For a wizard, the Dark Lord doesn't like the impersonal preparation spells and wants to tease Harry without them.

"Fuck me already!"

Tom's smirk is a little too evil when he speaks, "Such a foul mouth you have. I will take it as slow as I want, brat."

"No," the teen whines, sounding winded. The elegant fingers moving in and out are driving him closer and closer to utter bliss, but the Dark Lord is not letting his spouse fall over the edge just yet. "You're so mean, Tom."

"Patience," Tom intones, withdrawing his fingers and grabbing the pant leg of Harry's pyjamas and pulling them off completely, discarding them somewhere on the floor.

Harry spreads his legs wide and grunts to himself. "Bloody Dark Lord, thinks he can torture me. How about I don't let you bugger me at all?"

Tom crawls over his disgruntled husband and caresses his cheek. "You have a lovely temper." He lures Harry into a kiss. With a wandless spell, Tom banishes his remaining clothes, making it neatly
fold itself before depositing it on the chair. He doesn't stop his fluttering kisses until the younger wizard is putty in his hands. Harry's eyes look glazed and an almost dopey smile graces his face. "You are a very tempting vision. So eager for my touch, aren't you?"

"No need to butter me up, Tom." Harry laughs, but it turns into a choked moan halfway and the green-eyed wizard bites his lip, trying to stifle all noise.

Tom brings his thumb to Harry's lips, tracing it as he hisses, "I want to hear you." He inches into the tight arse of his beloved, careful not to lose control. The velvety grip makes words stick to his throat; only a pained grunt escapes him as he pushes his way inside. Harry swallows him up perfectly; the muscles in his arse working to torture Tom as he fully sheathes himself. Tom rumbles. "Fuck, Harry..."

The green-eyed man closes his eyes and hums in utter delight, but Tom doesn't like that and gives a shallow thrust, making Harry's quiet laughter turn into sobbing. "Fucking Dark Lord, marvellous sodding bastard! You fill me up so good! Gah, hate you, Tom..."

"I should chain you to my bed like this," Tom mutters, dropping down to his elbows. Harry brings his legs up as Tom's thrusts increase and a dark shimmer takes over his red-brown glinting eyes; it makes him look delirious with need.

Without much warning, lights explode behind Harry's eyelids and the tight coil in his belly snaps free, making his orgasm crash over him like a stormbound wave. The younger man howls out his pleasure. Hearing Harry scream out is like sweet music to Tom's ears and he, too, rumbles when Harry quivers around his throbbing cock, drawing his release from him. Tom's vision blackens for a few airless minutes, forcing him through a narrow tube of sensations.

He is mindful of the body under him, leaning on his side as a slow grin appears on Harry's lips and he opens his eyes. "One of these days, you're going to fuck me stupid." Harry lets his legs drop down on the bed as if no bones exist in his limbs.

"We can't have that, can we? I do have a reputation to maintain and an unintelligent spouse will not go over well with the public."

"I'm going to pretend that I didn't hear you," Harry hums.

Tom kisses Harry's temple and pulls him closer. "Sleep now, we have a busy day tomorrow and the day after."

"You need your beauty sleep." Harry notes and yawns. "Wake me for breakfast. Can't torture on an empty stomach."

Before Tom can reply, Harry seems to have dozed off already. The Dark Lord flicks his wrist, vanishing the mess they have made. He is not about to lie in a pool of sweat and stickiness. He drags the bedcovers over the sleeping wizard and douses the lights. The plan to take over the Ministry is watertight and Tom is not going to let anything or anyone ruin his triumph.

*****

Sirius drifts aimlessly around Grimmauld Place, unable to sleep in the dingy house. He is still royally pissed off about the whole Dumbledore's will issue. How dare that old geezer promise the Order
such a preposterous thing! Fucking Moody and Shacklebolt had probably known about that too. Sirius feels furious.

He is mildly irritated that the Dark Lord had made sure that he would sleep in an empty bed, having given the blond wizard the task of making use of Pius Thicknesse. Lucius hadn't even asked Sirius to join him. Poncy bastard.

Sirius wants to hurl something against the wall, but there isn't anything ugly at hand, so he decides to sit down in the kitchen. He locates a clean glass in the cupboard and pours himself some wine. It isn't a decent breakfast but Sirius doesn't trust the food Kreacher makes; he really isn't in the mood for indigestion.

Looking around the kitchen, Sirius realises that the place looks like a real dump; drab and falling apart. Years back, the Black townhouse had been grand-looking but death had taken many Blacks and Kreacher hadn't managed alone. In the end, the house had fallen into disgrace. Both literally and figuratively.

He is reminded of his mother and the years of being yelled at, being scorned and verbally abused. Even if he had practised the Dark Arts, his mother had not been happy because he was also a Gryffindor, a disgrace to the family name. He had been friends with James Potter, a Light wizard who had supported Dumbledore and Muggle-borns. Sirius does not actively hate Muggle-borns like the rest of his family, but he does understand why Muggle-borns might end up being a danger to the magical world. There is a whole lot he does differently but he is still a Black; he takes great pride in his blood and lineage.

Realising he's reminiscing about bad things, Sirius sighs to himself. The wine tastes stale on his tongue and the wizard pushes the glass away, his expression set in a deep frown. The sun is already up and instead of unwrapping Lucius, he is unwrapping the past and thinking about his god-awful mother and her never-ending tirade about abolishing all things impure. Grimmauld Place isn't going to improve his mood but he knows something that just might -- and with that in mind, Sirius pushes himself up and leaves the kitchen.

In the drawing room, he grabs his blazer and calls for the elf. Kreacher pops in and offers a contemptuous nod when Sirius tells him to keep an eye on the place. As he dismisses the elf, Sirius is ready to leave, but someone breaching the wards speaks of visitors.

Bill stumbles through the door, bloodied and covered in scrapes and soot. He heavily tips against the doorframe, almost ready to keel over.

"What the fuck happened to you?" Sirius exclaims, rushing over. The wizard urges Bill to slip his arm around his neck for support.

Bill wheezes out, "The joke-shop is gone, completely caved in and in flames. Forge managed to get out before they could flatten it. Some other shops too -- totally wiped out and blasted apart. They attacked the entire Alley, from both ends, trying to make it look like a Death Eater raid."

"The Order?" Sirius asks, but he already knows the answer. Helping Bill sit down, the Animagus wants to know more. "How did you figure it out?"

"Tonks and Sturgis Podmore," the redhead sneers out, wiping some blood from his eye. He gives a hollow laugh. "They were all wearing black robes and hoods but the masks weren't the same. Tonks was stupid enough to open her mouth when the Wheezes was attacked; she told Sturgis Podmore to capture the twins, saying they might know where Potter is."
"Where are the twins now?"

"Sorting through the rubble. I wasn't keen on leaving them on their own, but they wouldn't budge," says the injured wizard. "The shop was their dream and now it's just a pile of rocks and dust. I came here, hoping that you were in."

Sirius nods and says, "I was just about to leave actually."

"Look, I'm still a bit peeved about the whole 'Harry dating Voldemort' business, but I'm ready to face the facts and they're currently telling me that the Order has lost their minds pulling something like that. The Dark side is starting to look less insane."

"I get your point," Sirius tells the man and adds, "I can't wrap my head around this though. Attacking Diagon Alley during early hours of morning when most businesses open up; that's bold, even for Mad-Eye and Shacklebolt."

"My brothers were targeted, the other attacks were for show and to cause fear, to make everyone think Voldemort is on the move again."

The Ministry takeover is going to take place at noon, and that is less than four hours away, meaning that the attack will now hinder it somewhat. Making a quick decision, Sirius claps Bill on the shoulder and says, "You just got yourself an appointment with the Dark Lord. He's probably aware of the attack and pissed as hell. Lucky you."

They Disapparate. Moments later, they land in the foyer of Riddle Manor.

"I think I'm going to pass out." Bill groans, his head heavy and eyes bleary.

Sirius is about to go help his friend, but catches sight of something and goes to investigate. In a flurry, Severus stalks past him and for once, doesn't sneer when he sees Black. The Dark Lord is well aware of the attacks and seems enraged, but Sirius hadn't expected anything less.

Harry comes down the stairs, looking morose, but there is anger there as well. As soon as he sees Sirius, he quickens his steps. "Siri, why is there blood on your face?"

Sirius is completely ignorant of the fact that there is a smear of blood on his cheek. Harry is there in an instant, checking him over. Then Sirius remembers Bill and says, "I'm not injured, but someone else is."

Harry follows the man into the sitting room. "Bill!"

"I'll find him a Healer," Sirius suggests and ignores the redhead's complaining about not needing one.

Seeing Harry's worried face, Bill assures him, "Seriously, I'm fine."

"What happened?" Harry asks, already guessing the answer. "Were you present during the attack?"

Bill lets out a puff air. "Visiting my brothers when we heard people shouting, followed by blasts and what sounded like an explosion. I ran out to the street and saw the fires, some buildings were reduced into a pile of rubble. Two or three of them flew past me on brooms, wearing black robes and hoods, but the masks were all wrong."

"Fred and George?"
"Unharmed, but devastated," Bill sighs. "Their shop's gone."

Harry curses and starts walking around the room like a caged animal. Anger and sorrow well up in him. A wave of calm washes over him a moment later when his anger spikes. Tom is in the other room, dealing with the repercussion of the attack but he can still feel Harry's anxiety and fury pouring through. An unhappy groan from Bill pushes through Harry's thoughts and he sees Sirius coming back with Narcissa. The witch offers a disapproving look and waves Sirius out of the way.

The redhead dubiously eyes the witch, unsure if he feels safe in the presence of a Malfoy, but there is something stern about the witch that reminds him of his own mother when she is moments away from blowing up. The instinct of survival kicks in and he doesn't dare protest when the witch brandishes her wand and makes a few innocent flicks with it.

Bill almost flinches when the witch states briskly, "I need Severus to assist me. I can't heal these burns without certain ointments. I do not want to risk leaving scars."

Harry takes a quick look. Seeing the scorched flesh, he says with a pointed glare, "Yeah, that seems fine, Bill."

"Must have happened when I was trying to put out the fire," the wizard mutters because it really doesn't hurt.

"Sirius, help me get this young man to the brewing room and go find Severus for me."

Sirius slips an arm around Bill, helping him up. He grimaces and huffs to himself. "Since when am I an owl? I don't want to go looking for that slimy git."

But Narcissa is already gone and done with the nonexistent argument, forcing Sirius to obey. He aids the redhead towards the door and complains all the way there, muttering about Snape and the man's unpleasantness.

Harry decides to locate Tom. And to start planning a gruesome end to the Order. Tom is in a very bad mood and bad moods mean painful curses for anyone who gets in the way. He finds Severus in the other room with Tom, talking about the attack and how it will undoubtedly affect their plans. All the Death Eaters Tom had called to an emergency meeting have gone already, having been sent to take care of things. The young wizard does not see Lucius; something that seems particularly odd since he is one of Tom's favourite henchmen. Harry likes to think of them as trusted friends, but the Dark Lord has no idea what the word even means.

Neither Tom nor Severus notice Harry. The wizard remains in the doorway and listens in on the two.

"This attack has set us back."

"It may not have, my Lord," Severus suggests and goes on when Tom glares with a bit of menace in his gaze, "Scrimgeour can spin this in our favour. Rumours are spreading that this attack on Diagon Alley was not the work of Death Eaters. This is the perfect opportunity to discredit the Order and who better for the task than the trustworthy Minister himself."

Tom seems to think it over but he isn't fully convinced. "It's a risky endeavour. Scrimgeour can't be compromised; he is still needed and the public will turn on him when he starts showing compassion to Death Eaters."

Harry pushes away from the door and says as he saunters into the room, "I think Severus has the right idea. Make the supposed good guys look like the bad guys. The Order has to be disbanded and the Ministry should consider them as rogues. Not only will it make people think, it will make them..."
less eager to help the Order. Under Scrimgeour's administration, the Ministry has gained public support and he actually gets things done. Only because you want to get things done, but they don't know that. So would it really be that bad to disgrace the Order some more, especially if the Ministry does it?"

"We will exercise caution when dealing with the Order. It is not something I have considered before now, but I have underestimated the stubborn will of former Aurors."

"Shacklebolt is still an Auror, just in hiding right now." Harry tells Tom with a grin, "So is Nymphadora Tonks and a few others, but Dumbledore's death forced all of them into a hole. For them the war is in full swing; I'm missing or presumed dead and they seriously think that I'm the only person who can defeat you. They are desperate and scared, but foolishly brash and suspicious of anyone."

Severus adds, "Moody has always been paranoid. Even when Dumbledore was still alive, he didn't trust anyone."

"Well, he was right about you." Harry quips. He then remembers that Sirius had been tasked with finding the man and he says, "Oh, almost forgot...Narcissa needs your help. Sirius brought Bill Weasley here and he's injured."

Severus gives a small bow to his Lord and leaves when Tom excuses him. The Dark Lord then pins his husband with a look. "Why has Black brought him here?"

Harry shrugs. "He was with the twins when the fucking avenger squad turned up and started blasting curses."

"Yes, but why is he here?"

"I like Bill, he's one of the few Weasleys I consider family. He's not loyal to the Order and he's under oath, so he can't reveal any information about me," Harry explains. "He knows that this is the Dark Lord's evil nest of snakes."

Tom makes a face. "Evil nest of snakes..."

Harry completely ignores the point and Tom doesn't have the energy to make Harry give him straightforward answers. Instead, he allows the matter to drop. For now.

"I underestimated them," Tom states and rounds his desk. Harry can see that the wizard is on edge and anger bubbles just under the surface. "This attack...it should not have happened and I feel inadequate. The Order has been a thorn in my side for years; a pesky pain in the neck since the First War and still standing in my way after all this time."

"The Order was different back then," Harry points out, moving closer to Tom. He perches himself on the edge of the desk and goes on, "Dumbledore didn't have his weapon back then, he didn't know what was waiting ahead. They had principles and a sense of honour, opposed to whatever moral code they use these days."

"Mostly Gryffindors, idealistic and bold." The Dark Lord recalls the past and feels a slight tug in his chest, surprised to feel such a thing. He doesn't regret taking lives; it is something that often happens during a time of war and he can't possibly feel compassion for every Mudblood and reckless Gryffindors that stands in his way. In fact, there have been many Gryffindors standing between him and victory. He hadn't been sane back then; the splitting of his soul had done a lot of damage, but it is no excuse.
Harry touches Tom's wrist, pulling his hand away from his face. "Hey, don't go down that road. War is never simple and sometimes people do terrible, unforgivable things. My parents knew the risks, though I'm not sure if they knew what they were doing; in a way, Dumbledore pushed them into it just as he tried to do with me. But in the end, James Potter chose to involve himself in the war when he could have stayed away. Instead of leaving the country and hiding his family away, he risked his life and the lives of his wife and child by staying and putting his trust in the wrong person."

Tom wants to pull his hand away, but Harry's fingers are wrapped around it and gently rubbing circles on the pale skin there. There is a bitter taste on his tongue as he says, "I robbed you of your mother and father. I killed them both in cold blood, only caring about my own existence. I tried to kill you, a mere baby who posed no actual threat to me -- and yet I chose to believe the words of an unbalanced Seer. I feared death more than I feared anything else and that fear clouded all my senses. I could not accept the inevitable and you paid for it."

"You did and I have forgiven you," Harry explains, "but that doesn't mean I will ever forget. You took away my parents, a chance of a happy childhood. I will never forget, but I understand why you did it. I can understand it now because I know you. You were insane, completely crackers, deranged, barking mad, round the bend, off your trolley--"

Tom presses a finger against Harry's lips. "Yes, I see where you are going with this."

Taking Tom's hand, Harry brings it to his cheek. "The point I was trying to make is that I wouldn't have married a raving maniac. You are the same but you're also not the same. Voldemort was an unhinged egomaniac; he killed and tortured for pleasure, but I didn't marry Voldemort. I married you, I fell in love with you. Tom Riddle, the brilliant and sane Dark Lord, not this creepy Voldemort bloke who took away my mum and dad."

"You are far too forgiving. Absurdly so," Tom whispers, his tone slightly chastising; like a scolding parent. "I'm still the same, Harry."

"You were Voldemort, but then I beat your arse. Voldemort died that night and you were reborn as Tom Riddle once more. You got a new body, an exceptionally nice one I might add, and you mended your soul. You killed my parents, I killed Voldemort and that's that. Now we're just Harry and Tom, like some regular boring couple."

Pulling the teen into his lap, Tom replies, "Thank you."

"No problem." Harry plants a light kiss on Tom's lips. "Now what are we going to do about the Ministry?"

"Nothing," is Tom's resolute answer. "This has set us back and the takeover has to wait until I figure out how to deal with Order members dressing up as Death Eaters and blowing up Diagon Alley."

"Bill did say that the masks were wrong. Only idiots will think that it was a Death Eater raid," Harry says and frowns. "Though most can be considered idiots these days; they read the Prophet."

Tom muses. "We can use that to our advantage."

"Skeeter can write a nice article about it." Harry agrees, playing with Tom's collar. "Bill told me that the joke shop was destroyed. I can't imagine how they must feel, knowing that the Order was behind it. I helped them set it up and I've been investing in their business ever since. I'll help them again, but first I'd like to let them loose on the Order."

"You will have a chance to make them all pay."
"They've racked up a rather long tab." Harry grins.

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Bill still feels a bit uneasy in Narcissa's presence as the witch applies a salve on his arm, but who can blame the bloke. The burnt skin tingles and starts itching but Bill isn't about to complain in the presence of both Narcissa Malfoy and Severus Snape. The latter currently brooding in the background and glaring pointy daggers at the redhead. To Bill, it feels as if he has been sitting in the brewing room for hours. It is torture.

Sirius had left at some point, but he's back now with an update. He smirks when Narcissa starts bandaging the wounds on his friend's arm and Bill's expression turns cagey. It causes Sirius to snort and Bill's eyes immediately burn into him. Severus stalks out, not wanting to be near Black, and slams the door on his way out.

"The twins are here, probably trying to get initiated as Death Eaters so they could go after the Order. Fred said that Tonks came by their shop yesterday, told them to start being useful to the Order and help them get Harry back. They blew her off, so I guess she decided to blow them up."

Bill has always considered Tonks as a friend; he has never considered the possibility of her turning out like Mad-Eye. He curses. "Fucking bitch."

Narcissa tightens the dressing and scolds, "There is no need for such foul language, Mister Weasley."

If possible, Bill shrinks back even more and mutters, "Sorry."

"Harry wants to talk to you about what happened," Sirius tells the redhead and adds with a grin that does not ease Bill's mind. "And Tommy wants to grill you about it too."

Narcissa finishes and states with a smile, "All done, Mister Weasley."

Bill hesitates for a moment before saying, "I appreciate it, thanks."

"All right, I am to escort you upstairs to the Dark Lord," Sirius pipes in as Bill gets up and stands still for a few seconds as the spinning stops.

The two trek up the stairs and Bill finds himself in the spacious entrance hall from before. The Dark Lord's evil head office looks nothing like the place he had imagined. Instead of a blood-covered floor and skeletons hanging on the walls, he sees a very nice house where nothing is made of human flesh and bones but dark wood and marble.

Sirius knows that Bill is having some sort of silent crisis and claps him on the shoulder. "Forget what Mad-Eye told you and forget about Dumbledore's propaganda about what the Dark is like. It will be a lot easier if you keep an open mind. We're not a bunch of evil twats. Well, a few of them are."

Bill nods but doesn't find anything to say; he is still taking in everything that has taken place in just the span of a few hours. He doesn't see any masked wizards and witches walking about and the thought itself seems absolutely ridiculous. Sirius snaps his fingers, successfully bringing Bill back to the present and points at the large double doors. "That's where we are headed."
Another dumb nod later, Bill finds himself standing just a few steps away from the huge doors. He wants to raise his hand to knock, but Sirius is faster and just pushes the doors wide open, waltzing in as if he owns the place. For a moment, Bill wonders how in the hell is Sirius still alive. He remains in the doorway, not moving forward but not entirely in the mindset to bolt from the manor either.

"Stop cluttering the entrance, Red."

Bill whips his head around and comes face to face with a wizard. He is as tall as Bill but wider in the shoulders and with tousled dark hair.

"Rab, don't be a pillock."

*Rab? So this is the infamous Rabastan Lestrange.* That is Bill's first thought. The second is to stop acting like a fucking nitwit and move out of the way.

"Looks like a Weasley," the wizard gives a gruff retort, his tone sharp and somewhat unpleasant as if he is remembering something distasteful. He pushes past Bill and doesn't give him a second glance. At first, Bill doesn't see anyone in the lavish sitting room aside from Sirius and Lestrange, but then Harry comes in from an adjoining room, wearing a fitted robe that only kings can afford. He fixes his gloves on and picks up a wand from the desk that is easily the biggest desk Bill has ever seen in his life.

"How's your arm?" Harry asks, jolting Bill from his odd musings.

Harry's face looks so earnest and open that Bill can't help but to feel warm. He walks inside and gives his arm a look, saying, "Snape and Mrs Malfoy fixed me up."

"You planning on going somewhere?" Sirius asks the young wizard, his tone curious but dubious.

"Not planning anymore, actually going," says Harry with a slightly amused smile. "Relax, Siri -- I will be wearing a glamour. And Rabastan is coming along as protection."

Lestrange snorts to himself. "More like a glorified babysitter."

"I heard that," Harry hums, but doesn't sound cross. "Fred and George left to check on the shop or what's left of it anyway. I'll be meeting them later." He gives Bill a sheepish smile and says, "I still want to talk to you, but it has to wait until I get back. Tom is going to have a chat with you, but I warned him about torturing you, so you should be fairly safe."

Bill does not feel safe and it shows because Lestrange drawls with shameless amusement. "Now you made him skittish. Ready to run for the hills."

"Sirius will look after you," Harry pointedly states, "Won't you, Siri?"

"Actually I was thinking of getting breakfast." Sirius grins.

Rabastan takes Harry's arm and says, "Better not lose sight of him, never know who might be lurking around." He shoots Bill a predatory smirk that speaks of pain and mocking, and then he and Harry are gone, having Disapparated with a whip-like crack.

"I take it he doesn't like me?" Bill raises a brow.

"Rab doesn't really like anyone. It's a character flaw of his, being a bastard." Sirius tells the redhead, "Come on, I need a decent meal and coffee. The Dark Lord will see you when he feels like it."
Bill's arm is throbbing with pain when he follows the Animagus into the dining room that looks bigger than Bill's first flat. An elf serves them a late breakfast but Bill can only stomach pumpkin juice and doesn't touch the various foods the house-elf has brought.

He doesn't feel like talking either but asks out of curiosity, "Have you heard anything from Remus?"

Sirius' good mood vanishes and he sags back in his seat. He doesn't say anything for a while and Bill almost gives up on the subject but then Sirius says, "I haven't seen him since Dumbledore's funeral and even then he only showed up from time to time, whenever he needed Wolfsbane or when Dumbledore sent for him. Always the devoted disciple, blind to everything that didn't come out of the old man's mouth. Remus always feared that the creature would one day take over, but he let fear take over. He's a coward, not because he chose to flee, but because he chose to be as spineless as Pettigrew."

"Did he know about you being Dark?"

"I don't think he knew about my loyalties but he certainly suspected. Being a Black means a Dark heritage and even though I was a Gryffindor and James was my best mate, I still felt a pull towards the Dark Arts and I didn't want to be Light. Being a Black and a Dark Lord's follower didn't stop me from being all those other things, but Remus couldn't see past the Dark creature in him. He clung to Dumbledore and never let go."

"It's not for us to judge him," Bill remarks.

Sirius agrees but prompts, "Everyone deals with it differently and not everyone is like Greyback, fully embracing the animal within. I'm not judging him for his decisions, but I do judge him for turning his back on me. He was my friend, at least that's how I felt about him." There is bitter laughter in his voice when he speaks again, "He didn't believe me; he didn't outright accuse me of betraying the Potters, but he didn't have to say it out loud for me to know that he thought about it. He was so scared of being outed as a werewolf that he distanced himself and disappeared, never even caring that I was being sent to Azkaban, never caring what happened to little Harry. When I escaped and he found out about Pettigrew faking his death, all the evidence was pointing at Peter, but there was still doubt in his mind. He was still distrustful of me. Not that I blame him, but he knew that James and Lily had meant the world to me, yet he still viewed my involvement with uncertainty."

"It ruined your friendship," Bill understands and doesn't blame the wizard one bit. "To be honest, I don't think any of them believed your innocence. Why didn't anyone question it when you were sent to Azkaban?"

"No one knew I wasn't the Secret Keeper; it was a change we did without telling Dumbledore and at the time, Remus didn't know either. James wanted me to be the Secret Keeper, but I knew that the Dark Lord would ask me about James and Lily sooner or later because back then he wasn't all that sensible and he was trying to figure out the prophecy. So I declined, not giving James the whole truth and then Peter was chosen because he was a pathetic twit that no one would have suspected and at the time, I didn't know that Peter had been recruited by the Dark Lord. In the end, it was an oversight that got James and Lily killed; it was my fault because I didn't tell James the truth about my loyalty to the Dark. I shouldn't have allowed it to spiral out of control like that, but by the time I realised that the Dark Lord was going after Harry, I couldn't do anything about it. For Dumbledore, having me in Azkaban was the best possible outcome because that way he had power over Harry."

The redhead does not argue, knowing that Dumbledore had been devious and completely wrapped up in his 'Greater Good' rubbish, and Black's accusations seem sound to him. Yet it still feels surreal to Bill that Sirius had been loyal even during the First War. "Why did Pettigrew set you up?"
"I didn't know about him and he didn't know about me. He pinned his supposed death on me because he was jealous and bitter and he hated me because I was everything he wasn't and to him, it seemed as if I had it all."

"It's still hard for me to believe that you're loyal to the Dark Lord," Bill confesses. He is curious and questions, "Why did you join the Order if you weren't interested in helping Dumbledore?"

"I had to keep up the pretence and joining the Order was an ideal way to prove myself to Dumbledore. Besides, James wanted me to join. I was never made into a spy like Snape; the Dark Lord did order me to keep an eye on Order members, but it was before the prophecy was made. It was a dangerous time for everyone; people were kidnapped and killed, their homes raided and the Order was suspicious of everyone. Had I not joined, Dumbledore would have questioned my choice."

"Would you have betrayed the Potters had Voldemort ordered you to?"

The answer comes quickly and without hesitation. "No, I would have died for them. Despite my loyalty and Dark nature, James was my best friend and I loved Lily like a sister. They made me Harry's godfather and appointed me as his guardian should something happen to them. I never betrayed their trust; I might have left things out, but I didn't help the Dark Lord and I certainly didn't help Pettigrew."

"Who exactly killed Dumbledore? Because when I asked about it, Mum wouldn't stop crying and Moody ranted about traitors. Was it really Snape?"

"The greasy git cast the Killing Curse, but it's actually a funny story. Turns out that Dumbledore was dying, some curse he managed to pick up for being too meddlesome, and he was going to die anyway," says Sirius and takes a bite out of his sandwich. Bill's eyes widen and Sirius goes on, "Snape was thought to be a spy for the Light and Dumbledore made him swear an oath -- one that made sure that when the time arrived, Snape would be the one to kill him, thus cementing his position with the Dark Lord. Only the old man hadn't counted on Snape being true to the Dark Lord. Dumbledore hadn't mentioned his secret pact with Snape to the Order and he was written off as a traitor."

Bill knows the basics, but he is still surprised to hear the real story behind what the Order knew and believed. "So...he would have died anyway? I don't really care, truth be told, Dumbledore lost all credibility when he didn't do anything to save my sister. He should have sent all the students home when a student was petrified, but he didn't take it seriously and he allowed it to go as far as it did. Ginny's death made me think, but the twins and I were the only ones. Mum and Dad said that Dumbledore was blameless and he did everything he could. That's a load of bull because Dumbledore dismissed the incidents."

"Snape did say that the School Governors wanted to roast Dumbledore, preferably on an open flame."

"Dumbledore claimed that the Governors were threatened into it by Malfoy"

Sirius shakes his head. "All the Governors had children attending Hogwarts, no one had to threaten them into anything. Narcissa wanted to bring Draco home as soon as the news of students getting petrified started circulating and she wasn't the only one."

"A bit hypocritical considering who enabled Voldemort to open the Chamber through Ginny," Bill grumbles, piercing Sirius with a look.
"Don't glower at me. It was a stupid move, I agree wholeheartedly." Sirius looks almost understanding. He finishes his coffee and states, "He realised his mistake and tried to get the diary back, but that wasn't as easy as he thought. Besides, he didn't even know what the diary was until Filch's stupid cat got petrified. Lucius just wanted to get Arthur in trouble by slipping a dark object into his girl's things."

"Doesn't make it okay and I won't pretend that it didn't happen."

Sirius sighed and didn't press further. He has no illusions when it comes to the prospect of Bill ever getting along with Lucius. Considering the matter dropped, Sirius throws his napkin on the table and stand. In the parlour, he spots something far more interesting that Bill and worrying about a strapping Weasley is the last thing on his mind.

Lucius is descending the main staircase, carrying a stack of brown folders. Sirius knows that Tom had sent the blond to the Ministry and the frown marring his beautiful face is enough to tell Sirius that it had been a very bothersome meeting.

As Lucius reaches the bottom of the stairs, Sirius approaches. He smirks when Lucius notices him and the frown disappears. Instead of asking something sappy, Sirius inquires, "Did you find anything out from Scrimgeour?"

"He had already planned a trip to Belize, so he's understandably upset because he won't be going," says the blond. "The damage done was not extensive but a few shops located on the main street need to be rebuilt from scratch."

Sirius nods. "The Weasley joke shop was destroyed almost entirely. I think they wanted to grab the twins and torture some information out of them."

"The Ministry will reconstruct the parts of Diagon Alley that received most of the damage and the good Minister has already made a statement regarding what will be done to get the business up and running again," Lucius tells the Animagus and taps his finger against the stack of folders. "I had Thicknesse write up a list of Aurors that are also members of the Order, and it's a surprisingly long list. He was extremely forthcoming after my visit."

"Are we going to start making house calls now?"

"I think not," Lucius hums. "Scrimgeour made a statement regarding the Order's violent methods of recruiting. It seems quite a few Aurors were coerced into joining because they believed they would lose their jobs if they refused. Some were under the Imperius. Thicknesse was supplying the Order with information and Aurors. The Dark Lord wants the Minister to destroy confidence in the Order of Light by making it known that the attacks were not the work of Death Eaters. I have to meet with Scrimgeour and pass on the request."

"I take it the Ministry will still stand a few more days?"

"I think it will better for us in the long run," Lucius comments with a slight smirk. "Scrimgeour is doing a decent job as Minister and he's rather popular, mostly due to his determination to fight corruption and Fudge left plenty of that behind when he was forced to resign. It will make the transition smoother for us."

The answer satisfies the dark-haired wizard. Sirius reaches for the paperwork and tugs it out of the blond's hand, dropping it on the small table conveniently placed to his right. The grin on his face is nothing short of mischievous when he slithers his arm around Lucius and walks them back until the wizard is pressed against the wall.
He asks with a grin, "Did you miss me?"

"I miss cursing you."

Sirius chuckles because the sneer is half-hearted at best and it is cute how the wizard tries to act all haughty and unaffected as Sirius pushes his body against the blond's. "You still curse me, painfully I should add, but I forgive you." Sirius places a kiss on the man's lips and mentally cheers when Lucius doesn't push him away and opens up instead. Sirius doesn't wait before deepening the kiss and lets his hand travel down the wizard's waist to his backside.

"Buggering hell!" the strangled cry belongs to Bill. The man, having decided to see where Sirius had gone, ends up walking in on a snogging session he definitely doesn't want to witness. He turns his back and growls out, "Fucking warn a bloke."

Sirius is annoyed that Bill has interrupted them, but also feels a bit guilty for getting side-tracked. The redhead looks as uncomfortable as Lucius feels; the Animagus can practically sense it.

"Weasley," is the only thing Lucius says to Bill when the redhead dares to look again.

Bill doesn't say anything, just offers a tight nod as he stands there with his arms crossed, waiting for Sirius to step away from Malfoy which he doesn't do. Instead, he asks the blond wizard, "Is Tommy busy?"

Lucius gives Sirius a little shove to make him take a step back. He absolutely hates Weasley's prying eyes on him. Grabbing the folders, he pats down his robes to maintain some decorum. "The Dark Lord is in his study. Please knock before barging in."

"Worried that I'll get my head blasted off?" the Animagus smirks.

"You don't have a lot of other positive qualities," Lucius offers in a wry tone, completely serious as he speaks. "We wouldn't want to risk it, now would we?"

The dark-haired wizard snorts, "Admit it. You're worried about me."

"The only thing I'm concerned about is your mental health, as well as my own," Lucius tells the Animagus and leaves the parlour with his papers and parchments.

Sirius laughs and goes to Bill, ignoring the wizard's grimace. "What can I say? The wizard loves me."

"I thought he didn't love you."

"We worked things out," Sirius announces happily and smiles like a kid. "Now let's get you an audience with the Dark Lord."
The cottage belonging to Remus Lupin looks outwardly deserted but a faint light glows inside. The wizard is sitting by a small fireplace, a woollen blanket over his shoulders. He looks weary and unshaven, a set of new scars on his face. The last full moon had been rough and without the Wolfsbane, Remus feels as if he is going mad; one step away from becoming feral. He doesn't have the nerve to leave the shabby-looking cabin in order to buy some from Knockturn Alley. He knows that the woods surrounding the house are not safe; he has seen other wolves and even as the scars to prove it. He feels more alone than ever before. The wolf keeps scratching at his mind, raking its claws down his skin from the inside. Moony is restless, even more so than the man. Wolves are loyal; they are pack animals and Remus had walked away from it. The wolf inside resents him for it.

Remus jumps when heavy knocks to the door echo in the otherwise silent cabin. No one knows where he is hiding and he grabs his wand, ready to attack. But a rough and familiar voice calls out, sounding impatient, "Lupin, open up!"

Mad-Eye Moody barges in as soon as Remus unlocks the door. Mad-Eye comments as he sees Lupin, "You look like shite."

"Nice of you to notice," Remus says and closes the door. "I don't remember asking you to visit?"

Moody gives the room a quick inspection and sits down on the old leather sofa in the middle of the room. "This is a proper hideout you have here. Took me a while to find you."

"I didn't want to be found," Remus retorts and goes straight to the point. "Why are you here?"

"We're losing this war," the former Auror groused with a rough tone. "Black tossed us out and banned the Order from entering Grimmauld Place and that blasted Potter boy is still missing. You-Know-Who has been silent but that only means that he's planning something big. Our spies in the Ministry haven't reported anything suspicious, but Scrimgeour has been seen with Lucius Malfoy, having meetings behind closed doors. We all know who Malfoy is loyal to."

Remus holds up his hand and asks, "Hold on. Sirius banned you from Grimmauld Place? And what do you mean Harry is missing?"

"Black threw us out and left the Order. Losing him wasn't much of a tragedy, he hasn't been helpful for a while, but losing our headquarters forced us out in the open and finding a new place hasn't been a walk in the park either. Potter didn't spend the summer with the Dursley family and he has yet to show up for his last school year. We don't know where he is. In all probability, the boy is hiding out with that two-timing mutt, but we can't go near Grimmauld Place without the wards going off."

Remus really feels like laughing. It doesn't come as a surprise, and having known Sirius for years, Remus knows that the wizard is nowhere near as Light as everyone likes to think. But Harry's disappearance does come as a surprise. "Why didn't you have someone checking up on Harry?"

"Because the blood wards were still in place when he was supposed to go back there," Moody explains gruffly. "The boy agreed that staying there would be safer. Black agreed as well. After the
funeral, the boy was sent to the Dursleys. We were supposed to pick him up on his birthday -- only he never arrived there."

"Of course he never arrived there since he never planned to go there in the first place," Remus tells the other wizard with a raised brow. "They tricked you and you fell for it."

"We hadn't counted on Black being pardoned." Moody defends himself.

That makes Remus' eyes go wide. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said," Moody spits out, his own anger rising. "The Minister exonerated him. It seems that Peter Pettigrew had a change of heart and he turned himself in or some rot like that. All charges against Black were dropped and the fool even got an apology out of the Minister. He's a free man, even attended Albus' funeral. You should read the *Prophet* more often. Or maybe show up every once in a while."

"When did this happen?"

"Around the time Scrimgeour chased Fudge from the office," Moody huffs, "but it happened on Potter's sixteenth birthday. A rather strange coincidence if you ask me."

Remus asks, "You think the Minister was acting on someone's orders?"

"Rufus can't be swayed; I have known him for years and he hates Dark filth as much as I do. But I don't like what I've heard about his dealings with Malfoy. Rufus wouldn't betray the Light, but he might be threatened into helping You-Know-Who by that serpent."

"The Imperius Curse is hard to fight, especially if a wizard as powerful as Lucius Malfoy is the one who casts it."

The hardened ex-Auror makes a grunting noise. "Rufus is no weakling; a tough Auror like him would be able to overpower Malfoy. Fudge was an old fool, falling prey to Malfoy's deceitful charms and deviant magic, but Rufus Scrimgeour is a fine man; a respectable wizard who would never allow himself to be seduced by that immoral sprite."

Remus decides not to argue; mostly because he doesn't know Scrimgeour as well as Moody and because he doesn't want to point out the man's clear distaste and strong views. Lupin asks, crossing his arms, "What do you want from me then?"

Moody stares as if he can't tell if the wizard is joking or not. "For you to do your part of course. The Order needs every witch and wizard to support the Order; otherwise, we won't be able to put an end to You-Know-Who's tyranny."

"You mean you lost Harry and need him back, but I don't know why you came here. Sirius doesn't trust me and I haven't seen Harry in a while. They won't hear me out, Moody."

"We need someone to infiltrate the Greyback pack. Those dirty beasts are uniting with You-Know-Who and we need to put a spy in the middle of them. We have no information; we're completely blind."

Remus lets out a bitter laugh. "I'm one of those dirty beasts or have you forgotten about my little problem?" Moody's face doesn't show any shame, only eagerness to have someone spy. It infuriates Remus to no end. "My answer is no. Find another way because I won't be joining Greyback's pack."

Jumping up from the sofa, Mad-Eye growls, his wand suddenly in his hand. "You can't turn your
back on us! Now is not the time to fall apart, Lupin."

"You all turned your backs on me or don't you remember? Even before Albus died, you kept me out of all the important missions and practically excluded me altogether. And now you're standing here and telling me to do my part? You think being a werewolf is the same as being a senseless monster; I know how you and Shacklebolt feel about creatures."

Moody rumbles with a sneer. "You seem to forget that it was you who ran, Remus."

"I think it's time for you to leave," Remus orders and walks to open the door. Holding it open for the unwanted visitor, he tells the older man, "Find someone else to do your dirty work, Alastor. Greyback knows who I am; he would scent me out the moment I step foot on his lands and that would make for a very short career as a spy."

Moody wants to say more but clamps his mouth shut and grunts to himself. The thump-thump-thump of his wooden staff is the only sound in the small cottage as he hobbles the length of the room and steps outside. Remus is about to slam the door in his face when Moody holds out his hand and catches the door. An ugly sneer on his face, the wizard warns, "We will win this war, one way or another, and when we do, your weakness will be remembered. The Order is prepared to do whatever it takes to put an end to the Dark's oppression. Whatever it takes!"

"You-Know-Who's Death Eaters stopped their raids months ago."

"Evil doesn't sleep," Moody replies with an almost fanatical smile. "The Order will fight."

"You go on and do just that," Remus suggest and slams the door in Moody's face. From the little window, he sees Alastor whiz past it. The man disappears into the distance. Remus knows that he has to move again. Moody won't be the last Order member knocking on his door.

For a fleeting moment, Remus thinks about contacting Sirius but he quickly dismisses the absurd idea. They have not been friendly for a while, even before Dumbledore's death -- and a tiny part of him knows that he hasn't trusted Sirius for many, many years. He can still remember James and Lily, hearing about their deaths and then Pettigrew's murder, both the alleged work of Sirius Black. Yet Pettigrew is alive and had admitted to him that he had betrayed the Potters. Remus knows that Sirius had not killed the Potters.

Why does he still have doubts about Sirius, knowing he had not been the culprit? Why is he still suspecting Sirius of something he can't fully figure out? But does he really want to know?

Remus settles in front of the fireplace. The solitude presses down on him; it's close to crushing him entirely.

*****

Sirius ushers Bill to Tom's study, but not before politely knocking. Pushing the unsuspecting redhead in like a lamb being presented to the hungry wolf, Sirius closes the door behind them.

Tom is busy jotting down notes, his black-feathered quill scratching the parchment. He has a lot on his mind, but he is mostly trying to figure out a good way to seize power without creating a bloodbath. He does not have to look up to know that Sirius Black has entered. "Black, I do not recall asking you to be here."
Sirius shrugs lightly. "Harry told me to keep an eye on him. 'Where he goes, I go' sort of deal."

Bill decides to stand very still; he remains utterly stiff with his fists balled and stark white from all the tension. Is he supposed to say something? The Dark Lord hasn't even lifted his gaze, but he doesn't have to face Bill for the redhead to realise that Voldemort has a young face. Where is the scaly, slimy, monster mug the Order has reported seeing? Does the Order even know what the Dark Lord looks like? Has he always been good-looking rather than repulsive?

Why the fuck are you speculating on his looks!? Bill shakes his head and simply comes to the decision to wait until the wizard actually wants to speak to him.

"William Weasley, the eldest son of Arthur Weasley. A Curse Breaker for Gringotts if my sources are correct," the Dark Lord lists and his gaze lands on Bill. He places the quill aside and laces his fingers under his chin, inspecting the wizard with a cold look. It is downright chilly.

He has eyes; normal human eyes. Bill mentally berates himself for having odd thoughts. Clearing his throat, Bill says, "Actually I'm self-employed at the moment."

"Interested in a job?" Tom asks, cocking his eyebrow in an inquisitive manner that makes it seem as if he is burrowing his way into Bill's mind.

"I'm not in the torturing business."

Sirius snorts privately and wonders if it is a Gryffindor trait to mouth off in the presence of the Dark Lord or a secret Weasley peculiarity. Either way, it is entertaining.

"Then you are doing the wizarding world a favour; I imagine all idealistic Gryffindors suffer from sentimentalism. Caring isn't an advantage, especially when it comes to taking lives. It would be largely ineffective," Tom comments, his gaze unwavering. "Please, have a seat."

Bill slowly edges himself into the chair, the discomfort clear in his eyes. He folds his hands in his lap, eager to have a wand to clutch.

"Forgive me for not offering you a drink, but I simply cannot find a reason to share it with you," Tom remarks, his tone bored. "Let me get straight to the point. You are here because Harry wishes it and I tend to grant him his wishes, however ridiculous. Seeing as you are injured, I will offer you my hospitality and you may stay as long as you feel the need, though I advise to not feel the need at all."

"I don't want to stay here; that is not why I came here."

"Then why did you?" Tom raises a brow.

"Because the Order blew up the shop belonging to my brothers and almost killed us by flattening it while we were trying to salvage as much as possible. They need protection because the Order wants to capture them and get as much information out of them as possible. I'm also here because I wanted to ask Harry if he might help me find a safe place for them to stay."

Tom huffs out a disbelieving laugh. However, he allows the redhead to continue, "I don't want anything from Harry; he's not duty-bound to help us, but I think I'm not asking for the impossible. I just want to find a safe hiding place for Fred and George until it all blows over."

"You are right about one thing," the Dark Lord states, his tone abrasive. "Harry isn't obligated."

"But he will do so anyway; whatever anyone says or thinks about it," Sirius points out. "You know
Harry and he's a bleeding heart, always putting others before himself and he'll want to help."

"Black, your silence would be appreciated."

Sirius offers a mocking bow, "Whatever my Lord wishes."

"If Harry decides to help, it is no concern of mine. I trust his judgement, at least in most cases," the Dark Lord intones and goes on, "I do not much care for Weasleys but your brothers are rather unique; somewhere between Light and Dark, not entirely one or the other. It's a refreshing sight."

"I haven't been around for some time and I don't know what the Order has planned, but I do know they won't just give up."

Tom wordlessly agrees and says, "Tell me about the attack."

"Not much to tell," Bill replies with a wince, recalling the exact moment he had rushed inside a falling building to search for his brothers. "Three or four of them were on brooms, sending curses all over the place. The Alley was mostly empty; a number of shops were already open for business; but for the most part, the shops were still closed. Fred and George were about to open up when we heard loud bangs, like explosions, coming from the south end. I ran out and saw one of the shops on fire; people were running around and that's when two cloaked figured flew past me on brooms. A moment later, Fred is pushing George down as the joke shop is attacked. They blasted it apart and the twins were caught under the rubble. I was knocked on the ground and I heard a female voice tell Sturgis Podmore to grab my brothers because they might know where Potter is. After a few more blasts, I ran to get my brothers, but Fred had already knocked Podmore out cold and then someone grabbed Podmore by the arm and Disapparated. It was all over in less than ten minutes."

Tom listens in silence, mulling over the information.

"I heard people talking and the general opinion is that it wasn't the work of Death Eaters. A least the shopkeepers who saw them didn't think they looked anything like Death Eaters. Too sloppy and clumsy, they said. And since there hasn't been a raid in months, no one really believes that it was one of yours."

Sirius snorts. "They are exceptionally stupid. What were they hoping to gain with this?"

"Tonks knows how much Fred and George care about Harry; he's like a little brother to them and they respect Harry a lot. Maybe she thought that kidnapping them would flush Harry out," Bill suggests with a frown. He still can't believe that Tonks is such a horrid woman. She'll pay for hurting my little brothers, Bill thinks.

Sirius adds. "Or she was planning on torturing them until they exposed Harry's location to her?"

Bill seems unconvinced. "She's a fucking bitch but I don't think she has it in her to torture anyone. Now Mad-Eye on the other hand, that I can believe. Moody is willing to do anything if that means winning this war, but what he doesn't understand is that they've already lost the war. He doesn't know when to quit."

As Bill finishes his thought, the door gets unceremoniously pushed open and Harry walks in. He has changed into his usual attire; atrocious Muggle clothes as Tom likes to put it. At least everything is the right size. Thank Merlin for small miracles. The young wizard looks delicious in a pair of faded blue jeans and a purple polo shirt.

Harry rounds the desk and tips forward to give Tom a kiss. It isn't an innocent peck on the cheek either, but rather a prelude to a proper snog.
Sirius mutters to Bill, "They're always doing it in front of me. Disgusting, isn't it?"

"Do you expect me to care, Black?" Tom sneers, pulling Harry against his side. "I'm almost certain you know how to use the door. Or should I have a dog flap installed just for you?"

Bill attempts to stand. "I better get going; stuff to do, brothers to console."

"Don't worry about Fred and George." Harry smiles. "My cheering-up technique works wonders. They're both pleasantly buzzed."

Tom's sharp gaze narrows and Bill knows that it is the perfect time to head towards the door. Sirius holds back an amused snort. Harry looks annoyingly sunny, ignoring the dark scowl on his husband's face. He waves goodbye to Bill. "I'll see you next week, Bill. I'll send Siri to fetch you should something come up."

"See you around, Harry."

As the door closes behind the redhead and the muttering Animagus, Harry encircles the Dark Lord. Perched on the edge of the desk, Harry's serene smile hides a wide grin that wants to break free. A jealous Dark Lord is an adorable sight; all menacing and brooding like a rain cloud.

Self-control is something Tom takes pride in; he has plenty of restraint and a perfectly crafted mask to hide behind should he ever feel less than in control, but Harry takes all those little rules and twists them. He doesn't nudge or gently prod Tom towards the limit -- oh no, nothing like that -- Harry shoves him like a brute. Jealously is something weak-willed commoners feel. And yet...

"Perhaps we should discuss that technique of yours."

Harry's face is a picture of innocence. "Oh, do tell?"

"Just how buzzed did you leave those Weasley heathens?"

"Moderately," Harry states, trying to sound serious and not burst into giggles. "Big smiles on their faces, a slightly hazy look in their eyes, limp in both body and mind."

Tom drawls, his voice like a blade, "Their heads mounted on the wall would put a big smile on my face."

"Why ever would you do that, my dear?" Harry asks and smiles. "I think they'd be a great addition, not to mention well-liked. Everyone likes Fred and George. Implement a little anarchy into your life, Tom. The scowl does not go away; if anything, Harry is sure that it is getting darker before his eyes. "I took them on a little outing. Losing the shop affects me as well, you know. I'm an investor and it affects me but that's not as important as helping my family. The shop was their source of revenue and without it, they'll go insane. They can't go without pranking or thinking up new pranks."

"And how exactly did you cheer them up?"

"A big bag of Galleons. Idiots didn't want to take it at first, but I made them feel like shite by acting all hurt and teary-eyed," Harry explains and grins. "But your jealousy is cute, dearest husband."

Tom huffs. "One of these days, I will tie you to the bed and keep you there until you learn not to annoy me."

"I thought I was annoyingly lovable?"
"There is no such thing, Harry. Now be a good husband and leave me in peace. I'll get nothing done should you stay. Your presence is inviting and I don't have time for distractions."

Harry says, looking devious, "I think I haven't annoyed Snape today, so I'll go hunt him down and force my ignorance on him until I can make his head explode."

"Do not permanently damage my best servant."

"I'm going to tell Lucius you said that."

Tom sags into his seat and glares at the teen. "They have a different set of skills. Severus is the best spy, while Lucius is the best manipulator. Equally vicious if I'm honest, but again, a different set of skills for me to put to good use. I have a use for them both."

"You should tell them that you have no favourites. Maybe they'll stop bickering over it like children fighting over daddy's affections."

Harry smiles when Tom takes his hand and brings it to his lips, placing a kiss there. "My affections are wholly yours."

*****

Severus is studying an old and rare tome, trying to figure out the last step in making a new potion he is experimenting with. It is proving to be harder than he had initially believed. He has been working on it for hours and it is already late in the evening. It is perfectly normal for him to spend many of his days and nights in Malfoy Manor. He even has personal rooms in the mansion.

His quiet time is interrupted when the brewing room's heavy door creaks and alerts him of a visitor. Narcissa glances inside, a small smile on her lips. "Have I caught you at a bad time?"

Severus closes the book, but not before bookmarking the page, and turns to face Narcissa. The witch is smiling that secret smile again, the one she always uses when she wants something. Narcissa casually walks around the table, her slim fingers skimming over the glass jars and bottles filled with potion ingredients. Her face betrays nothing; her oblique smirk is the only hint that she wants something. "How many years have we known each other, dear Severus?"

"A sufficient amount of years," the wizard answers cryptically.

The witch hums, the answer satisfying her for the time being. She gazes around the dimly lit room and feels a chill, knowing that it is most likely the coldest room in Malfoy Manor.

No liking the odd silence, Snape clears his throat and speaks, "Do you have a particular question in mind, a potion perhaps?"

"No, something else entirely." Narcissa does not meet Snape's gaze. Then she turns and her expression seems solemn. She looks ready to speak. "I've given thought to something, mulled over it for an ample amount of time, and I believe I have reached a decision. One that affects you as well. Therefore, I ask that you accompany me."

"If your intention was to confuse me, you've succeeded."
Narcissa only offers a quirk of her lips before moving towards the door, holding it open for Severus to follow. Curious, the wizard falls in step with the woman and prepares himself for whatever he is about to be dragged into.

They walk towards the blue sitting room, and without knocking or wondering why exactly the double doors are closed, Narcissa glides in. She certainly doesn't look troubled to find her cousin sitting there with Lucius straddling him, on his way to an improper state of undress. The witch doesn't mind the scene. Severus, however, is disturbed. Thoroughly so.

Narcissa clears her throat. "Lucius, there is a matter I wish to discuss."

"And you couldn't have waited for a better time?" Sirius snaps, missing the sinful mouth already. He is annoyed that the delicious wizard on top of him is getting up and leaving him wanting. "We're sort of busy at the moment."

Severus sneers. "Go fetch a stick, mutt!"

Lucius, unaffected by his lack of clothes, gathers his robe and slides it over his shoulders in a slow movement, making Severus turn away because he does not want to see his best friend in any state of nakedness, let alone see the reddened marks on his neck. The fact that he is -- thankfully -- not completely uncovered does not lessen the awkwardness. Severus is perfectly aware of his friend's fair and flawless exquisiteness, and he is also very much aware of his own unsightliness.

Sirius smirks and barks out an irritating laugh. He whispers to Lucius. "Look at Snivellus, he wishes I could die."

"Sirius, be quiet," Narcissa snaps, although rather sweetly. "As I was saying, I wish to discuss something, and while I realise now might not be the best of times, it is relevant."

"Sorry, not following," Sirius says. He adds with a grin. "Not enough blood in my brain."

Lucius whips his head towards the Animagus and pins the wizard with a narrowed glare, telling him to rethink his sense of humour for the moment. As Sirius rolls his eyes, remaining silent, Lucius turns back to the witch. "This discussion couldn't possibly wait until morning?"

"I think it is time for me to start thinking about what I want and need. We've done our duty, Draco is a well-mannered young man and no longer needs his parents to stay in a charade of a marriage. What I want is rather simple -- Lucius, I want a divorce."

Severus stares in stunned silence. Sirius sits upright and curiously eyes his cousin and then Lucius.

Lucius, the least bothered member of the group, dismissively sighs. "You could have told me all this in the morning, Cissy. I'll have the papers drawn up first thing tomorrow."

"Just like that?" Sirius asks. "Does this mean I can take you out on a real date now without causing a scandal?"

Narcissa smiles. "I only ask for my dowry and a chance to live in the Manor as long as I please. And perhaps the townhouse in London; I do love the view."

Lucius has no objections and says, "Of course, whatever you want."

"It will certainly cause an outrage once the Prophet gets a whiff of the divorce. The scandal could--" Snape huffs like a petulant child but doesn't finish his thought.
Sirius stares at the man, after seeing a flash of hurt on Narcissa's face. "What's your problem? You finally get the girl and isn't that a novel experience for you, Snivelly."

"Lucius! Put his muzzle on already." Snape sneers with venom.

"I thought you would be overjoyed," the blond points out and receives a death glare for his troubles. "Perhaps this is a matter best discussed in private." He stands and says, "Come along now, Siri."

Getting dragged out of the room, Sirius puff's out, "It was just getting good!"

Alone with the witch, Severus dares to look at the witch. Narcissa is silently staring at the wall and her jaw seems stubbornly clenched. "Was I foolish to think that you would be pleased?"

"I am not displeased."

"You were the one who didn't want an affair as long as I was married to Lucius. You were the one who said we had to hide our relationship -- and now that I have asked for a divorce, you stand there as if you care more about the gossip it would undoubtedly cause than the simple fact that we no longer have to watch each other from afar like a pair of forlorn teenagers."

"And you could not have warned me before blurting it out in front of your idiotic cousin?"

Narcissa bristles, her voice rising, "Why should you care about anything Sirius says? I just asked my husband for a divorce and instead of being happy about it, you allow Sirius to rile you up. As always!"

"I was unprepared!" Snape protests.

Harrumphing, Narcissa crosses her arms and shows Severus his irritable side, making it known that it is entirely his fault and his mess to sort out. Snape, not liking confrontations any more than the next sane wizard, considers leaving the witch to her fuming and approach her tomorrow. Then again, Narcissa is rarely angry at him, so he has no real idea what it will be like or how long it will last once the witch gets started. Damn it all to hell!

Taking the first step, Severus braces himself as if going near a pissed off cat. "Cissy... of course, I'm pleased, never doubt that."

"You're a very tight-lipped wizard, Severus. How am I to know what's on your mind or in your heart."

Placing one hand on the witch's waist, Severus sidles closer. "I'm not a particularly sentimental man, Cissy."

"You can be if you commit yourself to it. I am not accusing you of not caring about me, but I had thought that finally saying divorce out loud would garner a somewhat different reaction from of you." Narcissa turns around and lets the man's hands slip around her waist. "I know your limitations and care very little about them."

Snape snorts. "You speak of me as if I'm a cripple or mentally impaired."

"Simply stating that hearts and flowers are not something I should expect from you, and oddly enough I find your sourness endearing, so there is nothing to miss either. You cannot possibly be a poorer husband to me than Lucius."

"You've clearly been spending too much time with that diseased mutt."
"It was a joke in bad taste." Narcissa chuckles, running her hands over Snape's arms and finally locking them behind his neck, pushing herself closer. "Truth be told, I wanted Sirius to be present for this if only to assure him that Lucius truly cares for him. He so readily agreed and I think Sirius only found further proof that the relationship between them is strong."

"How utterly Gryffindor of you." Snape sneers. "Subjecting me to their sordid fondling just so you could encourage the dog."

"One day you have to let go of these ridiculous schoolyard fights."

"Never!" the man vehemently states, but the sneer disappears as Narcissa coaxes a kiss out of him and teases him further by bringing her slim fingers to the front of his robe. She starts toying with the clasps. Her lips are warm against his skin, soft like rose petals. Being near Narcissa is like being near something that is sacred. She radiates an elusive beauty that is not meant to be captured; it is not meant to be touched. It's a beauty one has to admire from a distance. Everything she does entices. Everything she touches turns to gold under her fingertips. That is how Severus feels when the witch brings her delicate hands to his shoulders and slides them to his face. As Narcissa cups his face, her smile is full of devotion and her eyes are filled with simmering emotions that gleam but never burn too brightly. Narcissa is a woman who knows how to restrain herself when all she wishes is to let go and immerse herself. Severus admired her measured affection more than a quick and intense shot of passion. That is how they fit; it is the way they love.

The witch hums, "I believe there is a far better bed waiting for us upstairs than this sofa."

"The thought of past fornicating on said sofa makes me slightly ill."

Narcissa's bell-like laughter echoes in the Manor as she walks out of the room and heads upstairs, knowing that Severus will follow. He will always follow.

*****

Tom rubs his temples, hoping to push away the tendrils of a massive headache in the making. The morning edition of the *Daily Prophet* is laid out before him, the bold headline sticking out and personally offending him. There is nothing wrong with it; it is positively perfect for the Dark Lord's cause but the part towards the end of the article does nothing to soothe his headache. The Minister has taken an unnecessary risk by claiming that they have the Voldemort situation under control. Yes, Tom would like to shed the unsavoury reputation and present himself as a capable and powerful leader, but to say that Voldemort is no longer a major problem -- well, it does offend the Dark Lord somewhat.

"You're glaring at the paper, Tom."

Tom doesn't react in any way; he just keeps staring at the paper. Harry snatches it away and eyes the front page with curiosity. He lets out a laugh. "Dear old Rufus put a nice spin on it. I dare say that it might even shine a good light on the Dark fraction."

"It might also cause the public to distrust Scrimgeour. He spoke too soon. Now everyone will speculate, they will wonder why the Minister dares to make such statements. He dares to say that Lord Voldemort is no longer the bane of the wizarding world -- I'll Crucio him until he can't hold his bladder."
Finishing his pumpkin juice, Harry folds the paper and gets up from his seat. "Have faith, lover."

Pecking his husband’s cheek, Harry disappears. However, the Dark Lord does not get much peace as an elf pops into view and alerts him of visitors. He finds Lucius in the sitting room. He isn't alone and Tom stifles a groan when he spots Black. The grinning fool is standing by the window, a big smile on his face. He doesn't bow; he doesn't even acknowledge the Dark Lord -- as it happens, disrespect is something that never fails to annoy him. Usually with dire consequences.

Seeing the murderous look, Sirius rolls his shoulders to get the kinks out and only graces the wizard with a smirk. Voldemort looks pissed off and a treacherous part of Black's brain is delighted over the prospect.

"Black, what an unpleasant surprise." Tom sneers and turns to Lucius. "What brings you and your paramour of the month here this early in the morning?"

If Lucius takes offence, he doesn't show it. He isn't exactly surprised to learn that their Lord knows about the affair. "Last night, Narcissa approached me with the subject of divorce, and while I find no reason to deny her request, I wished to discuss it with you, my Lord."

"By all means, go ahead with it. We need a good scandal to diffuse the tension of war, it may even benefit us in the end. Or do it quietly and be discreet, though I imagine discretion to be a difficult concept for Black. I do not care as long as it does not harm my plans." Sirius wants to tell the bastard to go to hell and rot there, but he keeps his mouth shut and just looks on with narrowed eyes. That only serves to amuse the Dark Lord further. "I'm tempted to mark you just so I could see you writhing in pain."

"I came to visit my godson," Sirius states, his distaste aimed at Voldemort. He points a finger in the wizard's face and wants to say something harsh, but a sharp look from the blond wizard has him close his mouth. Lucius really does give the best looks. It makes Sirius hard in an instant but there is always that edge of control there as well and that makes an electrifying thrill of run down his spine.

Lucius swiftly cuts into the conversation, "I will let my solicitors know and have them start the proceedings."

Then Harry comes in, fixing his cuff. He watches the three wizards, all of them standing with stiff backs. Sirius looks angry and he is standing very close to Lucius -- a wizard he claims to dislike. Lucius doesn't seem to mind Sirius' hovering presence either.

Sirius clears his throat and steps away from Lucius. "Pup, you ready?"

Harry nods, coming out of his daze.

"Remind me where you are going?" Tom's gaze falls on Harry.

"Having lunch with Fred and George," Harry says with a smile. "Then I'm meeting Draco, Luna and Neville. I'll be home late, so don't wait up. I will not be seen by anyone who shouldn't see me. Lose the intimidating Dark Lord scowl. I have an excellent glamour."

Tom recalls something about a lunch-date but vaguely. He watches Harry leave with Sirius and as the two disappear from sight, he turns back to Lucius. "Harry is unaware of his godfather's dalliances. It is a statement rather than a question. Tom does wonder why his husband doesn't know about the affair. "Will it stay a secret now that you are going through with the divorce?"

Lucius looks indecisive. "We haven't discussed the possibility of a public relationship, but then again, Sirius likes to make a display of everything."
"I find myself surprised, Lucius," Tom muses, walking to the small cupboard to pour himself a glass of water. He smirks. "Sirius Black? Consider me shocked, truly... Perhaps life does work in mysterious ways, or so Harry keeps telling me. When did it begin, if you don't mind me asking?"

Lucius actually does mind, but he can't tell the Dark Lord to stuff it, so he clears his throat and speaks, "After you sent us to retrieve the prophecy, my Lord."

Tom hums and before he lets the blond wizard leave, he states, "I advise Black to inform Harry -- sooner rather than later because Harry's temper can be as volatile as my own. I don't want to see my husband displeased, Lucius. Is that clear?"

"It is not my desire to displease Harry," Lucius replies. It's true, after all. He actually likes the boy a great deal. Maybe life does work in mysterious ways. He adds as an afterthought, "I will discuss it with Sirius."

After Lucius leaves, Tom smirks to himself as he gazes out of the window while sipping his drink. He has a lot on his mind, the most important matter is the Ministry and Hogwarts. He had grown tired of all the games and the Order's tactics, yet he isn't sure if an attack would benefit him or bring about his ruin. It is too soon, but he can't afford to miss the perfect chance.

Knowing that he has some matters to sort through, Tom returns to his work. With Harry away from the manor and unable to distract him, the Dark Lord walks out of the sitting room.

*****

The dungeons under the manor are cold and terribly humid, as are most dungeons that are hidden below the ground. The spiral staircase is illuminated by torches charmed to always glow but never burn. There are three separate cells to the right and three smaller ones to the left; all of them made of rough stone and enchanted metal to bound the magic of whoever is being kept prisoner -- it makes for a terrifying sight. It is all very dark and unclean, a certain stench of decay lingers in the stale air.

Harry has put it out of his mind and he wouldn't have remembered it at all if not for Draco's morbid interest in the two Gryffindors -- but as he descends the stairs, he mentally reprimands himself for forgetting Ron and Hermione. They have been down in the dungeon ever since Harry's wedding -- so a little over two weeks. Harry isn't even sure if they are still alive. His question gets answered when he hears Ron's shouts and sneering. Oh well...someone must have given them food.

"Finally showing your face. Coward!"

Draco, wanting to see Weasley's suffering some more, has tagged along and reaches the bottom of the stairs just as Weasley starts screaming insults. Neville, who doesn't care for gore and torture, had decided to skip the visit and stay in the garden instead. Luna had eagerly followed Draco and comes down last. Immediately, she skips forward, peering into the cell. She laughs as Ron makes a grab at her but is forced back by the magic around the cell.

Hermione is in the other cell; her hair is a rat's nest and there are fading bruises on her face and arms. No one has healed them and it shows in both of their faces. Ron is missing a few teeth and his nose looks fractured, while the girl looks like she has received a customary Bellatrix Lestrange welcome-to-the-dungeons thrashing. Her face is caked with dirt and dried tear tracks and a trickle of dark crimson runs down from her nose to her chin. Some of it is smeared, spotting the girl's sleeve from
her attempt to wipe her face clean. They both look filthy and scruffy.

Draco, having heard enough of Ron's screeching, casts a silencing spell and smirks when the redhead's mouth keeps moving without any sounds coming out. "The sight of Weasley's head exploding would definitely give me pleasant dreams."

"It is a rather ugly shade of red already," Luna hums, inspecting the redhead closely. She notices Harry standing in the back, his green-eyes watching with a detached and lazy gaze. She gestures Harry closer, crooking a finger at him with a smile.

Harry pushes away from the wall and approaches. A slow grin appears on his face as he sees Ron shrinking into himself. He actually hurries to back away into the far corner of the grimy cell. A pair of magical cuffs around his wrist bind him to the cell, draining away his magic. Harry can feel the suppressing sense around the cells but the three of them will stay unaffected as long as they keep away from the metal bars or don't physically step inside the cell.

Hermione, too, watches Harry with fear and she is visibly pressing herself further into the stone as if the wall might swallow her. Harry flicks his wrist and the spell on Ron vanishes. Before Ron can get a word out, Harry steps closer and reaches out his hand just a bit. He rests it palm up before flicking the tips of his fingers towards Ron.

Draco watches with amazement as Harry continues to use wandless magic on the redhead. Even he can't do anything other than a few simple spells but Harry is casting a dark hex with just a few neat waves of his hand. He wants to laugh when Weasley starts clutching his throat and splutters. He has a hard time gasping for breath.

"While a silencing spell is useful, I prefer a more personal touch to make someone shut up. Now that I have your complete attention," says Harry, holding Ron in an almost breathless state. He goes on with an almost sheepish grin, though it is as calculated as the rest of him. "To be honest, I forgot all about you, Ronald, but seeing as I was reminded, I thought that a visit was in order. You don't seem happy to see me."

"Fuck...you!" Ron groans out, scratching at his neck to relieve the pressure there.

"And here I was thinking about letting you go," Harry sighs, his face changing into the picture of perfect aloofness. "I guess you must really like it here. Your stay here can be arranged... indefinitely."

Draco drawls, "Perhaps Granger is more accommodating."

Comfortably settled in Draco's arms, Luna smiles. "She always has something clever to say. I think I like her a bit more now that she's not speaking."

Harry is not done with Ron, but takes Draco's suggestion seriously and moves to stand in front of Granger's cell. However, he still keeps Ron under the curse.

"I haven't tried more than one wandless spell at a time," Harry says, a concentrated look taking over his previously aloof expression. He casts a spell and smirks when Hermione is yanked across the cold stone and the spell forces her to come out of the shadows, dragging her unwilling from to him.

"You have to teach me some of that," Draco smirks, his voice filled with wonder. "That was impressive."

"I do have the best teacher, so I can't complain," Harry points out and turns his attention back on Hermione, momentarily ignoring Ron's choked pants. "Evidence would suggest that you are a fair bit smarter than Ron over there, but I want to know if you can listen. You always seemed to love your
own voice more than anything else."

Silent, Hermione just glares.

"I see Bella didn't manage to teach you any respect. A shame really; she's usually very efficient. Perhaps another session with her will rein in that Gryffindor insolence."

"Have you been taking lessons from Uncle Sev?" Draco asks, raising a brow at Harry's shrug. Luna snickers and gives a flick of her head towards Hermione. She is shaking her head and her lower lip looks like it's going to tremble. With a smirk, the blond wizard guesses, "I don't think she likes Aunt Bella."

"Aunty Bella is the best!" Harry states with a gleam in his eyes that looks worryingly similar to the witch in question. He snorts when Hermione scrambles back and Luna starts laughing, her face buried in Draco's neck as she giggles uncontrollably.

Draco comments, "You'll have the stupid chit die from shock, Harry. Look at her, she's practically ready to soil herself."

"All right," Harry sighs, getting back to business. Forcing Hermione back to where she had been before scurrying away in fear, Harry goes on, "Rudeness doesn't help you one bit, learn from Ron's example."

Hermione, despite everything, nods and her lips thin as she holds her mouth rigid and completely shut. She doesn't want to anger Harry. Ron is still thrashing about, only getting a little air into his lungs, and she doesn't want to experience it in the near future.

"I don't really have a use for you and keeping you here for an indefinite period isn't something I want. Frankly, I want to be rid of you and never think of you again," Harry explains. Checking if Hermione is listening, he pauses before moving on, "You never cared about me. Befriending me was opportune. Being disliked wasn't something you could handle, and I know you can't stomach the idea of being wrong, but you were wrong about me."

Her voice is scratchy from not using it when she spits out, "Dumbledore was right about you."

"Ooh," Harry says excitedly. "sounds scandalous. I do love a good 'Dumbledore knows best' story. Did he tell you I was a troubled young boy or did he tell you to keep an eye on me and report back to him if I did anything dark?"

"He said -- he told us that you were tainted. That You-Know-Who had left a mark on you, a mark of evil. You're just like him, you--"

"Blah, blah, blah," Harry drones with dullness, "Though I have to credit Dumbledore for being right about one thing. Our choices show us who we truly are and we all made a choice. He chose to use me and no matter how he denied it or how much he lied to himself and others; he desired power more than anything. He couldn't resist it; after all, it was right there in his reach and all he had to do was grab it. We can deny our true nature for some time but we can't refuse it in the end. In my experience, it's best not to deny it at all."

Hermione refuses to look up and just glares at the bars, the floor and Harry's feet.

"You may think of me as selfish, however, so was Dumbledore," says Harry, but Hermione doesn't speak, just shakes her head and Harry quickly grows tired of the entire conversation. "I will give you a choice. It's all rather simple."
"A choice?" stammers the witch.

"Yes, a choice between two options." Harry clears up the girl's confusion and goes on, "You can either choose to die or live your life, far away from this world, as a Muggle. You get to keep your life and forge a future for yourself and your family. This is a choice between death and giving up your magic."

"You can't do that! You can't!"

Draco chuckles. "Of course it can be done."

"Maybe Bella would like to adopt you," Harry suggests flippantly, sharing a look of mischief with Draco.

"Perhaps death then?" Luna implies with a curious smile.

"No! I...I don't want to die... I'll go away, you'll never see me again, just don't take my magic! Please..."

"I can't let you leave here just like that," says Harry. "I will let you go and you can have a normal life in the Muggle world, but you won't remember magic, you won't be a witch anymore. This is what I offer. The other option is a quick Killing Curse and it will all be over."

Sobbing, Hermione splutters, "I am a witch! I won't give it up, you can't take my magic! Please...just let me go. I'll leave and never come back, I'll never tell anyone. I'll forget about you, about this. Please, you can't do this to me, please--"

Harry sees the flash of green and Hermione's lifeless body slumps down. Mouth open, Harry turns just in time to see Luna pocketing her wand, all the while wearing a blank expression. Draco is standing next to the girl and staring at her as if she had suddenly sprouted three heads.

Seeing the faces of the boys, she speaks, "She chose death. All this crying and howling was making my ears ring and it was attracting Wrackspurts."

"Luna--" Harry blurts out, still slightly stunned.

"I can't believe you just killed her like that," Draco mutters. "Amazing, my crazy witch."

Harry snorts when Draco grabs the blonde witch and pulls her towards the back and they start snogging. Not interested in seeing his friends kiss, Harry goes back to torturing Ron. The redhead is sporting a deep scarlet flush but Harry isn't sure if it is due to the lack of air or seeing his girlfriend die. Probably a combination of the two.

He releases the redhead and hurls him against the wall. As he slides down and into a heap on the floor, Ron doesn't look up, choosing to ignore the green-eyed wizard. Harry clucks his tongue. "Pay attention!"

Ron, defiant to the end, glares, "Did that make you feel powerful? Killing Hermione, did you get off on it, you sick bastard!"

"I didn't kill her, Luna did. And what an awesome surprise that was, let me tell you."

"Are you going to kill me too?"

"That depends," Harry muses, "Are you going to continue with your little tirade? Do you want to
piss me off, Ron?"

Ron doesn't say anything but offers a little shake of his head.

"If you're done being a rude pig..." Harry starts. "I will give you the same two choices. I had a chat with your brothers; you know, the ones not helping the Order, and they were all in agreement that you are a problem. One that I would rather not deal with on a regular basis, so I'm letting you choose."

"I don't want to choose." Ron sneers. "I'd rather stay here for the rest of my life than give you the satisfaction of seeing me beg. I won't."

"See, here's the thing," Harry smiles cruelly, "I don't mind ending your pathetic existence; it would actually be a real pleasure, but I care about your brothers and I won't hurt them by AK-ing you right now. They still care about you, though I don't see why, since you seem to only care about yourself."

"Go to hell, you twisted dark bastard!"

Harry calls out, "Hey, Luna. Ron here wants to die. Mind granting him his wish?"

The girl laughs and skips over as if she's having the time of her life. "It was rather fun."

Harry smirks and tells Ron, "It's always the quiet ones. Neville, Luna, your brothers... I'm constantly in a state of surprise."

Ron's face stays twisted in a mask of pure horror. He seems more scared of Luna than Harry and that makes laughter bubble in Harry's chest. Ron obviously doesn't think Harry has it in him, but he is sorely mistaken because Harry is his worst nightmare and sweet Luna is nothing compared to what he can do.

Seeing Luna raise her wand, Harry holds back a laugh as Ron starts to scamper around the cell, trying to hide or run away. He looks frantic and his face is set in a petrified grimace. He is close to tears, snot running down his face.

"What's the matter? Death not to your liking?" Draco sneers, having followed Luna. He is taking pleasure in seeing Weasley trembling like a frightened child.

As Luna smiles and gives another little wave of her wand, Ron yelps and makes a rather unmanly noise before he squeaks. "Fine, I'll go away. I'll choose, I'll be a Muggle. Don't kill me!"

"This option is slightly different than what the late Miss Granger received. You will be stripped of your magic, reduced into a Squib, but you won't be chased away. No, you will remain in the wizarding world, near your blood-traitor parents and you will see magic every day of your remaining life. You will know about it and you will forever live with the knowledge. You will never forget me or forget what was done to you. You will be bound to secrecy and you won't be able to tell anyone what was done to you or why; only you will know and remember."

"I think he's already regretting not choosing death," smirks Draco, looking at Ron's wide eyes and slack mouth. "I would rather be dead than a Squib."

Harry gives a snort. "That's because you're an arrogant prat and wouldn't survive without magic."

"True." Draco quips. He sees no reason to deny it; having no magic would be the most horrible thing in the world.
"Regrettably, you can't change your mind. You chose this and I shall deliver, as a merciful Lord would." Harry states and frowns when Luna snickers behind him. "Too much?"

"Just a bit."

Draco groans. "Damn it! I wanted to see Weasley disembowelled, roasted on an open flame and nailed to the wall. This is just boring."

"Don't pout," Luna gives the blond wizard a salacious smile and a wink. "I'll show you something far more interesting when we get to Malfoy Manor. Ron's entrails aren't nearly as entertaining. Though I think seeing his spine ripped out would make for a splendid show."

"I do like the way you think."

Harry waves them off. "My teeth hurt from all the sugar. Just go snog or something."

As the two go up the stairs, Harry eyes the dead body of Hermione Granger and snaps his fingers. An elf appears, smoothing down her pristine uniform. Big eyes staring at Harry, the elf bows. "What can Pebble do for Master Harry?"

"Take care of the witch's body. Take it away somewhere, but make sure you leave it where someone will find it," Harry says and then stops himself, an idea forming in his head. "Take it to Hogwarts. Can you do that, Pebble?"

Pebble nods readily. "It will be done as you ordered, Master Harry."

"Make sure no one sees you, not even the house-elves of Hogwarts. Be quick and discreet."

Ron watches quietly as the elf disappears with Hermione. Then he turns his puffy eyes on Harry, his voice pitiful as he asks, "Will you take my magic now?"

"No, you get to keep until morning," Harry tells the redhead. "The Dark Lord will personally take care of it. I could try, but I don't want to accidentally kill you; not after I went through all that trouble to make sure that you would suffer for a very long time. Rest for the night; being a Squib can be an awfully exhausting experience."

Ron's screaming and verbal slurs follow Harry as he treks up the staircase, wearing a satisfied smile. He is going to enjoy tomorrow a whole lot more now.

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Standing in the doorway, Lucius watches on as his son stands in one corner of the room, eying the ceiling. At first, Lucius had thought that perhaps Draco had overindulged with the wine, but a feminine voice had quickly chased that thought away. Apparently, the Nargles are conspiring -- whatever that means. The girl, while well-mannered and lovely, has rather odd ideas and the absent-minded look in her eyes is ever-present. Lucius wouldn't exactly call her insane, that is perhaps a little strong, but her behaviour and wild imagination are somewhat concerning. She will make a fine Malfoy, just a not a level-headed one. He thinks he can live with that.

"There's something wrong with your miniature replica."
In a way, Lucius agrees. He feels arms encircling his waist and as Sirius presses himself closer, the wizard goes on, "Luna is a nice girl, but I think Xeno dropped her on her head once or twice."

Having seen enough strangeness, the elder blond leaves Draco to his ceiling gazing. Sirius doesn't give his lover much time to think before Disapparating. The big bed is what Sirius has in mind and he intends to use it. Shrugging off his blazer, the dark-haired wizard asks, "How did it go with the solicitor?"

"After realising that I was not trying to be funny, they started the proceedings," says the blond. He smirks. "I'm the second Malfoy in history to divorce my perfect pure-blood bride. It will take some time to get everything sorted."

"Are you really okay with it?" Lucius stops unclasping his robe, a small frown on his brow. Immediately, Sirius spots it and hurries to say, "I just mean that you so readily agreed, didn't even pause for a moment when Cissy brought it up. Even though you didn't marry out of love, it's still a big change. You were married for almost twenty years. That's what you're used to."

Lucius shrugs and says in a clipped tone, "I'm touched by your concern. I believe I will manage."

"Or maybe I'm concerned because you won't be married anymore. You'll be free to do whatever you want. Some want to make up for lost time, browse the dating scene and see what's out there. Have a little fun, you know. Though being married didn't stop you before," the Animagus mutters. Even he isn't sure what he is saying and sighs, "Forget I said anything."

Disappearing into the bathroom, Sirius stares at his reflection and sneers at himself. Having random bouts of insecurity like a teenager; it is a travesty. He can't even believe that he's feeling unsure of himself. He has no idea why he fears...whatever it is that he fears. What the hell is wrong with you, Sirius Black! Snap out of it and stop acting like an insipid witch.

He stays in the en-suite for almost twenty minutes, altering between frowning and cursing his own stupid mouth. It always gets him in trouble. Hoping that the blond has disregarded it by now, Sirius stalks out and finds the wizard nowhere in sight. The feeling in his gut is not a nice one and he is about to curse himself thrice when he notices the curtains fluttering in the slight wind. The French doors are pushed open. He ties the sash of his robe and goes to sneak a look. Lucius is standing just outside the doors, the silky strands flickering in the breeze.

Knowing that it's mostly his fault, Sirius isn't sure if his presence will be wanted, but he doesn't want to leave either. Thinking that he can't possibly say anything that might make it worse, Sirius states, "You'll catch a cold out there and then act like a horrible brat when you're sick."

Lucius doesn't say anything, doesn't even look as if he had heard a thing. But Sirius sees the slight change in his expression, the subtle tic in his jaw. Lucius had heard, hadn't liked it and simply won't answer. Simple as that. Taking a few steps closer, Sirius sees the blond's shoulders tense just a little, but his eyes are still staring ahead.

"Do you want me to leave?"

Visibly nothing changes about the wizard, but there is an edge to his voice when he speaks, "Are you impatient to leave?"

"Not in the slightest," Sirius says and curses his own stupidity, "I shouldn't have said what I said."

"Then why say it?" the blond's eyes flash as he turns to face the man. "Is that what you truly think of me? That this divorce will tempt me to spread my legs for whoever pants after me?"
Feeling a surge of anger swell up, Sirius protests, "No! I don't think--"

"I imagine you hardly ever do," the blond wizard cuts in and strides past the Animagus. The doors snap shut behind him, curtains suddenly hanging limp.

"You know, the last time we stood here like this -- arguing -- you kicked me out. And I left because it was the only thing I could do, but I won't go this time. I know I fucked up."

Lucius stops in the middle of the room and for a moment, all fight leaves him. The other takes that as a bad sign because an angry Lucius is much more predictable than a calm one. The wizard's brain momentarily short-circuits because instead of anger or the silent seething Lucius is so fond of, Sirius sees a rare show of emotions; a fleeting moment of uncertainty. It is an expression so unnatural and unsuited that Sirius wants to wipe it off.

Crossing the room, Sirius pushes his fingers into the sleek cascade of hair and brushes some of it back, letting his hands feel the soft silk.

"For you to think so little of me--" Lucius starts, trying to find the right words. He looks too vulnerable and hurt. "Have I expressed my affections so poorly, then?"

Sirius hates it; no, he loathes what is happening, but a part of him is glad that Lucius is so upset over it. Because in some twisted way, it shows Sirius that his fears are unfounded. Now he just has to fix it, but that seems like being asked to resurrect Merlin. "You haven't given me a reason to doubt you. I know you want this, but I sometimes find it hard to believe. I, too, can experience self-doubt; regardless of my smug, charming self. The years spent in Azkaban didn't exactly leave me with all my good sense intact."

"I doubt you had any to begin with," Lucius replies derisively, looking away from Sirius' earnest face.

Smirking, the Animagus says, "You have enough for the both of us."

It is good to see Lucius revert back to what Sirius loves best, but that doesn't mean anything has been resolved.

A while later, Sirius can't settle himself and even though the bed is spectacular, it doesn't feel comfortable. Lucius has made it his mission to stay as far away as possible from Sirius without falling over the edge of the bed and with a really big bed, the space between them feels like an impassable void. Sirius is always touching his lover; every chance he gets. Although Lucius wouldn't be caught dead holding his hand, Sirius still loves to provoke the wizard.

But this is torture, close to pure torment, and Sirius feels it deep in his very being. More than a decade in a dank cell with nothing but Dementors to keep you company and no physical contact is enough to ruin any wizard and starve them of their humanity. After escaping and seeing Harry properly for the first time after all those years, he had pulled the young teen into a tight hug and had held him there for as long as he could. Ever since getting out, Sirius has craved touch; whether that comes in a form of a handshake or a pat on the back. And yet hugging a friend or his godson is vastly different from wrapping his arms around his lover.

After almost a year and a half of exploring that lean body next to him, Sirius can say that he knows everything about it; all the curves, how it moves, how it flexes and what makes it tremble. He knows how that body feels under his hands, how to make it hum for him and most importantly, he knows how to take it apart and pull every last ounce of pleasure from it.
He thinks about casually inching closer -- and is about to attempt it -- but then Lucius shifts under the covers and rolls over, making the rift seem less unfeasible to conquer. The silence in the room gets broken when the wizard says, "Must you think so loud?"

"I thought I hardly ever did that," Sirius says. "Wasn't that what you said?" In the dark room, Sirius doesn't see Lucius sneering at him, but he knows it is there. The warm light of the bedside lamp flicks on and casts a soft glow over them. Cold hands make contact with his arm. "If you're so cold, why are you sleeping so far away?"

"Your idiocy is catching," murmurs the blond, but he doesn't move away from the warm spot he has picked out for himself. He goes on, "The Dark Lord wants you to tell Harry, and he didn't forget to add that his husband's discontent displeases him as well. It was essentially an order, not a suggestion."

Sirius has no problem with telling people; he hadn't planned on keeping it a secret. But the thought of telling Harry makes him a little anxious. He lets out a deep and troubled sigh. "Pup's going to be pissed. I don't want to tell him."

Lifting his head from the comfortable spot by Black's shoulder, Lucius frowns and his eyes narrow just a bit. "Ashamed, are we?"

Sirius snorts and shook his head. "Never that, Luce. It's just...Harry doesn't like to be the last one to know, especially if it's something others have known for some time now. He hates it when people keep things from him and lie to him. Telling him that I've been shagging you for more than a year won't go over so well. I should have told him a long time ago. It's my own damn fault."

"You had good reason not to," says the other wizard and settles back. "He'll understand, I'm sure. Now stop talking."

Sirius complies and stays quiet for about a minute before saying, "I'm sorry for saying such stupid things. I guess I'm just feeling insecure. I keep thinking -- why in the hell would you want to be with me if you could have someone better. Someone who isn't a raving lunatic."

The only response he receives is an arm stretched across his chest. It seemed like acceptance enough. He really hadn't meant to accuse Lucius of anything; he has no cause to do so. However, he's still a Gryffindor and actually wants to hear the words. Sirius wants confirmation and Lucius really hasn't given him much of that.

"I can still hear you thinking."

"Stop listening in on my private business then," Sirius mutters. "I'm having an inner monologue."

"Don't hurt yourself," Lucius tells the man and turns his back on the Animagus, but allows his lover to curl an arm around him. The soft glow in the room remains and keeps the sleepless wizard company for a little while. After a while, Sirius is sure that Lucius is no longer awake, so he places a soft kiss on the man's bare shoulder. "Love you."

Sirius darkens the room and settles back down, letting out a heavy sigh before closing his eyes. His arm remains around Lucius, loosely holding him. In the dark, he doesn't see that the man isn't asleep, but Sirius smiles to himself when he feels the wizard turn towards him. Lucius presses close to Sirius, craving the contact. For the moment, it is enough.
The Dark Lord is having a nice cup of tea and creating plans in his mind when a heavy book is pushed in front of him, left open in the middle. It is an old tome; one of the many books in his library that is unique and dangerous. Every page of the thick leather tome is dark, soaked in magic and every self-respecting Dark Lord has one hidden away under wards and enchantments. He recalls placing it in a concealed hiding place, covering it with at least three wards, one of which gives the snooping individual a rather nasty case of boils. Now Harry has the book and he doesn't have any boils. He doesn't look to be cursed any other way.

"I need you to do that," says Harry, all smiles and sparkling eyes as he placed his finger on the page.

Tom, ever the curious Dark Lord, inspects the page and the particular spell Harry is pointing at. He reads it once, twice and even a third time before saying, "You need me to permanently destroy someone's magical core?"

"Such a clever boy," Harry remarks, fully knowing that he is walking on thin ice. Tom's dark gaze pins Harry and promises unspeakable things. Harry enjoys the crackle of irritation and magic in the air.

"Explain."

Harry, now perched on the edge of the desk, glances at the book and says, "I want you to destroy a magical core, leaving that person a Squib."

"Not a good enough explanation, Harry."

"First, you tell me if it's possible and then I will explain further."

Tom eyes the spell and everything that comes with it. He sighs. "Seeing as there exists a highly dark spell for it, I'd say that it is possible, but I cannot tell you if it is within my capabilities to perform it."

"You're the Dark Lord," Harry points out, "isn't this your area of expertise, doing dark stuff?"

"Did you actually read through the whole paragraph?"

"Well, no--," says the green-eyed wizard and goes on, "but everything written in bold suited my needs. Why did you have this book warded anyway?"

Tom rubs his temples. "Because it is a rare volume, containing some of the darkest curses and I did not want nosy Gryffindors with sticky fingers to find it and handle it with little care."

"I hope you don't mean me." Harry grins, absolutely unapologetic.

The leather tome had been locked up tight. And of course Harry had figured out that it was meant to
be that way, but he had been looking for a spell that would leave a wizard without magic and after searching through the library and the library in Malfoy Manor, Harry had started looking somewhere else.

"Had you read through the entire paragraph, you would know that destroying a magical core isn't as simple as one would think. The caster doesn't just make the magic disappear; the one who casts the spell will absorb it. This is the function of this spell."

"So it's like a Dementor sucking out someone's soul."

"Not quite, but it is similar."

"And there is no other way to leave someone a Squib?"

Tom gives a pointed look as he speaks, "Perhaps you should tell me what this is about."

"Last night I visited the dungeons... after I was reminded of the two prisoners down there, and I promised Ron Weasley a nice existence as a Squib for the rest of his pitiful life. He chose it over death and I can't go back on my word. It would make me look stupid."

"Why not simply kill him?"

Harry shakes his head. He slides into the chair and rests his head against the back of it. "I can't kill him. I won't cause Bill more heartache, especially if you consider what happened to his little sister. We killed her, Tom. You sucked out her life-force and I didn't stop you. That makes me just as guilty as you and Lucius, who gave her the means to let you manipulate her. If I kill Ron or even have someone else do it, I won't be able to look Bill in the eye ever again."

"The girl took her last breath when you arrived; there was nothing you could have done. Do not think yourself responsible for her death," says Tom and sighs as he goes on, "I understand your dilemma, but it would be easier and in the end, it would not cause problems for us."

"Death would be too kind. I want him to suffer. I want him to live in the wizarding world, surrounded by magic, and not be able to cast a single spell. I want him to break. I was excited and now I'm just frustrated because you're telling me I can't do it."

Tom stands and rounds the desk, putting his hands on Harry's slumped shoulders. Slightly kneading the tense muscle, Tom places a kiss on Harry's neck as he leans closer and hums, "We can't have that, now can we? I rather like your idea, so I'll try to find another way."

"A wizard's magical core is not something you can stretch beyond its limits. Every core is different and no witch or wizard has the same amount of magical strength. Over expanding one's core can lead to disastrous consequences. Pure-bloods tend to have a bigger core because the blood-lines are less corrupted by Muggle blood. Muggles do not have a magical core, thus the mixing of Muggle and magical blood results in weaker cores and lower levels of magical strength."

"But in order to use the spell properly, the caster must be magically powerful, right?"

"Yes, and that is why very few wizards have ever attempted it. Magic from another wizard can enlarge the caster's magical core to the point of destroying it. That is why I will not attempt it and neither will you."

"Can't we have another competent but expendable wizard perform it? Ron will be reduced to a Squib
and whoever does the spell blows up from the excess of magic."

Tom chuckles and walks over to the cupboard where he keeps his Ogden's whisky. Pouring himself a glass, he says, "A sacrificial lamb for your experiment?"

"I recall your promise to give me everything I asked. It was actually a part of your wedding vows to me," says Harry.

"I shall endeavour to do better."

Rising to his feet, Harry makes a move to grab the book, but Tom makes a sound a disapproving parent would make. The stern look on his face reminds Harry of McGonagall, who had always stared at her students with that exact scowl and pursed lips. Letting go of the tome, Harry backs away with a defeated look. He had wanted to study the book further, but Tom's eyes are telling him that he cannot.

As if reading the teen's mind, Tom smiles. "You can, but not at the moment and not without supervision."

With his expression considerably brighter, Harry hums, "Since I suddenly have no plans at the present time, I might as well tell you about the other thing I wanted to tell you."

Tom raises a brow.

"Last night, Hermione Granger joined Dumbledore in the afterlife. She was hysterical, pleading and begging for me to let her keep her magic because being a Muggle is so much more dreadful than being dead. She was crying and blubbering and then she died. Just like that."

"Just like that?"

"Well, Luna cast the Killing Curse because Granger's wailing was giving her a headache and it was attracting Wrackspurts and apparently that's not something you want to happen."

Tom stares over the rim of his glass and doesn't say a word. It is simply ridiculous, an utterly absurd thought, but Harry looks completely serious. The wizard gives a dubious look as he drawls, "You're telling me that Luna Lovegood, that silly girl who floats around the room and speaks of imaginary creatures, killed the Mudblood?"

Harry nods, "Yes, she just fired the Killing Curse and didn't even blink. You should have seen Draco's face, he was mesmerised and started snogging her."

"Would she be interested in joining my ranks? She would get into the Inner Circle quicker than most; I dare say everyone else would pale in comparison."

"She did mention something about ripping out spines making for a wonderful show," laughs Harry, "but I don't think she'd want to be a Death Eater. As a rule, Luna is sweet and walking somewhere between the clouds and I like her that way because when she snaps it's fucking brilliant and it won't ever get boring."

"Perhaps it is best if we don't tell Lucius about this," suggests Tom and sips his drink, "He's barely coping with the thought of having a senile daughter-in-law."

"That's not very nice, is it?"

"When have you ever known Lucius to be nice? In fact, I rather agree with him on this. Draco could
do better."

"But he doesn't want anyone else and Luna is the best," Harry states.

Settling back into his seat, Tom places the glass to his right and leans back in his seat. "Have you seen your dog today?"

"I'm going to ignore your condescending tone and ill-mannered jokes about my godfather, but I have yet to see him," Harry tells the wizard and narrows his eyes. "Why? Are you planning something unpleasant for him?"

"It is my greatest wish to see Sirius Black in my dungeons, hanging from his thumbs, but alas, it is an impossible dream."

Harry eyes the man warily but pushes away the weird sense that Tom is keeping something from him. He has that glint in his eyes, the one that says that he knows something and is dying to speak of it. He can hardly contain himself, to be honest. Harry points it out, "You know something. You wouldn't have brought him up otherwise."

"You have an incredibly suspicious nature."

"You're deflecting, but I'll let it slide for now. Severus gave me homework and I haven't even started. He's mentally taking away points, I can just feel it."

Tom accepts the quick kiss Harry gives him and watches the young man leave. He has work to do and the book in front of him is another matter he has to deal with. Asking Harry about the three rather strong wards around the book had slipped his mind, but he makes a mental note to ask later. Another matter is Ronald Weasley, the insignificant redheaded nuisance that had also slipped his mind.

He considers Harry's idea and finds it worth the effort; it is positively devious of his young husband. All those who had betrayed him are now dead or on their way there and he has to admire Harry's ruthlessness that is perfectly masked behind innocent green eyes. He will find a way to grant Harry his wish.

He mulls over his thoughts for a while, letting minutes pass. Someone knocks and Tom calls them in. It is Lucius, looking positively gleeful.

"My Lord," says the blond man, giving a small bow of his head. Tom acknowledges him and waves him closer. Lucius goes on, "The Mudblood, Hermione Granger, was found dead this morning. But you already knew that."

"I know she is dead, but I have no idea where her body was found. Enlighten me."

Lucius smirks; it is a cruel quirk of his lips and Tom knows that Harry is in for a serious discussion. "Actually, there is a rather lovely picture of it, ready to be published in the Evening Prophet."

Tom is handed a freshly printed newspaper and the front cover is very telling. Tom really has to credit his husband for thinking outside of the box. Hermione Granger, one-third of the holy trio, had been found in Hogwarts, or rather her dead body had been found in the Entrance Hall of Hogwarts by a first-year Ravenclaw. The caption reads -- THE TRAGIC END OF THE GOLDEN TRIO.

"The wording is quite banal, but the picture is rather fetching," says Lucius.
"I would very much like to know who took it and reward them," muses the Dark Lord and as he folds the paper, he smirks to himself. "Harry wants to taunt the Order, but placing her body in the Entrance Hall of Hogwarts will do more than just taunt them. It will enrage them and that is what we need. For them to come out of their dirty little holes."

Lucius silently agrees.

Tom, however, is considering another matter and decides that he really wants to see Lucius' face when he tells him about the new and delightful development.

"Would you like to know who cast the Killing Curse?"

Lucius, of course, assumes that the curse had been cast by Harry himself, but the almost smug look on the Dark Lord's face tells him something else. The blond wizard tilts his head a fraction as to ask who and the Dark Lord, with a smile threatening to explode, says, "The Mudblood was killed by your son's chosen bride."

Tom is met with stunned silence and then Lucius completely snaps. "You're joking!"

The Dark Lord decides to forgive Lucius for his outburst; frankly, he had expected it and since Lucius isn't one of his usual lackeys, he even allows it. In fact, he rather enjoys the incredulous expression on the man's face. He has never seen Lucius so dumbfounded before; he is close to gawking like a commoner. It is positively hilarious.

"I assure you, Lucius, that I don't tell jokes."

Visibly taken aback, Lucius closes his mouth and decides against calling his Lord a liar. He sinks into the chair and says with disbelief, "Luna Lovegood talks to the walls and insists that my manor has a Nargle infestation. She's an airhead."

"Apparently she can be violent if the mood strikes her. Harry claimed that the Mudblood's crying was annoying her and she simply killed her. As if it was nothing."

Having no reason to doubt Harry's words, Lucius knows that it had happened exactly as described. He can even admit that the incident has spoken in Lovegood's favour, but still -- it is all rather unbelievable. The girl is almost childlike, as though she is a doll with her wide light-blue eyes and dreamy expression; nothing about her speaks of danger or mentally competent for that matter.

"I know what you are thinking, Lucius, but perhaps there's more to Lovegood than what she's letting the world see," says the Dark Lord and muses out loud. "Arthur Weasley's youngest is still alive, awaiting his fate in the dungeons."

Lucius doesn't show a scrap of emotion and Tom knows that he simply doesn't care enough to concern himself with Weasley's insolent whelp. He toys with the idea and eyes the book on the desk, the spell still on his mind. "Harry came up with a delightful punishment, but as usual, he didn't bother to read the fine print." Tom pushes the book under the wizard's nose and goes on, "He wants Weasley's magic gone, but he wants him to remain in our world; close to magic, but unable to perform any."

Lucius knows the book and the spell looks familiar, having heard of it from his father. He looks up, perhaps a touch of concern flashing through his eyes.

"I will not attempt it myself, the risk of damaging my own magical core is too great, but I am interested in the general idea of it."
"There is no such spell, other than the one described here," Lucius says, but adds a moment later, "Perhaps Severus has some ideas regarding a potion that could accomplish the same results. Shall I mention it to him?"

Tom hums, agreeing with the other. "I suppose it is worth asking."

"Why not just kill the boy?" asks the blond, but the Dark Lord's arched brow speaks volumes and Lucius realises what he means. Of course, Harry wouldn't kill the boy or have anyone else do it. He doesn't want to cause the rest of the Weasleys more pain. The boy is sickeningly considerate and sentimental, yet he is as vindictive as the Dark Lord. Harry truly is a contradiction.

"He will not kill him," Tom explains, almost jovial in his expression, "he'll do something much worse. He means to make Weasley suffer; he wants to break his spirit by rendering him a useless Squib yet keep him wanting and yearning for magic. He means to chain Ronald Weasley to him, never letting him forget that the hell he is in was crafted by his own hands."

"The boy is one of Weasley's latest editions and from what I've heard, the boy is not very strong, magically speaking. There have been recorded cases with large magical families where the youngest child is magically weak, almost a Squib. The Weasleys have more children than they can afford."

"You might be right, Lucius." Tom nods, tapping the desk with his fingers, "The Weasley chit didn't have a very large core; it was less than average. Perhaps the boy falls into the same category. I will have to test just how magically strong he is."

"If he doesn't originally have much, it won't be hard to leave him with none at all. The dungeons here are modified to dampen magic. Who's to say their purpose cannot be altered?"

"You mean have the wards around the cells do the work for us?"

Lucius gives a nod.

"Perhaps coupled with the right potion..." muses Tom and trails off when a smirk plays its way onto his face. "You are my favourite, Lucius. Until Severus comes up with something brilliant."

The expression on the blond's face is close to comical.

"Harry seems to think that you and Severus are fighting for my attention like children, which might actually be the truth."

"Well, Severus has been bragging about being the best Death Eater, but I think Bellatrix cured him of that habit. There is a reason why Severus always checks the chair before sitting down."

"A dagger?"

Lucius winces slightly. "A bear trap, my Lord."

"I do not want to know," Tom sighs, leaning back in his seat.

"Shall I look into the wards then?"

Tom gives a humming sound as agreement and turns his attention to the papers on his desk. Lucius leaves and when the door clicks shut, Tom snorts to himself. "Where did she find a bear trap?"

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The potion homework doesn't take as long as Harry had expected and after giving it to Snape, fully ignoring the man's moans about the paper being shorter than the previous ones or that Harry was supposed to hand it in the day before, the green-eyed wizard finds himself in the fireplace, ready to Floo over to Malfoy Manor.

He is bored and rightfully so. Harry has absolutely nothing to do and he hates it. Sure, Fred and George provide amusement and they are loads of fun, and annoying Tom is always rewarding, but Harry misses doing stuff. He misses the freedom to just go out and not care about the rest of the public staring at him as if it is mandatory for him to fight in a war that is nothing more than a joke. He misses Quidditch a lot and despite Draco's best efforts to get him to play, Harry doesn't find it interesting anymore. He wants everything, but he doesn't even know what everything means. Time slips by, hours turn into days and days stretch into weeks.

It is nearly the end of December and Harry hasn't even noticed the time go by. Malfoy Manor has been done up in tasteful Christmas decorations -- and it really hits Harry that Christmas has arrived.

Harry locates Draco; the blond is sitting in his bedroom, flicking through a magazine. Harry doesn't have to take a closer look to know it is *Quidditch Weekly*, a popular magazine that caters to everyone who has a healthy interest in the game or a more kinkier interest in Quidditch players in tight Quidditch robes. Harry suspects that Draco is only interested in the magazine as a catalogue for what he wants to order.

Harry doesn't knock and just strides in. Draco only acknowledges his friend with an absentminded wave of his hand, not even looking up. Harry notices something as he walks to the window and draws the drapes aside to let some light into the dim room. He asks. "What's that?"

Draco hums and looks up. Harry is pointing upwards, asking about a strange plant hanging there. Actually, it is hanging everywhere. Draco replies, "Mistletoe. Luna put it up, said something about Nargles infesting it. Don't ask."

Harry snickers, fully understanding the meaning of mistletoe. "How often does she get you to stand under it with her?"

"Five or six times a day," Draco smirks like a pleased cat. "It appears out of nowhere and disappears just as quickly, mostly in doorways. The only ones that don't disappear are in my room. The mistletoe is enchanted."

"In what way?"

"If you get stuck under it with someone, you won't be able to move away until you kiss the person stuck with you. I've been trying to get Severus under it with Sirius, but no such luck yet."

Harry's head snaps to Draco, his eyes narrowed. "I didn't know Sirius came over that often."

Draco swallows hard, trying to say something to undo his slip of the tongue. "Well, he visits Mother quite frequently now that he's a free man."

Harry's gaze softens, but there is still something nudging at his brain and he doesn't know why or what he is supposed to do with it. "If you're done admiring the newest Firebolt, I want you to help me with something."

"Luna is Flooing over any minute."
"She can come as well. In fact, I insist," says Harry. "I want to set up a Christmas tree and she can help me decorate it. I forgot all about it, to be honest, but a tree would look nice. It will make the manor look welcoming."

"Have the house-elves do it." sniffs the blond.

Harry makes a face. "I'm not asking you to go chop down a tree for me."

"Then why do you need me to be there?"

Harry opens his mouth to tell Draco why, but he snaps his mouth shut and mutters, "Forget it."

He stalks across the room, intent on leaving, but Draco lets out a troubled sigh before Harry can reach the door. He pushes the magazine aside. As he gets up, he says, "All right, I'll help decorate your stupid tree."

Harry grins. "Really?"

Draco sneers at no one in particular, perhaps at himself, and runs a hand through his hair. He doesn't want to sound like a complete tosser and Harry's face looks so open and sincere that Draco can't turn him down. "Yes. Now come along, Potty."

"Do you think we could set up some mistletoe?"

"As if you need another reason to snog the Dark Lord," Draco snorts. His arm tossed around Harry's shoulders, Draco walks them downstairs and is about to quicken his steps when he spots Luna standing in the parlour, but he finds himself unable to move. He groans. Looking up, Draco spots the fucking plants above their heads, almost mocking him. Those bloody things pop out without warning.

Harry starts laughing, finding the situation entirely too precious. He is stuck as well, but he doesn't make a fuss. Luna's voice carries over and she looks amused; perhaps a bit **too** amused. Her smile is wide and her eyes hold mischief.

"Don't look so miserable, Draco. Give us a kiss," Harry says, smirking to himself.

"Harry, I swear to Merlin--" Draco grunts, not at all happy with the situation.

Harry snorts and continues with a grin, "You should have thought about that when you so willingly walked me down here, not once looking up to make sure that there was no mistletoe around. Buck up, you great git. It's just a kiss."

Luna keeps giggling and watches in anticipation. Draco, mortified and reluctant, braces himself; his eyes are tightly screwed shut. Harry can't help himself and bursts out laughing. "Could you possibly look more disgusted? Would you rather be stuck here with someone else?"

"I bet the Dark Lord is a great snog."

Draco admonishes, his eyes snapping open. "Luna!"

Harry only nods, "Fantastic snog."

Another voice joins in. "Oh, for pity's sake! Some of us would like to get going; *today* if possible."

Harry sees Rabastan and Rodolphus, briefly wondering what they are doing in the manor, but decides that he doesn't really care to know. The brothers are standing there with impatient looks on
their faces. Rabastan's arms are crossed over his chest and he is the one who had sneered at the two wizards.

"Suppose you'd like to get whipped for kissing your Lord's husband?"

Harry stifles a laugh. "Afraid he'll chase you up and down Diagon Alley with a whip? Now that's an interesting idea."

Draco's reluctant grimace and Harry's distracted expression provides a perfect opportunity and Rabastan uses it. With his hand suddenly behind Draco's neck, he pushes forward and smacks the blond's face right into Harry's, forcing them to achieve some sort of contact with each other. Surprisingly good with his aim, Rabastan manages to free them. With an irritated groan, he pushes the two wizards out of the doorway.

"What the hell did you do that for?"

"Because I have more important things to do than stand here and wait for you two dunces to do something. Now, if you'll excuse me..." Rabastan barks in a barely contained growl. Making sure he that he is alone the moment he crosses the threshold, he walks into the parlour and greets Luna on his way out. Rodolphus chuckles as he follows his brother, snorting privately as he passes Draco. He is clearly amused and Draco is the source of his mirth.

Luna takes pity on Draco and plants a chaste kiss on his lips before turning to Harry. She says, "Nargles are devious, don't you think?"

"I'm going to need lots of mistletoe." Harry nods with a smile.

"Planning to decorate the manor?" Luna asks with a smirk. "I have a better idea."

"Ambush the unsuspecting Death Eaters?" Draco raises a brow.

"Precisely."

*****

After going back to Riddle Manor, Harry has the elves bring a decent-sized tree and tells them to find something to adorn it with. Then the trio spends several hours decorating it.

Luna's choice of ornaments seem to lean towards the bizarre and wacky sort, but Harry doesn't say anything. Luna is enjoying herself and so is Draco. The blond wizard is mostly helpful until Luna distracts him and the two disappear, leaving Harry alone for a moment.

With the tree finished, Harry thinks that they have managed to keep it elegant and not too flashy. The elves help Harry clean up and as they take the boxes of decorations away, Harry spots Luna and Draco by the window. Harry had wanted the tree to be somewhere everyone could see it, walk past it and admire it or simply notice it from the corner of their eye. The large entrance hall is perfect for it.

The besotted pair does not notice Harry at first and the green-eyed wizard considers the idea of spraying the couple with water to separate them, but Luna herself snaps out of the trance and the two come back. Draco is looking smug and Luna is just her usual dreamy self. Her neon earrings are
bright enough to blind Harry, but she is perfect just the way she is and neither he nor Draco would want her to change.

"Where do you want the mistletoe?"

Harry considers Draco's questions. "Oh, you know...here and there. I think every entranceway deserves a proper snog."

After sprinkling the mistletoe everywhere they can, Harry has Luna use the same enchantment. No one is getting out of a kiss. After the decorating, they have lunch and as it is getting dark, Harry counts the day as a success.

Snape had arrived at some point and said that the tree looked less drab than last year. Bellatrix had suggested more blood and guts and had kindly offered to acquire some. Harry had, of course, politely declined.

No one really notices the mistletoe hanging above them as they enter a room or leave one, but perhaps it isn't all that noticeable since no one has entered a room with someone else, therefore getting stuck under it. Harry is about to give up his stalker-ish mission when Luna gives a quick nod towards the archway that leads to the other wing on the ground floor. The entryway is wide enough to allow two or three people to step through it together and that is Harry's plan.

The green-eyed wizard is giving the tree some final touches and Luna, who is adding some more tinsel to the tree, has spotted something. She elbows Harry.

Harry holds back his laughter when he sees Sirius approaching the archway and he is not alone. Narcissa is three or four steps behind Sirius and it looks as if they are going to step under the mistletoe together. Of course, Sirius wouldn't mind kissing his cousin -- a quick peck on the lips would do -- and Harry finds nothing scandalous in that, but Luna's giggle catches Harry's attention. Even Draco, who is seated in the parlour, is eying the archway with a somewhat amused look.

Narcissa has disappeared, most likely gone back, and Sirius is alone. He isn't alone for long though. Lucius is coming towards him, his eyes fixed on the papers in his hand and he doesn't seem to pay attention to anything around him.

Harry cranes his neck to see better and he frowns. Sirius has not uttered a single insult; he hasn't done anything really. He is just standing there as if he is waiting for Lucius to reach him. If anything, he looks relaxed and there is a shrewd expression on his face.

Draco and Luna exchange looks. Seeing it, Harry hisses out. "You're doing that weird eyeballing thing again?"

Draco just shrugs and Luna turns away, but she is wearing a smile. It isn't a normal, happy smile. It is a smile that speaks of slyness and something that Harry can't possibly figure out. He turns his eyes back to the doorway and watches, partly hidden behind the massive Christmas tree. He's eager to see something entertaining. Sirius will surely protest and rather kiss a toad, but Harry couldn't be more wrong.

He sees the exact moment it happens, but it is no accident. Sirius sees the mistletoe. Harry is convinced that Sirius knows. Because Harry can tell. Sirius is wearing a half-smirk that Harry has seen before. Sirius is definitely planning something. Unaware, Lucius steps into the spider's web and he only manages an annoyed glower. No curses, no insults and definitely no disgust. Just a mild look of irritation as he lifts his eyes from the papers. He looks like someone who has been through this before, someone who knows what is keeping him trapped.
The papers get plucked from the blond's fingers and Sirius throws the brown folder aside, barely getting it to stay on top of the nearby cabinet. Then he glances up again, this time with more meaning and he draws Lucius' eyes there as well. The look of horror is not there. It is odd and puzzling and Harry feels that something nudge his brain again.

In a flash, Sirius has a roguish grin on his face and he pushes Lucius against the frame of the archway, his arms sliding to the man's waist and finally coming to rest on his hips. Sirius presses on until there isn't a hairsbreadth of space between them.

Harry sees more snogging than he ever wanted to see, but he is so stupefied that he has to watch. In clear view of Harry and the rest of the fucking house-hold, Sirius Black continues to kiss his once bitter enemy and apparently loves it. The mistletoe only wants a kiss -- a single peck on the lips -- not a full minute of tongues sliding against each other and the two wizards practically devouring one another. They are in the clear and have no need to stand there anymore, but neither seems to move; if anything, each passing moment only adds more heat. A thought occurs to Harry.

_They've done this before. Many times._

He glances over to the younger Malfoy and Draco's shamefaced look confirms it. Harry can read his face. Luna, too, is no stranger to this.

Other thoughts cross Harry's mind as well -- less happy ones.

_Sirius didn't tell him about it. How long as he kept it a secret? Why?_

Luna touches Harry's arm and whispers, oddly understanding and clear. "I don't think he meant to keep you in the dark."

"You knew about this and you couldn't tell me? Who else knows?" Harry mutters lowly, sneaking a glance at his godfather who seems enamoured with Lucius to the point of not even noticing the two teenagers whispering by the window.

Draco fidgets. He throws in his two Knuts. "Well, Mother knows and so does Severus. Bellatrix, Rabastan, Rodolphus--"

"You mean everyone but me," Harry states briskly, his voice climbing higher. "That's just brilliant, fucking grand!"

By now, the wizards have stopped; Harry's exclamation is loud enough to echo in the vast hall. Harry knows that there is no point in hiding and steps out from behind the tree, slightly fuming. Mostly glaring at Sirius with an expectant look, as to say 'well, start explaining'.

Draco opens his mouth to say something, but he trails off and clears his throat awkwardly. Sirius leans in to speak to Lucius and then the wizard gives a nod. He skives off and leaves Sirius to deal with his own mess.

As Sirius prepares himself for the chat he is about to have with Harry, Luna ceases the opportunity and says, "He's happy. So is Lucius. I know you won't take that away from them, Harry. You're angry because he kept it a secret, but don't you think that perhaps he had good reason to? You don't know, do you?"

It is weird to get a lecture from Luna and Harry doesn't even know how to react. When Harry fails to reply, Luna presses a kiss to Harry's forehead and giggles. "Love is silly sometimes, you know. Makes people act silly, too."
A throat being cleared makes Harry snap his head up and he sees Sirius, looking sheepish and agitated. *Good -- thinks Harry -- you should be.*

Draco doesn't plan to linger and grabs Luna's hand. As the two walk off, Sirius runs a hand through his hair and rubs the back of his neck with embarrassment. He sighs, somewhat relieved, "I should have told you sooner, but I didn't. I'm sorry I kept this from you."

"When were you going to tell me? On your fucking deathbed!" snaps Harry and darts his eyes away. He heaves a distressed sigh. Harry doesn't want to talk about it in the middle of the parlour and motions towards the sitting room. Sirius follows him in.

Harry isn't pissed; he is just hurt. At least he thinks he is hurt by it. It feels as if he *should* feel hurt. He is much calmer when he asks a second time, "Why didn't you just tell me?"

Sighing, Sirius pushes away from the door and walks across the room. He sits down, choosing the armchair and edges his body forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Honestly? I was scared. I didn't want to be in a position where I had to choose."

"But I would never make you choose. I wouldn't do that."

"I know, all right!" Sirius groans, "I didn't believe you would, but you come first. Always. If I have to choose between having you in my life and having Lucius--"

Harry feels truly awful. "Have I ever given you the impression that I would force you to choose?"

"No, of course not," Sirius says. "I just wasn't sure if you'd approve. I made a right mess of it. I didn't want to be in a position where I had to choose."

Harry asks, "Are you in love with Lucius?"

"Absurdly so." Sirius grins.

It is a genuine expression and Harry feels less annoyed over the fact that he is the last one to find out. He recalls Luna's words and asks, "Did you keep it a secret because you believed I wouldn't approve or was there something else. You need to tell me these things, Siri."

"Well, that's *partly* why I didn't want to tell you. To be honest, I wasn't planning on telling you anything, but that was before I realised that I loved the pompous git. I wasn't going to tell you about a shag or two."

"Something obviously changed." Harry raises a brow. "You are serious about this, aren't you? Serious about him?"

The older wizard slouches into the seat. "I haven't been this serious about anything before. It hasn't been easy, you know. Never had a proper relationship before and I didn't even know I had fallen for him; Cissy had to point it out to me and once she did, everything fell into place for me. I didn't just want casual hook-ups, I wanted more. Lucius was being a prat about the whole thing, dumped me
right after I told him I wanted something proper and all; kicked me out after I told him I had feelings for him and I left. What else was there to do? So I pined in silence until I couldn't put up with it anymore."

Harry listens with his mouth slightly open. "He dumped you?"

Sirius nods, but he is wearing a goofy smile. "Yeah. Didn't even give me a proper farewell shag before pushing me out the door."

Harry rolls his eyes and doesn't comment on the joke. "How long have you been...you know?"

"You're married and can't even use the word 'sex'?" Sirius snickers and replies to the question. "Oh, about a year and a half...something like that."

Harry's eyes widen, then they narrow and then he groans, doing the math in his head. "You mean you've been shagging Lucius since that Department of Mysteries mission? Sirius--"

"Don't snipe at me, Harry James!" Sirius barks, pointing an accusing finger at his godson, "You didn't tell me about your psycho boyfriend either. I was pretty fucking surprised to find out that little fact. This makes us even. You didn't tell me about your creeper boyfriend and I didn't tell you about Lucius. Even-steven, Pup."

"Fine," bemoans Harry, "We don't have to ever mention it again."

"Hanging mistletoe everywhere was a bloody brilliant idea," Sirius muses out loud, "it annoys Lucius a great deal."

"You won't think it's so brilliant when you get stuck under it with Snape."

Sirius grimaces, glaring at the teen. "You wouldn't do that to your own godfather, Harry."

"I wouldn't, but the Nargles would. Just be extra careful when you walk into a room."

"I cornered him after your wedding party. I convinced him to reconsider and I didn't let him slip through my fingers again. It wasn't easy, more like taming a wild Abraxan, but there is no such thing as taming Lucius."

Harry frowns, but then smiles, forgetting about his troubled thoughts. "I am happy for you. I don't want you to doubt it, Sirius. I think I understand why you didn't tell me sooner, even though I don't like being kept in the dark. I know now and you don't have to fear my bad reaction. I can't very well judge you; I would be a right wanker to criticise your choice of lover. And I like Lucius. He's always been respectful towards me and he doesn't treat me like a pampered prince or an insipid teenager, as many still do. He doesn't treat me like a child either."

"Pup, I hated him at first." Sirius laughs, bringing a smirk on Harry's face as well. "He's a conceited arse. It is a very nice arse, mind you, but at first, I was just interested in a few romps between the sheets. I wasn't interested in his character defects. He hasn't changed, never will, but I don't mind it; I want everything he is, everything he gives me, everything I am when I'm with him."

Harry is slightly stunned. He speaks, his voice full of surprise and wonder. "Siri, you got it bad. You really love him, don't you?"
"Weird, isn't it?" the wizard sighs, but Harry suspects he is a bit too choked up to say more. He is, of course, right because Sirius finds it difficult to speak without sounding like he has inhaled helium.

Harry doesn't ask any more questions and they sit in silence for a little while. Harry's mind starts wandering between different things and he tries to think how difficult it must have been for Sirius; to not say a word when all he wants to do is shout it out for everything to hear. He knows what Sirius is like and he must have wanted to tell everyone, boast about it and brag about catching Lucius. Harry has perfectly functioning eyesight, and he knows that Lucius is gorgeous and always has eyes on him, following him around.

Lucius knows that as well and he knows how to use it. It is no shocker that Sirius had indeed agreed with Harry's assessment and instead of just trailing his eyes after the wizard, he has done something about it. Harry is pleased for them; he truly is and wishes them all the happiness in the world. Despite his own doubts, he trusts Sirius. It isn't a fickle fling; that much is written all over the wizard's face, shining in his eyes even. Harry had witnessed a portion of it earlier.

"I had planned to tell you tomorrow. Tommy practically threatened me."

Harry's bright green eyes gleam dark and he asks, perfectly calm. "You mean to tell me that my husband was aware of it and just failed to mention it to me? Is that what he was hinting at before?"

Sirius shrugs and says with a slight quirk of his lips. "I didn't know that he knew. I suspected that he might have figured it out, but he never said anything. When Lucius asked his input regarding his divorce, Tommy just knew that we were involved."

Harry feels anger surge in him, but another little slip catches his attention. "The Malfoys are getting a divorce?"

"It's not a proper marriage anyway. Cissy asked for a divorce and Lucius willingly agreed. The papers should come through any day now. Depending on how quickly the solicitors can sort everything out."

"So you're going public with it?" Harry eagerly inquires.

"Not before the Ministry takeover. With the Order still lurking about, it would be too reckless. If they find out about my relationship with Lucius, they will figure out my true loyalties as well. They're not that thick. I'd rather not put you at risk. If I'm dark, who's to say you're not dark? We won't endanger you or whatever Tommy has planned."

"That's considerate of you," Harry smirks sweetly. "I know you can't wait to show him off, rub it in everyone's nose and stick your tongue out to them."

Sirius laughs. "That would be petty of me, but I don't give a fuck. I'd like to see Moody's face when he finds out. The old geezer is a homophobe, the biggest bigot I know and I bet he'll just choke on it."

"Mad-Eye doesn't like anyone. He hates dark creatures, half-breeds as he calls them, and he dislikes magical beings and can't stand two blokes walking down the street side-by-side. He's going to die a horrible death."

"He's mine," Sirius warns. "He owes me. He'll die when I permit it."

"Whatever you like," Harry says. "I'll have my fun with Umbridge. She's no better than Mad-Eye and I have a personal dispute I'd like to resolve. She's going to bleed like she made me bleed, but I'll drain her to the point of unconsciousness until she's ready to go again. She owes me."
Sirius shakes his head and puffs out a light laugh. "You sound like Bella."

Harry doesn't comment and seems far away. Sirius knows Harry is thinking about Umbridge and her methods. The bitch had tortured kids with a Black Quill, scarring some of them badly. Fred and George both had the reddened scars and while Harry doesn't like seeing them and has hidden them with a glamour, Sirius knows that they are there. Sirius wants to wrap his hands around the woman's neck and snap it, but he hasn't done so yet and never will because she is Harry's. Her punishment is Harry's to give out. Sirius is oddly fine with that.

"Have you heard already that Granger is dead?"

Sirius has seen the paper that is going to be published. A picture of the Muggle-born sprawled on the floor of the Entrance Hall, her eyes unseeing and face blank, is going to be a bolt from the blue. The public will go crazy.

"I saw The Evening Prophet; she is tonight's cover story. There's a picture and all."

Harry's eyes widen a little bit. "You already saw it?"

"Lucius had a copy. It should be in everyone's post by now. The front page heading was: 'The tragic end of the Golden Trio'."

"How dull." Harry sneers. "The Golden Trio? Who the fuck comes up with this tripe?"

"Lucius mentioned that it was Luna who killed her. Seriously? Luna Lovegood, the innocent doe-eyed witch, who doesn't look like she'd harm a Flobberworm? She killed Granger?"

"She did," states Harry, "Luna is full of surprises and your first mistake is to underestimate her. She may look like a fairy princess, but she's a lot tougher than that."

Sirius smiles. "She just appears rather delicate, that's all I'm saying."

Out of nowhere, Harry asks, "Can we have a Christmas dinner? I want all the family together. Do you think I should ask Tom?"

"Why ask him? If you want a family gathering, you're better off asking Cissy for help. She's the organiser."

"I know and I will ask her for help setting it all up, but I meant should I ask for Tom's opinion on this? Maybe he doesn't want to."

"Well, too bad for him. He doesn't get to complain and gripe about it, he did marry you, and extended family sort of goes with you. It's a package deal. Though I'd rather eat in the kitchen with the elves if you make me sit next to him."

"I've never had a proper Christmas before or Yule, as Draco keeps correcting me. I just want a memory I actually like remembering."

Sirius sighs. He hates seeing Harry sad. "All right, I'll play nice with the Dark Lord."

Harry grins. "I want a party as well. I'll invite the Inner Circle and wait until they get stuck under the mistletoe."

"As anyone told you that you're sort of evil, Pup?"
Molly is still shaking, even though hours have passed since finding out the horrible news. They are all in shock. Hermione Granger had been missing and now she is dead; no one knows anything. Molly doesn't shed many tears for the girl -- no, she is sobbing quietly because of her youngest son. Ronald is missing as well. She doesn't know whether her son still alive or not. He was last seen with the Granger girl.

McGonagall is perhaps the most rattled by the incident. The castle's defences are failing, if not completely gone already, and that means that the school is in danger. Any outside attack can tear down the last of the protective wards. She has faith in the Order and she has faith in Hogwarts, but she bloody well wishes for Potter to show up.

"Right," barks Alastor Moody, getting up from his seat, "You-Know-Who has played his hand; him and his rabble!"

"A girl is dead, Alastor!" says Minerva, aghast to hear the wizard's callousness.

Moody grunts. "Casualty of war. If she didn't want to be a part of this fight, then she shouldn't have involved herself with Potter. She knew the risks."

"Our main concern should be locating Potter," says Kingsley, his tone leaving no room for arguments. "The boy is the key. Dumbledore himself was certain that the boy is the one who can defeat the Dark Lord."

"There's just one tiny thing to consider," Tonks supplies dryly. "No one has seen Potter since Dumbledore's funeral. He could be dead for all we know."

"That wretched boy is hiding." Molly sniffs to herself and looks up. "He's just like Black; an irresponsible child. Everything we've done for that boy and how does he repay us? By hiding away and refusing to do his duty!"

Kingsley sighs, appeasing Molly's rant, "There is a chance that Potter has been killed, but consider it for a moment. If You-Know-Who has truly killed him, wouldn't he be celebrating, letting us all know? We haven't heard much for him these days, there haven't been any violent attacks lately, which might mean that he's also looking for Potter. If he is using everything at his disposal in order to find the boy, it would make sense why he's been quiet and it could create a perfect opportunity for us to strike."

Moody grumbles, nodding along. "Exactly. If we could just cut off the head of the snake, the rest of it would fall apart on its own."

One of the Auror's speaks up, "How do you reckon we do that?"

"It's fairly simple," Mad-Eye retorts with a smirk, "we capture someone who knows the inner workings of the Death Eaters; someone close to You-Know-Who."

Tonks raises a brow. "Not following you, Alastor."

Kingsley starts laughing in earnest as he figures it out. "Please tell me you're not actually thinking about kidnapping Lucius Malfoy."

"What's so strange about that?" asks Molly, backing up Mad-Eye. "He's You-Know-Who's pet
"I appreciate your enthusiasm, Molly, but this is insane. We won't be able to get close to him, not to mention get anything out of him." Kingsley counters.

"He frequently visits the Ministry; it would be easy to grab him and take him somewhere remote," Tonks muses. "And I know we have some Veritaserum left. It could actually work, Kingsley."

Shacklebolt crosses his arms over his chest. "It's risky. In principle, he's just another upstanding citizen, and we would be committing a crime. It doesn't matter that we know he's a Death Eater; he hasn't been convicted of any crimes."

"Rubbish!" Molly exclaims in anger. "Everyone knows that Malfoy is a Death Eater."

"He has the Minister's ear," Mad-Eye gives a sullen reply. "Rufus is a good man and even better Auror, but Malfoy has managed to influence him."

Tonks snorts as if she knows something others do not.

"Something you'd like to say, Nymphadora?"

The witch rolls her eyes and ignores the use of her name. She offers Moody a sharp look. "Scrimgeour might be a good man, but he's still just a man."

"I hardly think--" Molly starts, but Tonks cuts her off with a pointed look.

While Molly makes a grimace of disapproval, Mad-Eye speaks out, "I won't hear of such nonsense. Rufus would never be enthralled by that wizard! He's an upstanding, honourable man."

"It doesn't matter." Kingsley quickly settles the argument and says, "We can't trust the Minister. Times are treacherous and we cannot trust anyone."

Minerva, having stayed silent for a while, says, "Perhaps you should consider another detail about your plan to abduct someone. Lucius Malfoy knows each and every one of you. How do you plan to get near him?"

Tonks points out, "Well, it obviously can't be anyone in this room. Aside from me, that is. He won't recognise me if I don't want him to."

"Malfoy is a skilled dark wizard," Minerva drawls, "I do hope you all acknowledge it before rushing into this without thinking."

"All right," Kingsley states firmly, "either we come up with another idea or we make sure this plan is executed without a flaw. And yes, we have to take into consideration that Malfoy isn't a novice. As much as I hate to say this, and I truly mean it, Lucius Malfoy is one hell of an opponent. It's not a matter of getting to him, it's a matter of not ending up seriously maimed or dead yourself."

There is heavy silence for a few moments. They are all taking into account the plan itself and weighing the pros and cons of such an endeavour.

Someone asks up from the back of the room, "What of Potter?"

"We keep looking," Kingsley declares, receiving nods from both Mad-Eye and Molly. "We'll find Potter and he won't escape his responsibility."
A day before the big family dinner Harry has been organising with Narcissa's help, they have a party to live through. A nice holiday get-together without duels and torture, and definitely no pissed off Dark Lords.

Harry adjusts his collar and runs his fingers through his hair, trying to make it lay flat. It isn't obeying and after a while, Harry simply gives up and decides to just make do with infernal hair.

"Harry," comes a woman's voice from the doorway. It is Luna. "Your hair looks very sexy, leave it alone. The Dark Lord won't be able to keep his hands to himself."

"You think, Luna love?" Harry grins, hoping to have Tom's hands in his hair soon enough. "Everyone here?"

Luna offers a shrug and smoothes down her dress. It is navy blue, with long sleeves, and the fabric almost hugs Luna's body. The dress ends just above her knees, which isn't really pure-blood protocol but Luna certainly doesn't care. It is a perfectly normal dress, aside from the elegant silver snake that seems to be moving. It slides from Luna's hip, around her waist and ends up settling on her shoulder with the tail curling around her upper arm. Harry thinks that magic is awesome.

Her blonde hair is slightly wavy and falls loosely down her back. She already looks like a Malfoy. Harry says, "You look fantastic."

"Thank you, Harry." she smiles and adds with a curious smirk, "I'm rather hoping that Draco will help me get out of it later."

"Too much information, Luna."

"Oh, sorry," she sheepishly says, "Draco always says that I need a filter between my brain and my mouth."

"Life would be incredibly dull should anyone try to censor you, Luna." Harry links his arm with the witch's and goes on, "Now how about we make a beeline for the refreshments table?"

Luna laughs. "Sirius has been sampling the alcohol for some time now."

Harry only groans.

A lot of people have gathered around the tree. Death Eaters or not, they still celebrate holidays and can now even relax a little. The Dark Lord is not going to torture them for a bit of holiday cheer or sipping eggnog.

Bellatrix is the first one to greet Harry and Luna, brushing gingerbread crumbs from her cleavage. Even she has dressed up, although it is still a black corset dress made of leather and lace. At least it is clean; not a speck of blood on it. The witch flits away and Luna giggles, laughing to herself as she eyes the people in the parlour. She sees Neville and waves him over, rescuing the young man from having to stand next to McNair, who is telling stories about the executions he has performed.

Neville's face morphs into a smiling one when he reaches Harry and gives Luna a hug. "Nice turnout, right?"
"They all know Tom won't kill them on the spot for enjoying themselves. He's reformed now."

Neville looks amused. "I saw Fred and George handing out little hats and reindeer antlers."

Luna's eyes brighten and she excuses herself, fully intending to find the twins and get one or two of those headpieces.

"I'm glad you decided to come, Nev."

"Gran had plans to have tea with a side-order of gossip with her friends and I really don't want to be there when a horde of elderly witches try to pinch my cheeks. I'd rather mingle with Death Eaters."

"You know, oddly enough, these people aren't so bad. Yeah, they're nasty Death Eaters, but that's a job for them, a calling if you will. At the end of the day, they're just regular people with families and personal problems. I'm giving them a chance to get together and not torture anyone. They can have a chat and a few laughs without their masks on."

Neville gives Harry an odd look, but doesn't mean it as an insult when he says, "You are a strange one, Harry."

"That's a compliment, Nev."

"I meant it as one."

Harry grins. For a moment, he loses himself in the crowd and just watches everyone interacting. No one is doing anything remotely evil. Bellatrix comes back, wearing a green hat, and with a handful of gingerbread cookies, she struts around the parlour, making conversation with her colleagues. Harry spots Sirius sulking in the alcove, nursing a glass of champagne. He doesn't see Lucius anywhere. That is enough for Sirius to sulk like a child.

"Harry Potter, I've decided that you are brilliant."

Somewhat startled, Harry turns to see Pansy Parkinson, Blaise Zabini and Theo Nott. The girl gives Harry a thousand megawatt smile. "Seriously, this is a stroke of genius. You've done something nobody else has ever achieved."

"And what's that?"

Theo explains, "Now don't take this the wrong way, but you've managed de-claw the Dark Lord."

Pansy gushes, "We love this version of the Dark Lord."

"He's sane, for one thing, and completely brilliant with his new plans. He would have never achieved all this without you." Theo states with a grin. "And we're here and not cowering in fear. This is monumental."

They are all being sincere and Harry doesn't feel irked by their commentary. Pansy looks bright and breezy and Theo, who Harry remembers as a surly boy, is wearing a carefree expression. They are right, of course. Tom is less into killing first and asking questions later, and now actually makes detailed plans instead of just sending his minions out with their wands cocked and no actual plan in their heads. Harry doesn't want to take credit for it, but deep down he knows that Tom wouldn't have been the man he is today if he hadn't helped him find the way.

As if reading Harry's mind, Neville remarks, "Accept credit when credit is due."
"You deserve an award for it; a shiny, golden prize," Pansy says, not paying attention to Harry's snort. She then turns her gaze to Neville and purrs, "Well, hello there Longbottom. You've filled in rather nicely, Neville. Looking very fit."

Harry rather enjoys Neville going as red as a tomato. Pansy moves from Theo's side to Neville's and runs her fingers down Neville's bicep, and with a flirty flutter of her lashes, she hums, "You don't happen to have a girlfriend, do you? It would be a terrible shame, with us just getting reacquainted."

"I'm fairly sure we have never been acquainted with each other."

Placing her index finger on Neville's lips, Pansy silences him. "Hush, Longbottom, you're negativity is not wanted. Now, how about you get this lady a drink."

Pansy's eyes dig into Neville and the Gryffindor keeps blinking harder than normal. Drawing random patterns on Neville's arm, Pansy flashes a winning smile. She throws a wink over her shoulder as Neville ushers her towards the drinks.

"I can't argue with Pans." Zabini grin. "Longbottom is looking rather fit."

Harry watches with a silent smirk as Neville ends up under Pansy's thrall. Then again, Neville isn't a bumbling Gryffindor anymore, and he can take on Parkinson or a squadron of Slytherins.

"Have either of you seen Draco?"

Theo flushes pink and Zabini clarifies with a smirk, "Last seen snogging Lovegood. Had his hand up her dress and all."

"I think Luna isn't the only one who needs a filter."

Blaise turns and faces Draco. The blond wizard looks to be fuming, but Luna just beams behind him and she nods. They were, in fact, snogging.

Harry leaves the Slytherins alone and goes looking for Sirius. He quickly backtracks out of the hallway when he stumbles upon his godfather pinning Lucius to the wall. The wizard's hands grip Lucius in not so innocent places and Sirius is eagerly trying to stick his tongue down the man's throat. It would be incredibly hot had they been random blokes, but Harry considers them family. So it's a bit sordid; like seeing your parents snog.

"Get decent at once!" Harry barks, coming back to stand in the hallway in full view of Sirius and Lucius. While Sirius groans and thumps his head against the wall, Lucius swiftly smoothes down his robe to right it. Not a hair out of place, Lucius gives Sirius a gentle push. The blond wizard enjoys being indecent, but he certainly doesn't enjoy being indecent in public.

"Hey, Pup," Sirius says, cheerful as ever. "Something you want?"

"Nothing in particular; just wanted to know where you disappeared to." Harry manages a grin, not sorry at all. "Most of the invited guests are here already, and Bella cleared off with the gingerbread cookies."

Sirius is still in a fog of lust and just offers a noncommittal nod. He immediately snaps out of it when Harry tells him, "Siri, go find Severus. He hasn't left the brewing room all day and this is a party. I didn't go through all this trouble to have the man brood in the dungeons."

"It will cease to be a party once Snape shows up."
Harry sticks out his lower lip and looks straight into Sirius' eyes.

"Fine, I'll fetch the bat," the Animagus grumbles. "I don't know why I let you do this to me, Harry. Every sodding time."

He steals a quick kiss from Lucius and stomps away, heading towards the rooms meant for potion making.

"How did it go with the Minister?" Harry asks as he finds himself alone with Lucius.

The wizard straightens and composes himself in a flash. He says, "Rufus is not pleased, which is understandable, but he will follow his Lord's orders. All the troublesome Aurors have been identified and placed under the Imperius. Thicknesse is a useful tool."

"You don't have to report to me, Lucius," Harry says with a half-smile. "You could have just said that it went fine."

"You're the Dark Lord's spouse, Harry -- you need to know the state of things. It will benefit you in the long run, once he takes over."

Harry knows all that, but that doesn't mean he has to like to. "Are you telling me I can't just sit somewhere and look pretty?"

"It would be far more effective with valuable knowledge in that head of yours. You can't afford to seem weak, Harry. And having no information is a weakness."

They move into the parlour and Harry sighs, "A lot of people will think of me as a trophy husband, but that doesn't mean I'm a simpleton."

"That is why you will always have to be the smartest person in the room, the most informed."

"You mean have dirt on everyone?"

Lucius offers a shrug. "It is another way to keep them in check. Secrets are worth more than gold."

"In that case, I will hire you as a tutor and have you teach me the tricks of the trade."

Sirius arrives before Lucius can reply. With his face set in a scowl, Sirius glowers, "Thanks for that."

"You're welcome?" Harry hesitates, unsure why the man is thanking him.

"I need a drink," Sirius states, "to wash out the image of Snivelly's skinny arse."

Harry sharply turns and walks away. The current topic is not something he is ready to take part in. The two wizards find themselves alone.

"You didn't knock, did you?"

Sirius' face twists into a grimace. "Trust me, I wish I had. It was horrible, Luce. Snape was naked!"
And Cissy was there, looking very pleased with herself. They were *fucking*!

"I do not recall hearing your horrified screams." Lucius points out.

"I was too shocked to scream or do anything really. I just turned around and got the fuck away from Snivellus' bare arse."

"Well, they are allowed to have a good time," the blond reminds Sirius, raising a brow, "You wouldn't deny Cissy her happiness, now would you?"

Sirius shudders. "Of course I want her to be happy, but I was all for happily ignoring her relationship with that greasy git. Couldn't she have picked someone else, someone less morbid? Someone less *dead*. I've seen Dementors that are better-looking than Snape. And she knows I can't stand him."

Lucius heaves a sigh and plucks two glasses of champagne from the tray floating around the guests. He hands one to his lover. "Not everything is about you, Siri."

Sirius downs his drink and groans, "So I've been told, many times...by you I might add. Come on, I seriously need a proper drink right about now. And when this party is over, I'm bending you over your desk."

"Just the desk?"

Sirius grins, feeling better already. "I like the way you think. It's like our thoughts are in perfect sync."
"I commend you for making an effort," Harry says as he slithers his hand around Tom's arm and burrows closer to the man.

Tom is making an effort but that is the whole point of this social exercise Harry has organised. Dark Lord or not, the wizard needs to be more social and less homicidal, and a party is a perfect way to force Tom Riddle to mingle and not curse people on the spot. It makes warmth bubble in Harry's chest.

Tom's expression is one of utter boredom and his voice is flat when he replies, "I fail to see why this gathering is necessary. I happen to know my Inner Circle; I chose them after all."

"Trust you to miss the whole point of this." Harry lets out a gruff breath. "This isn't about your Inner Circle. They're not Death Eaters tonight; instead, they are people. Just wizards and witches having a good time and you are not allowed to curse anyone. This isn't a work function, Tom. It's supposed to be about fun and making friends with the people working for you."

"I do not want to make friends," sniffs the irate Dark Lord.

"And I don't find it all that surprising that you have no friends. Seriously, your attitude is terrible. No wonder you have henchmen."

"They need to fear me, not expect heart-to-heart chats over tea and scones."

Harry chuckles. "No, they shouldn't fear you. The word you're looking for is respect, Tom. And maybe a little bit of fear."

"Don't you have others to annoy." Tom raises a brow. "Go find your little friends and leave me to my menacing. Having you hang on my arm ruins the image of a fearsome Dark Lord."

"You know, I'm not entirely sure if you're being sarcastic or serious."

Tom's lips quirk a bit, but his expression doesn't change much. Harry releases his arm, and for a moment, Tom isn't sure if Harry is taking him seriously or not, but his thoughts are erased as Harry grabs him by the lapels and pulls him into a kiss. It isn't a particularly long snog, but it is effective. Just as Tom is about to slide his tongue into Harry's mouth, the younger wizard ends the kiss and grins. It is an evil grin. "With your precious image to consider, I'm afraid you'll have to wait until the end of the party."

Tom's face is now set in a scowl. He looks angry and aroused, but mostly just ready to slam Harry against a wall and claim him. Audience or no audience.

Harry only offers a teasing smile and lightly taps Tom's nose with his finger, making fun of him. "Enjoy your menacing, oh fearsome Dark Lord."
As Tom watches Harry's retreating back, especially his pert arse in those snug trousers, he has to wonder. Perhaps he has done something good in the past life, after all, to have been rewarded in the current one. Harry is that reward.

He gazes around the ballroom. All these wizards are his to command; they serve him and help him further his cause, and yet he can't recall ever thanking them for their unwavering support. It is a ridiculous thought really; him thanking those who serve him. A preposterous and humiliating thought. That is one of the reasons why he needs Harry.

His husband gets along with everyone and they all like Harry. He is that link between himself and the Death Eaters; he is the line of communication and in turn, the Death Eaters give their complaints and ideas for Harry to pass on. It is a wonderful system; one that makes sure that the Dark Lord never has to hold staff meetings with his minions and discuss stupid matters like team-building, seating arrangements and such rot. Harry is the one who encourages that nonsense and the party is one of those times, but Tom can't deny his spouse anything. What Harry wants, he usually has by the end of the day. The green-eyed wizard in question is standing with a group of five; Tom recognises Draco and his loony bride, but the others are unfamiliar. Offspring of his followers, no doubt.

Not far from the younger generation, Tom notices the Lestrange brothers conversing with the Weasley twins. The pair of heathens have silly party hats on. One has antlers on top and the other's hat is cone-like and green, with little red bells on the side. The four of them are sharing a bottle of firewhisky between them, which explains the laughter and rowdy noises.

No one seems to mind that the Dark Lord is among them. It is oddly refreshing. Tom wants to slouch his shoulders and stop glaring as if everything personally offends him. Perhaps Harry isn't so wrong after all. Party or not, there is still a need to discuss work-related matters. Tom instantly feels more like himself when Lucius walks over and says, "My Lord, I've spoken to Severus and he thinks he might have a solution to the ginger infestation in the cellar."

"Go on," Tom says, his interest growing.

"It would be similar to a spell used to contain magic; comparable to the spells used to bind uncontrollable magic in young magical children. Only this spell will block out all of Weasley's magic. He won't permanently lose it, but he won't be able to use any magic; it would be as if he had none."

"The block must be placed by someone magically powerful, my Lord. To ensure that it will work."

"Leave that to me, Lucius. I'm sure I'm up for the task," the Dark Lord says with an almost vicious glint in his eyes. "I have not seen Severus all night. Will he be joining the festivities or does he plan to languish in the brewing room until the sun rises?"

Lucius snorts to himself and clears his throat, ignoring the raised brow from his Lord. "Severus is
about as festive as a funeral. He will not come on his own."

"I'm surprised that Harry hasn't noticed it yet."

Lucius comments with a thin smile, "Ah, well...Harry did send Sirius to fetch the surly Potion master but tactless as he is, Sirius barged in on Severus in a rather awkward moment. Severus is a very private wizard and I'm sure he will not join the party, knowing that Sirius is here."

"Sometimes I think I ought to curse them both for keeping this ridiculous feud going, but then I find myself entertained by the sheer bull-headedness of such a composed individual as Severus Snape. I will not waste curses on them if they insist on doing it themselves," the Dark Lord states, wearing a faint smirk. "Perhaps another duel would settle it. I heard it was rather inspiring; even Bellatrix was impressed."

Lucius hums. "Severus is still rather tetchy."

"It is his natural state, but I cannot blame him for trying to separate Black's head from his shoulders. I have the same urge every now and then. Harry would never forgive me for mutilating his pet dog," Tom muses and glances at Lucius. He is talking about the man's lover after all. "Harry is happy for the two of you."

Lucius' face softens. "Harry's approval means a great deal to Sirius."

"When will the divorce be finalised?" Tom asks, suddenly feeling like he is talking to a friend. It is a strange thought. Lucius is like a friend to him, isn't he? So he can be nosy about his private affairs, right? The Dark Lord has no idea because he has no friends, aside from Harry.

"It was a mutual decision and Narcissa didn't make any outrageous demands, so it should be fairly quick."

"It will not stay undisclosed; the paper will eventually plaster it all over the front page. It will be a welcomed distraction, I think. Other news will be overlooked and it will work in our favour. I plan to secure the Ministry soon; it is a matter of weeks now. I want a smooth transition, something the public will not notice until the deed is done."

"It's a sensible tactic," Lucius points out, "with the Ministry implementing new laws and cleaning house; it will not be a hard sell. Fudge singlehandedly destroyed the reputation of the Ministry and we've only just managed to gain credibility. Trust won't be given overnight, but the Ministry is in a balanced state at the moment and Scrimgeour has done an adequate job in winning the support of the public."

"I quite agree," Tom notes with a small quirk of his lips, "however, we still have a long road ahead of us. Mindless sheep they may be, but they are not that stupid. I cannot make myself the Minister for Magic right away; not without support and a strong platform. No one will vote for Lord Voldemort."

Lucius suggests, "Then why not set up your candidacy under a different name? Either as Lord Slytherin or perhaps even as Lord Gaunt. The title is yours and the House of Gaunt was once prominent and respected; one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. That could be used to gather the support of the old families."

"I have thought about it, but some who remember are still alive. Besides, I look far too young to be of the Gaunt line, and it is believed to be gone. I was the one who helped eradicate the line, leaving myself as the last Gaunt."

"Dumbledore knew, but he is no more and I doubt anyone else remembers. You should claim the
title as the last remaining Gaunt. Discuss it with your husband."

Tom asks, "Why should I bring Harry into this?"

"You will not bring him into it because he is already part of it. As your husband, he needs to be informed, and as I told Harry earlier, everything he knows will only help him gain an advantage. He will not be hidden away for long and his status as the Saviour of the Light will only make it harder for him to keep his personal life confidential. He needs to be prepared for it."

Tom seems to consider Lucius' words for a while and finds them to be true. He asks, "Will you be willing to assist Harry with the Prophet and other publications? He is young and impulsive. I think he would rather tell everyone to bugger off than give out any information. I want to protect him as much as possible."

Lucius gives a nod. "I will instruct him when the time comes. I will make sure he is in control of what gets published. He is rather shrewd and already has a good idea how he wants to present himself."

"He is now Lord Potter, and as I understand he is also going to be Black's heir—for the time being at least." Tom keeps his face neutral. "Unless Black manages to beget an heir of his own blood." The Dark Lord sips his drink. "I will approach the subject after the holidays, Harry is easily distracted and he wants to spend time with his friends. Have Black collect the eldest Weasley scion tomorrow morning. Harry will want him here to discuss the fate of his brother."

Lucius nods in understanding but doesn't comment. He is still thinking about Tom’s little quip about Sirius producing an heir.

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Neville likes mornings. He enjoys the soft sunlight, the crisp morning air and the prospect of having a productive day ahead of him. He likes to take a stroll through the garden and sip steaming coffee while he does it. He loves the smell of morning dew in the greenhouse, watching the water droplets decorating the glass walls trickle down. Neville Longbottom is undeniably a morning person.

So when he opens his eyes, he expects to see streams of sunlight filter in and the smell of lingering night air. However, this time is different. He blinks his bleary eyes and notices that it is dark; heavy drapes pulled over the window, blocking all light from piercing through. The four-poster bed feels unfamiliar; not as soft as his own and notably wider. The air doesn't hold the sweet scent of morning dew, but rather a tangy floral scent that assaults his nostrils. His head feels heavy and his limbs seem powerless, but he still has enough in him to scamper out of bed when an arm shoots up from nowhere and drapes over his chest.

Completely naked, Neville Longbottom stands before the huge bed. His mouth had fallen open sometime after bolting from the bed and rubbing his eyes enough to see clearly. Despite the darkness of the room, Neville sees the outline of his bed partner, or rather the bare leg on top of the bedcovers. From the person's toes to their hipbone, He finds himself devoured by the darkness and shadow. He is completely naked, dressed only in his own skin.

When the figure moves and stretches, Neville recognises the face and lets out a puff of breath. He's
actually relieved because he might get out of this with his life.

"What's the hurry, Hot-bottom?"

Pansy Parkinson yawns and pushes the tousled locks out of her face. She is smiling rather predatorily; like a cat who has cornered the mouse and is about to sharpen her knife. She rises to her elbows and gazes at Neville with hooded eyes. In a snap, Neville reaches out and pulls a cushion to cover his privates.

"I already know what's under that pillow. No need to be so bashful," Pansy giggles and crooks a finger at Neville, "Come to Pansy, big boy."

Neville shakes his head and looks around, "How did I end up here? What happened?"

Pansy groans and slouches back into the bed. "Oh, you're one of those Gryffindors. It's just my luck. Well you see, stud...Pansy has no clothes on and neither does Mister Longbottom."

"No, I mean...I know what happened, it's pretty obvious, but I can't remember how we ended up in this room. Weren't we in the alcove, drinking some type of fruity cocktails?"

Pansy smirks. "Oh, that was fun, wasn't it? We were told to vacate the alcove by Draco, who wanted to stick his hand under Lovegood's dress again. We went outside; the garden was so pretty under all that snow. You really know a lot about trees."

Neville remembers bits of it. He recalls heavy snogging, but—oh...

"Remember now, darling?" Pansy grins, wearing a smile that is both lazy and provocative.

Neville blushes. They had talked, snogged and consumed alcohol. After some more snogging and groping, Pansy had found a bedroom upstairs and dragged him into it, slamming the door shut before jumping him. Then they had sex; lots of enthusiastic sex. No wonder his legs are jelly.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, Neville sighs. It is very out of character for him to do something like this. Let alone with Pansy Parkinson, the Slytherin who had been nothing but conceited in Hogwarts. Typical arrogant Slytherin, with long legs and those wonderful hips and creamy skin.

"Don't get all simpering now, Longbottom. Whatever. It happened and I won't force you to confront your righteous inner Gryffindor." Pansy huffs, her voice flat. She casts the covers aside and throws her legs over the edge of the bed, wiggling her toes.

Neville watches as she gets on her feet, counting the freckles on her back and trailing his eyes down to the curve of her shapely rear. Pansy collects her attire that is scattered around the room, her face set in a blank mask. She turns and Neville feels his groin twitch. Her breasts are for Neville to see and she doesn't seem to care about strutting around naked, but it is affecting Neville in a rather odd way. Neville likes girls; he is attracted to the shape of them, the curves and the silhouette of a woman's body. Their voice and softness, but also the strength of them. Parkinson definitely has all the boxes ticked.

Pansy Parkinson is slender, but not too thin; she has curves and Neville wants to run his hands down them, explore the ridges and bumps of her body.

"Look your fill, Longbottom; I won't stop you." Pansy winks as she finds her silk panties, but whatever she is about to add to it is cut short by Neville who grabs her by the wrist. He pulls Pansy flush against him, skin to skin, and slides his hand down her back to the top of her lush arse.
"My inner Gryffindor isn't all that righteous, to be honest," Neville says, pressing his body closer to Pansy's. "I don't usually act like this."

Pansy purrs, "Act like what? Like a sexy fiend, hmm?" Neville ducks his head and avoids Pansy's mirthful eyes. "I quite enjoyed your low inhibitions last night. You won't hear any complaints from me. Tell me, were you a virgin?"

Neville shakes his head, "No, but I am reasonably new to all this."

"Care for a demonstration then? I would be happy to help you unchain that wild beast you've been hiding from the world. You're more than competent in the sack, darling, but I think there is definitely room for improvements."

"A flattering remark or an insult?"

Pansy laughs. "A bit of both. I enjoyed myself last night, that's all you need to know at the moment."

A part of Neville wants to know more. He lifts Pansy up bridal style and deposits her on the bed. Pansy's protests die on her lips as Neville descends on her and covers her with his body. Neville is a fit specimen now; tall and wiry muscles in all the right places. He isn't buff like Goyle, but Pansy's eyes rake over his body with gusto. All that gardening and heavy lifting have paid off after all. Pansy's legs fall open to let Neville settle above her. The witch groan when she feels the wizard's hardening cock rubbing against her inner thigh.

"You said something about a demonstration."

Pansy huffs out a laugh. "Eager little lion, well—not little where it counts. Are you feeling brave, Gryffindor?"

"Actually, I feel like a cup of coffee and the customary morning paper for morning laughs."

"Is that so?" Pansy raises a brow and bucks into Neville, teasing him, "I can do coffee. Are you free, oh let's say... in an hour?"

Neville really is a Gryffindor and in his gut, he feels a deep need to charge head first into battle. 'Fortune favours the brave' is Neville's last coherent thought before he gives into the urge of the moment.

He flicks his tongue over Pansy's nipple, teasing it into hardness. He swirls his tongue around it and then sucks hard. Pansy screamed in a shrill voice. She can't keep herself from giggling and moans as the wicked tongue does it again and again until Neville moves to the other nipple. Satisfied with his work, the Gryffindor trails kisses down her stomach, pausing to nuzzle the soft skin of Pansy's abdomen. The witch twists her fingers into Neville's hair, tugging and scratching, unsure whether to push the head lower or pull him up for a snog.

"Morgana's knickers!" Pansy groans as he feels Neville's lips against her clit. "You're a fucking champ, Longbottom."

Neville lets out a laugh and lifts his head. "I think this warrants the use of first names."

The witch moans out as she enjoys being stimulated. She forces out a throaty reply, "I'll name my firstborn after you, just don't fucking stop."

It is strange at first because he has never done it, hasn't even thought about it, but there he is...or rather his tongue is, pleasuring the Slytherin witch. Pansy's whimpering and gasps only spur him on,
pushing him to do better. He brings his hands on the witch's thighs, smoothing the skin. Pansy arches up, bringing them closer. One of Pansy's hands is still tangled in Neville's hair, but the other has started drawing mindless circles on her stomach, occasionally moving up to rub her nipple. She bends her legs and cries out as a finger enters her.

"Stop teasing me, you brute!" she orders, her eyes flashing dangerously. Neville rises to his knees and licks his lips. Pansy's eyes land between his legs and she smirks. Longbottom really is a diamond in the rough. She beckons the man closer. "Let's see what kind of skills that innocent face hides, shall we?"

Neville looks anything but innocent as he hooks his arms under Pansy's knees and yanks her closer with one smooth pull. He grins as he tips forward, capturing the witch's mouth in a kiss. They both shudder as Neville's cock rubs over her face.

Pansy's eyes darken and she nips at Neville's lip as he teases her by slowly inching inside. Her body hugs the rigid flesh plunging in and then pulling out, the velvety tightness gripping it. Her face is a canvas of expressions, her mouth open with a pink tongue trailing over the lower lip. A particularly hard thrust has Pansy sobbing with pleasure.

Neville feels a hot coil in his belly, a trail of fire down his back and a tightness in his thighs. It is glorious and exhausting. Pansy's nails drag marks down his arms as she takes every inch of Neville, nestling him inside and releasing him with slow tenderness. It is close to sweet torture, but seeing that heavenly expression on Pansy Parkinson's face makes it all worth it.

"Harder! Put your back into it, Gryff."

Neville laughs, out of breath, "Are you always so bossy?"

Lifting one leg to rest on the wizard's back, Pansy smirks. "High maintenance is the word generally used when discussing my nature. Now stop being tame and let me see what you lions are really made of."

"In that case," Neville says, thrusting into the witch with a new, faster tempo. He skims his fingers down to Pansy's wetness and rubs his thumb over it in the rhythm of his thrusts, heightening the sensation and tearing a wrecked cry out of the witch.

It makes Pansy shout out, her voice hoarse, "Yes, that's it—right there."

Neville drives deeper, trying to reach her very core with each thrust. The burn is intoxicating; the sheer heat of Pansy's inner walls is enough to have Neville hooked. The witch's face is so open and honest, everything is visible and she doesn't give a damn. Somewhere between talking, dancing and drinking, Neville has lost his previous prejudice and views her with new eyes. She is smart and sassy, with a wicked sense of humour and a sharp, stinging tongue. She is obnoxious, but her absolute rudeness and dismissive attitude is attractive—at least it is for Neville. She isn't like other girls Neville knows.

He likes Pansy, despite being unsure of it at first, and now he feels fire licking at his insides as he moves inside her, bringing her closer to the edge. She appears wild; eyes screwed shut and her lip caught between her teeth. She constricts around the hard length buried inside, a hot judder going through her, and she clamps her legs together, holding Neville in place.

Neville heaves a low and throaty grunt as the tight fit pull his orgasm from him. His vision goes black and his ears start to buzz. The only sound in the room is their coupled breathing and panting. As Neville's brain comes back online and all systems start to work again, he rolls away from the
pliant body underneath and throws his arm over his eyes. He is still breathing like he has just run a marathon.

Pansy nestles to his side and buries her head under Neville's arm, gently tapping the wizard's chest with her finger. "I approve."

"What? Do I get a sticker that says that? Tested by Pansy Parkinson."

She snorts and sluggishly drapes her leg over Neville's. "You will be happy to hear that I'm taking the contraceptive potion."

Neville snaps his head up and allows it to fall back with a thump as he takes in the piece of information. "Blimey, I completely forgot about that. Sorry."

"Did I or did I not just say that I'm on the potion? Relax, Gryff."

"It was irresponsible of me, that's all. And I'm fairly sure I didn't ask last night either."

"No, you did, but you certainly didn't wait around for the answer. I think I might have misjudged you, Longbottom. I don't say it often, but I think you're not so bad for a Gryffindor."

Neville chuckles, carding his fingers through Pansy's hair. "You're not so bad for a Slytherin. I think this qualifies as promoting unity between houses."

"We will almost certainly need to exercise this new and wonderful method of settling the differences between Gryffindor and Slytherin."

"For the good relations between our houses."

Pansy smirks. "Of course. You are the Gryffindor ambassador of goodwill."

"So how about that coffee?"

"Let's reschedule, I'm knackered," says Pansy with a yawn.

Neville doesn't feel like moving either and grabs the edge of the duvet to cover them. He uses a wandless Tergeo. Pansy's breaths even out and Neville grins at the ceiling. This is also a very nice way to start one's morning.

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In another bedroom, in a different manor, Sirius only likes lazy mornings; those blissful moments when he gets to wake up with his arms around his lover. Or wake up to sweet lips wrapped around his cock. Those are the best mornings, to be honest. Dragging his body out of bed to do the Dark Lord's bidding is absolute murder and he hates it. Slipping out from the covers, Sirius sighs miserably when he glances over his shoulder and watches Lucius sleep.

Then he showers and dresses, keeping his muttering to a minimum as he exits the insanely huge walk-in-closet. His side is three times smaller than the blond's side. Lucius has a lot of stuff and his pompous arse only has the best. Sirius doesn't mind; in truth, he loves how snotty Lucius is.

He plans to quietly exit the bedroom, but he is stopped by Lucius. The man is no longer asleep and
now sits up in bed. He is still looking half-asleep as he mutters, "You are not as inconspicuous as you think, Siri."

The Animagus grins and forgets all about leaving. He climbs back on the bed and crawls over the wizard to get a kiss from him. Sirius smiles. "Didn't mean to wake you."

Lucius hums, "You were grumbling about stupid Dark Lords under your breath."

"He could have sent Bill a bloody owl. I have better things to do than play errand boy for him. Like enjoying a nice morning shag, followed by some strong coffee," Sirius says and moves to his feet. He makes a face that conveys his unhappiness. Leaving now seems so cruel, especially since Sirius knows for a fact that his lover is mostly naked under the covers. It's an injustice, a terrible unfairness, but he has to endure it.

Lucius props himself against the pillows. "Don't forget our dinner plans for tonight."

"Not bloody likely," Sirius curses. "Harry has been threatening me for the past few days, said he'll make me sit next to Snape if I give him any more crap about it."

Lucius holds back a smirk when he says, "It is important to your godson. As I understand, he hasn't had many happy holiday celebrations in his life. Is it so wrong of him to want one?"

Sirius lets out a groan and his shoulders slump a little. "Of course it's not wrong to want a happy Christmas."

"Then give him one. Stop making a fuss."

"Curse you for being right." Sirius sighs with no real fire.

"I am always right."

Sirius snorts. "You don't have to be so full of yourself."

"Don't you have a Weasley to find?" Lucius asks.

Grinning, Sirius approaches the bed again. Looming over Lucius, he comments with a slight smirk, "You don't like Bill very much."

Tipping his head up, Lucius looks a bit miffed but he hides it well. "As one would expect. He is a Weasley."

"You don't like that I like Bill," Sirius comments with a slow smile. He enjoys the flicker of something similar to vehemence in silver eyes and tugs Lucius into a soft kiss. Sirius chuckles as he pulls away, enjoying the nearly blissful look that it leaves on the blond's face. "Your petulance is heartening, Luce."

"I don't know what you are talking about." Lucius sneers and gives Sirius a slight shove.

Sirius isn't bothered by the condescending tone. He knows better and decides that Lucius throwing a silent tantrum is actually rather entertaining.

"Sure you don't. I'll be going then," says Black before leaving the bedroom with an amused smile. Lucius doesn't stop him, but Sirius knows that after having his sulk, the man will seek him out and pretend that nothing ever happened. Sirius uses the fireplace in the drawing room to Floo over to Grimmauld Place. The old place is cold and dusty, but Kreacher has been doing the best he can to
keep the house standing. After picking up a few items, Sirius leaves the house.

When Sirius strolls down the streets of Diagon Alley, people take notice. It is still early, some shops are still closed and there aren't many people about. Then again, a fair few see the infamous Sirius Black walking down the alley, wearing a carefree smile. He is an innocent wizard and it is within his rights to show up in Diagon and shop like a normal person. People still fear him a little but it is an involuntary response; after a few moments, everyone relaxes and gets back to their own business because Sirius doesn't display any signs of insanity and he's not cursing anyone.

The rebuilding of the joke shop is in full swing. Harry is an investor and a brother to the twins, so it is only natural that he wants to do this for Fred and George. Of course, Sirius himself wants to help. The twins remind him of his own youth and Sirius knows what it's like to hear discouraging remarks. His parents had made their disappointment perfectly clear.

The construction already started a few days ago but it is slow going. Some workers, plus the Weasley twins themselves, have managed to clean the rubbish and recover some items. Fred and George are not ones to sit on their arses and hide, so Sirius walks down the street to the place where the shop used to be.

Fred spots Sirius first, waving him over with a big infectious grin. Even though his dream is a pile of rocks and dust, Fred still feels pretty damn lucky. He's still alive and so is his brother—that sort of thing is enough to chase away gloomy thoughts.

"Take a break everyone!" Fred hollers over his shoulder and sends the builders away. George comes outside from the tent set up in the back, looking around for his twin.

Sirius snorts when a few of the crewmen look straight at him. They seem alarmed, thinking that the man is there to cause trouble. No one says anything; they just sip their coffee, knuckles white around the mug, and gaze elsewhere.

"You should have owled ahead," Fred says, walking over to Sirius.

"How's it going, making any progress?"

Fred claps his back and smirks. "We can always use an extra set of hands to help dig through this shite. We tried to use magic but it didn't really end well. We had some unstable potions in the backroom when everything blew up and it reacts with certain spells."

George, having reached the two, gives a smile. It is somewhat strained. "We're not making as much progress as we had hoped, but it's hard to find good workers who don't mind doing the work for free."

Sirius frowns. "You should have said something. I'd have helped pay for proper workers to clean this place up."

George winces and looks sheepish. "Harry already ripped our heads off. Called us idiots."

"The impudence!" Fred exclaims.

Sirius points out with a meaningful look. "You are idiots if you think you can keep something from Harry."

"Like you kept your relationship with Malfoy a secret and didn't tell him? How is that sexy Death Eater of yours anyway?"
Sirius grumbles. "Don't change the subject...and Luce is mine, so don't even think about it, Fred."

The redhead grins and offers Sirius a saucy wink. George whacks Fred's arm and goes on, "Bill has been helping out when he has time. He, too, said we were idiots for being out in the open like this. But we don't think the Order will try the same tactic twice since it didn't work out so well for them on the first try. We're not going to hide away."

Fred adds with a nod, "Yeah, this is our life. We won't let Mad-Eye and his thugs bully us."

"Good for you, boys," Sirius says. "Any chance finding Bill here?"

Fred looks around and shrugs. "He was here a minute ago, but I think he went to get us some breakfast."

"Breakfast is on Tommy today. I'm here to pick up Bill, but you should come as well. Harry would want you there."

George asks. "What's going on?"

"It's about your little git of a brother," Sirius states with a sneer. "He's going to receive his punishment."

"To be honest, we thought he was dead already. What with Granger turning up dead...and we know they were being held in the dungeons together," Fred speaks in a whisper, making sure no one is near enough to overhear them.

"Pup won't kill him," Sirius tells the boys. "Let's get your brother and you'll see. I had to drag my arse out of bed to get him, so he better be ready to go now. I should be enjoying my gorgeous boyfriend, instead of picking up you lot."

George grins as he asks. "The Dark Lord is sending you on missions like a proper Death Eater? What's the world coming to."

Fred matches his twin's grin.

Sirius groans. "Get yourselves sorted and meet me—where's Bill anyway?"

"Three shops down the streets; it's a bakery. We'll come find you."

Sirius makes his way towards the bakery and spots Bill inside, paying the storekeeper while juggling two paper bags. He decides to wait outside. The little bell makes a sound and Bill walks out with a content smile. He sees Sirius and his smile wanes. He asks. "Bloody hell, what happened now?"

"Why do you think something has happened? Seeing me doesn't automatically mean something is wrong."

Bill relaxes a bit. "Sorry, my nerves are completely shot. And in my defence, every time I've seen you lately, something is happening."

"Sorry to be the bearer of bad news. Again," Sirius smirks. Fred and George arrive just in time and Sirius goes on, "All right, let's go. I'll explain when we get there."

"Hang on," Bill raises his voice, eyes widening. "Something is going on, right? Am I about to be tortured?"

"No, of course not," Black muses but Bill doesn't seem reassured. So Sirius gives a vague
explanation, "We're going to visit Harry. Pup wants to discuss something with you."

Before Bill can ask any more questions, Sirius grabs his arm and does the same with Fred and George. With a faint pop, they are all gone.

The group reappears in the Dark Lord's manor. Fred and George yank the bag of baked goods from Bill's hands and disappear around the corner. Bill takes one look around and grumbles to himself. He is in Voldemort's house again. It is getting bloody annoying. Sirius only offers a wink before following the twins. Pinching the bridge of his nose, Bill counts to ten and then walks after Sirius. He ends up in the dining room and doesn't see Sirius.

The dining room, however, is not empty. On the contrary, it is packed. Bill is greeted by familiar faces and not so familiar ones. He recognises Draco Malfoy and Luna Lovegood, the girl sitting next to the wizard and eating treacle tart for breakfast. Then he spots his own brothers, already digging into the fruit tray with steaming mugs in front of them.

While he stands in the doorway, a few people pass him. A girl with brown hair is pulling a wizard by the hand. Bill recognises Neville Longbottom. Then another familiar face shows up. It is Snape. He takes one look at the table filled with a bunch of messy teenagers and flees, his robes billowing behind him like the menacing wings of a bat.

"What is it with you and doorways, Weasley."

Bill turns and comes face to face with Rabastan Lestrange. The man is wearing a bored expression, but there is something else there as well. A certain irritation.

"It's a shame there wasn't any mistletoe hanging in the doorway," comes from Lovegood and Bill is quick to look up. He feels his cheeks go warm at the girl's insinuation. Sirius arrives in time to give Bill a nudge. Rabastan enters the dining room, picks an apple from the bowl and a croissant from the basket and then he stalks out again.

It is completely weird and it messes with Bill's mind; he isn't sure if he likes it or not. He observes the table.

"Oi, pass the cheese." Fred reaches out his hand, making grabbing motions.

Draco sneers at the redhead. "Get it yourself, Weasel."

Fred tries again, batting his eyes at the blond girl. "Luna love, can you please pass the cheese?"

Draco snaps back, his voice rising. "It's right there, in front of your face! Get it yourself."

"No need to be so hostile, Draco. Fred just wanted a piece of cheese; he didn't ask for a threesome. Besides, that's butter, you nitwit. There's the cheese." Pansy rolls her eyes.

Draco gives a clipped reply, "How should I know which is which? They look exactly the same. Don't be a cow, Pans."

Pansy clucks her tongue and pierces the blond with a glare. "Don't be a poncy arsehole, Dray."

Sirius groans, unimpressed and annoyed. "Merlin, you're all giving me a headache. I didn't break out from Azkaban to deal with whiny brats."

Then George gives a low whistle and asks with a grin, "Neville, is that a hickey?"
Longbottom touches his neck and clears his throat. "Mind your own business, George."

"That's definitely a hickey. Look at the size of that. Did you have a run in with a leech or what?" George snickers.

Draco smirks snotily. "Leave the poor Gryffindor alone."

"What's that supposed to mean? You make it sound as if being a Gryffindor is a disease or that we're complete morons." Neville shifts in his seat, looking put out.

Fred turns towards the blond. "Yeah, what gives, Draco? We're also Gryffindors and that's insulting."

Sirius leans back in his chair with a smug smirk on his face. "I'm a Gryffindor and I was always covered in hickeys. I was a very popular guy in Hogwarts."

Draco lets out a groan. "No one wants to hear about it, Sirius."

"I want to hear about it," Fred perks up.

Shooting a narrowed look at the redhead, Draco grits out, "Eat your cheese, Fred."

Fred doesn't listen and goes on, "Do you give Lucius hickeys? I bet he looks even hotter with love-bites."

Draco clambers up from his seat. "For the love of Merlin, all of you stop talking about hickeys! Weasley, you will refrain from making such inquiries in the future or I'll hex your bollocks off."

Sirius chuckles. "Draco, that was mean of you. Look at him, he's afraid for his balls now."

"You know what, I think I'll have breakfast in peace without a bunch of lions. And I'm taking the cheese! Luna, want to join me?" Draco reaches out for the cheese plate, but Pansy slaps his hand.

"Draco Malfoy, put down the cheese and stop making such a spectacle. Honestly, you're acting like a complete twit."

Snorting, Draco jeers, "Pans, are you using your serious voice on me? You know it doesn't work on me, stop trying to—"

Pansy turns to the blonde witch and smiles. "Luna, did you know that Draco used to—what the hell was that for! It's in my hair. Did you really just threw treacle tart at me, you absolute monster!"

Draco shrugs, placing the spoon down. "My hand must have slipped."

Luna touches Draco's arm, saying, "Draco, that wasn't very nice of you. You should apologise to Pansy."

"What? But she—" Draco splutters.

Luna's smile slips a bit and she says again, her tone growing colder. "Draco, I want you to apologise."

Fred whispers to no one in particular, "Is Luna using voice magic? That's brilliant."

Bill Weasley cannot stop staring with his mouth falling open; he certainly can't understand what he is seeing. They really are children, bickering and fighting like a bunch of brats. This is the Dark Lord's
home, right? So how come that's even allowed? A laugh from behind catches Bill's attention and he
turns.

Harry is standing in the doorway, wearing a large grin. "Yes, this is the terrifying Dark side,
squabbling over cheese and hickeys and throwing food."

"Harry!" Fred and George both cry out in unison.

Harry pats Bill on the back and sighs, "You'll get used to it; should you wish to, that is."

The green-eyed wizard takes a seat next to Fred. He motions Bill to join them. Sitting down, the girl
with brown hair eyes him and cocks her head to the side as she opens her mouth, "Another one?
How many Weasleys are there?"

"Plenty to go around. Why, you interested?" George wiggles his brows.

The witch offers George a sneer. "Are you interested in getting your head flushed down the toilet?"

Fred snickers and gets kicked in the shin by his twin. Harry takes a sip of pumpkin juice. He says to
Bill, "There's something I want to talk about. Did Siri explain why you were asked to come here?"

"I wasn't asked; I was just taken along for the ride. Sirius said you had something to discuss, but he
didn't go into detail."

Harry gets up and tells Bill to follow. He doesn't want everyone to hear this part. They move to stand
in the hallway.

"Well, it's about Ron," Harry tells the redhead, waiting for Bill's reaction.

"I sort of figured you'd want to talk about him...with Granger's dead body suddenly turning up. I
only ask that you let him keep his life."

"I know and I did promise to let him live, but I have chosen a suitable punishment for him. I know
he's your little brother and you care for him, but I owe him no kindness. I will understand if you
choose to hate me for what I'm about to do."

Bill cares for Ron, that's true; they are brothers. But Ron is a selfish little git, unhappy with what he
had—a family and a good friend in Harry. He made a choice and it had been a selfish one; he had
turned his back on Harry and had sided with Dumbledore. He had spied on Harry and he had taken
Harry's money; he had even spread lies about the green-eyed wizard. Ron deserves whatever Harry
has planned, and if in the end, Ron is allowed to live—well, Bill knows that the Dark Lord does not
show mercy, so it is a big deal in Bill's view.

"I won't hate you, Harry."

"Even if I tell you that I plan to take away his magic and basically leave him a Squib?"

Bill's eyes widen a bit. It is indeed a cruel punishment, a wizard's worst nightmare, but at least Ron
will be able to change his future. He will be alive. "Even then I won't hate you. I know you're only
doing this because I asked, Harry... and I am grateful for it. You're my brother as well and Ron
brought this on himself. I can't help him any more than he wants to be helped."

"There's another thing I wanted to talk about; it concerns your mum and dad." Harry doesn't find it
easy to speak of it because he likes Bill and wants him to be a part of the future. He wants Bill's
support and friendship. He is talking about the man's family and their chances of survival. "It's up to
you to get your mum and dad to stop fighting us. I don't want you or the twins to lose your parents, but it will happen if they keep up this ridiculous fight. I'm giving you a heads-up because when we take down the Order, and your mum and dad are with them, I can't promise that they'll live through it. I won't save them if they themselves insist on putting their lives at stake. Talk to them, or take them out of the country. I really don't care. I will not tell you this again, Bill. It's not something the Dark Lord grants very often, but I asked this of him because I don't want my friends to suffer."

Bill can't find a single reason to feel angry. It has been on his mind lately, the weight of it makes his head hurt. "I think Dad sees that there is nothing to fight for anymore. He suspects that the Ministry has been infiltrated, but then again, he doesn't have anything bad to say about the Ministry. Everything is better than it used to be and I think he sees that; and even if he doesn't want to admit it, he knows that the Light has lost. My mum—well, she's hell-bent on fighting alongside the Order. She has never doubted Dumbledore, not even when Ginny died. I don't think she'll back down; if anything, she'd rather die than accept Voldemort as the victor."

"Perhaps Arthur can be convinced to stand down. He would have the rest of his life to enjoy if he does. Like I said, it's up to you."

Bill nods. He asks, "When will you take Ron's magic?"

"As soon as Severus is done tweaking the spell. It will block Ron's magic, so strictly speaking, he won't lose it. He just won't be able to access it. I won't be telling him that and neither will you."

"I think telling him would make him feel even worse, so I won't tell him that he has it but won't be able to use it," Bill states with a heavy heart. "Can I see him before you do the spell? He needs to know that I won't be stopping it. He has to grow up and realise that his actions have consequences. That he can't always hide under Mum's skirt."

"If you wish to see him, I can have someone escort you into the cellar. But I'm giving you a heads-up; it's not a pretty sight."

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Ron is a mess, but he is still a stubborn git and spits on the floor when a small delegation of wizards arrives. Severus only raises a brow and looks Ron over with a dark look that speaks of unbridled glee. As a teacher, Snape considers Weasley to be an ignorant and lazy nitwit. But as a wizard, he considers the youngest Weasley boy a travesty. Ronald knows nothing of loyalty or honour; he is a lousy friend and a lousy wizard.

Bill stands in the back. After speaking with Harry some more, he had agreed to collect his brother in a few days and take him home. Ron is going to be bound to secrecy and he won't be able to speak of what had happened to him or who had done it. He will remember his stay in the dungeons and he will remember the pain, the humiliation, the reason why he has no magic. He just can't speak of it to anyone.

McNair and Crabbe haul Ron to his feet and drag the kicking redhead out of his dirty dwelling. Harry walks down the stairs with Tom and he notices Bill standing in the shadows.

Seeing Harry makes Ron scream out, "You bastard! You'll pay for this, Potter! You'll all pay for doing this to me! You're a freak!"
"A truly delightful young wizard." Severus drawls. He keeps his keen eyes on Harry and the Dark Lord; both choose to stay in the shadows for now as well.

Ronald turns his ire towards Snape. "You're a fucking traitor, Snape! A slimy snake."

Snape looks unmoved; he only quirks a brow at the teen's rant. It's not like he cares for the words of a spineless worm. Besides, he had betrayed Dumbledore and had enjoyed every moment of it.

Harry starts laughing. He laughs and laughs, circling Ronald like a stalking panther. He moves to stand behind him and tips forward to hiss in the redhead's ear, "Pathetic. Is that the best you can come up with? Calling me a freak? Calling Severus a traitor? That's really pitiable, Ron. Work on your material."

"You're the pathetic one here, Potter!"

Crabbe slams his knee into Ron's back and Harry smirked as the redhead topples over with a loud scream. The green-eyed wizard walks around Ron and says, "What makes you think that, Ronald? What do you know of me, of my life? Nothing. You don't know anything, do you?"

"I know you're a sick queer."

Harry snorts. "Did you hear that from Mad-Eye, the resident hater of all things different? Come now, Ron, you can do better than that. What else do you think you know about me?"

"I know you're dark scum, siding with these bastards," Ron sneers out and adds with a sneering leer, "Do you suck their cocks too? I bet they pass you around. You're only ever going to be good for that, freak! A Death Eater whore. Do you let Snape fuck you? How about the Ferret? Or maybe you bend over for his daddy dearest? You're used up anyway."

Harry's eyes flash. It is subtle and almost undetectable, but Severus sees it. He sees that Harry wants to kill the little rat with his bare hands, but is restraining himself for Bill's sake.

"Why else would they put up with you? You're a useless slut, Potter. Just a worthless cock-sucker for Death Eaters to play with."

Severus notices it before anyone else, but he doesn't even try to say anything or intervene. The redheaded cretin deserves it. Tom walks out of the shadows, his magic practically vibrating. He looks ready to snap Weasley's neck like a twig. Even an idiot like Ron senses that this wizard is pure danger; he is not someone you want to ever meet. Tom comes to stand by Harry's side and presses his hand against Harry's back. It is a gesture to show Harry that he is there and with him.

The Dark Lord presses the tip of his wand under Weasley's chin and applies just enough pressure to cause pain. The redhead glares up at him, but he is wisely keeping his mouth shut.

"Have you ever felt pain? True pain that makes your heart stop and your lungs close up. It makes you want to scratch your skin raw and bloody. Do you want to know what it feels like to be in such terrible, endless pain that you would rather die than suffer through it?"

Tom gives Crabbe and McNair a small nod and they both take a step back. Before Ron can even react, Tom hisses, "Crucio."

Ron's body slides to the floor, twitching and shaking. He is unable to breathe or make a sound. His fingers claw at his chest, twisting and bending his limbs at odd angles. He starts to turn a little purple, but Tom keeps the curse on him. Harry watches with detached eyes. When Ron looks ready to pass out, Tom lifts the curse. "Shall I continue?"
The redhead violently shakes his head. He raises his head and stares straight at Bill. His face is set in a disbelieving scowl, but he can't speak. He can't call out for his brother.

"Crucio."

It happens again. Twitching, scratching, bending, twisting and Ron's face turning into a rather fetching colour of mauve. Only this time, Ron soils himself. Tom sneers at that and removes the curse. Harry looks completely dispassionate, but there is something else there as well. It is the final piece falling away. Harry no longer cares if Ron dies, not even after promising Bill that he will live. The promise is slipping away. Bill, too has noticed it and he walks out of the dark, not sparing a glance at his brother. He is ready to stop Harry should there be a need for it. A single moment in time and Ron would be dead, but it doesn't happen.

Severus is never glad to see Black, but now he is thankful for his timely arrival. The Animagus saunters down the staircase, groaning about the filth and stale smell. He glances at Bill, but he doesn't care for the boy on the floor and throws his arm around Harry. He mutters, "Cissy wants to talks about the Christmas dinner. She's not happy with the average menu—her words, not mine—but I said you need to look it over because it was your idea in the first place."

Harry blinks, the haze of violence disappearing from his eyes; and just like that, he is back to normal. The dull edge has faded away. "I don't want to eat duck."

"You need to tell her that because if you two don't resolve this, we'll be having sandwiches and crisps," Sirius says and adds with a grin. "I have something to show you, an early Christmas present."

"Sounds mysterious." Harry smiles and gives Tom a fond look. "Don't kill him, but feel free to maim him. Dinner is at seven, so don't be late."

As the two Gryffindors leave, Severus releases the breath he has been holding. Weasley is still twisting in pain, but the Dark Lord is far from being done. Now that Harry is no longer there, Tom plans to break the boy before taking his magic. Bill lets out a deep sigh and walks away; he can't watch the torture.

McNair yanks the boy up by the scruff and holds him upright while Tom bends down to eye level. "You spoke ill of Harry and for that, I will show you more pain than you can take. I will break you, little Weasley. I will show you horrors one can't even imagine."

Ron sputters out blood and snaps, "Why'd you care? Potter's just a whore."

"No, Harry is mine and you are not worthy to speak his name. You will live, but I intend to break every bone in your body."

"He must be a first-rate cock-sucker."

Severus sighs and watches as the Dark Lord smirks like a ferocious beast before breaking Weasley's arm. It is visibly bent out of shape and Snape wants to laugh. It truly amuses him to see the brat digging his own grave. Now Tom is going to have him bury himself in it. Ronald Weasley will survive this and there will be some life left in him, but he will never forget it.

Tom enjoys it immensely and he makes sure Weasley knows it as well. He notes, right before breaking his fingers, "I hope you take this as a lesson in humility. You disrespected my husband and I cannot allow such behaviour. What sort of Dark Lord would I be if I allowed an insignificant pest to besmirch my husband's honour?"
Ron swallows. He realises that this wizard is Voldemort. The terrible, horrid Dark Lord who wants to conquer the wizarding world. It finally reaches his brain—Potter is married to Voldemort! It's so fucking twisted.

The cracking of bones echoes in the dank cellar, as do Tom's dark and delighted chuckles. For the next hour, Ron screams himself raw while thrashing on the cold stone floor of the cellar. Leaving him twitching, Tom turns to Severus and says, "It is a rather clever idea you and Lucius have come up with. Harry was most pleased."

Severus offers a curt nod. It's good to be praised.

Tom points his wand at the redhead and starts chanting the spell. The tip of the Dark Lord's wand starts glowing and the faint stream of light blue emitting from it starts to cloak the red-haired wizard on the floor. It goes on for a few minutes before disappearing and wrapping around Weasley like glowing ropes. The magical cords sink into Ron and pulse on his skin for one final time before vanishing. Crabbe yanks Ron up to his knees and Tom peers at the barely conscious teen. "The binding is in place."

Severus knows that the spell is perfect, but it is still nice to hear that it has worked.

"I'll leave you to tidy up, Severus. I'm afraid I'm running late to a meeting," says Tom, pocketing his wand. "I expect to see you at dinner, Severus."

"I am in no position to decline, my Lord."

Tom only laughs and ignores Snape's acerbic tone. Harry will drag the wizard kicking and screaming. He will make him sit next to Black as punishment should he try to get out of this family dinner. Tom himself has his doubts, but Harry is eager and what the green-eyed wizard wants Tom happily provides.

He casts one last look at the teen on the floor and says, "It is a pity I cannot string you up by your own intestines. I would love nothing more than to see you die. Be very grateful to my husband, Weasley."

Tom gives a nod to the Death Eaters and the message is clear. Ronald must not enjoy his stay in the cellar.

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Harry watches the elves setting up the dining room in preparation for the big Christmas dinner. The table is long and Harry counts at least 12 chairs around it. One elf is busy cleaning while another is decorating. Sometimes it still surprises Harry how much the elves love their work and how much it fills them with pride.

That's how Sirius finds him; dully eying the busy elves by the window. The Animagus calls Harry over and motions for him to follow. Then they Disapparate to Malfoy Manor and Sirius takes them to the sitting room. The young wizard moves to a sit on the sofa, drawing his legs up. Sirius slumps next to him and stretches his arm on the back of the sofa.

"What's on your mind, Pup?"
Harry blinks and shrugs a little. "Nothing really. Just something stupid Ron said."

"What did that little snot say?" Sirius raises a brow.

"I know Tom loves me, and whatever Ron Weasley thinks shouldn't matter, but he made me doubt myself. He made me—I wish I could kill him."

"What the hell did he say to you, Harry?" asks Sirius. He is getting worked up over it, the weird look in Harry's eyes only adding to it.

"Called me a pathetic freak, a sick queer and said that I'm only good enough to use as a whore and that the Death Eaters probably pass me around because I'm just a slut. Asked me if I let Severus fuck me or Draco or Lucius."

Sirius jumps to his feet, fists balled. "I'm going to kill that little bastard."

Before the man has a chance to storm out, Harry stops him. He grabs the wizard by the arm and holds him in place. "Sit down before you hurt yourself. There's no need to get worked up, Siri."

Black huffs, his body still tense and ready to snap. "There's every need!"

Harry sighs and tugs at the man's arm, forcing him to sit down again. "Tom's taking care of it. Do you think Ron is having a good time with the Dark Lord?"

"At least he's going to be very sore in the morning. Despite being a massive twat, Tommy loves you."

"Exactly," Harry smirks. "Ron just bought himself a ticket to an exclusive torture session with Voldemort. And when he's nicely broken, Tom's going to bind his magic and Ron will just be a pitiful weasel with no magic and a questionable future. Whatever slurs he can think up to throw in my face won't make a difference because I've won."

"Do I need to worry about you turning evil?" Sirius asks, raising a brow. "It's a great plan, don't get me wrong, but you weren't this vindictive before you met Tommy."

Harry shrugs. "You didn't know me before. I haven't changed all that much, to be honest. I guess now I'm finally free to act accordingly."

"Had I not been sent to Azkaban, things would have been different for sure. James wanted me to be your godfather and even though your mum wasn't sure at first, she agreed. I may have been a juvenile delinquent and reckless, but I'm a Black and we take care of our family, and you are my family."

Harry smiles and says, "You're still a delinquent."

Sirius reaches into his inner pocket and pulls out a small book. He enlarges it and hands it to Harry. It is a dark brown, leather-bound album. "I wanted to give you this for your birthday, but I couldn't finish it until now."

Harry takes the album and opens it. He offers Sirius a watery smile. "You put this together for me?"

Sirius nods. "It belonged to me before I was sent to rot in prison, but it's yours now. I should have been there, Harry; all of us should have been there."

Turning the first pages, Harry sees pictures of a dark-haired baby sleeping in blankets. Another
picture shows baby Harry sitting on his mother's lap, stuffing a rattle into his mouth. There are at least a dozen more—all showing Harry as a baby, nearly ready to start crawling. The next pages are various photographs of James, Lily and Sirius. Some are school pictures and others have been taken after graduation, but one thing is constant. The people on the photographs are all smiling; they all seem light-hearted and happy. It tugs at Harry's heart, but he quickly swallows the lump clogging his throat. "This is perfect, Siri."

"I tried to warn James," Sirius mutters in a defeated tone. "I told him not to trust Dumbledore, told him to stay away from it all. I would have tried to recruit James without Dumbledore's influence, but he and Lily trusted that goat more than anyone, more than me."

Harry closes the album and faces Sirius. Seeing the guilt on his face, Harry says, "It's not your fault that they chose to trust Dumbledore. You didn't know that Pettigrew was going to betray them. You did everything you could to protect your friends. There is no one to blame for that. You did all you could."

"I didn't do enough."

"You did what you could without compromising yourself."

Sirius looks away, absentmindedly picking at his cuff. He does feel guilty and will probably always feel guilt over it. Harry moves closer and huddles against the wizard's side. "What matters now is that you're here, looking after me as my parents wanted you to."

Throwing his arm around Harry, Sirius exhales heavily. "I'm sorry for being so difficult."

Harry snorts.

"No, really." Sirius states firmly. "I was told to stop ruining your Christmas because not everything is about me."

Harry starts laughing.

"Yeah, laugh it up," Sirius grumbles.

"I'm not laughing at you," Harry tells the Animagus. He points out with a grin, "I just think it's great that you're not on your own. It's an additional benefit that I actually like Lucius."

"Sometimes I'm not even sure if I like him," Sirius comments.

Harry hums under his breath, agreeing with the wizard. They sit in silence for a little while until the green-eyed wizard asks, "Do you think they'll forgive me for loving Tom?"

Sirius is stumped for a moment but then he considers it. "Honestly? I'm not sure, but Tommy was insane and unstable when he came after you. Now he's saner than I have ever seen him. He's not even the same wizard anymore, right?"

Harry sits up straight, his face set in a worried expression as he takes the album. He flicks it open again and stares at the picture of James and Lily sitting on the floor in front of a sofa, with little Harry on all fours, trying to move forward but failing and falling on his bum. His family... before the unthinkable had happened.

Sirius sees the sadness in Harry's eyes. "What's on your mind?"

"I don't feel like I'm doing something wrong by being with Tom, even though I think I should. Tom
didn't kill my parents—*Voldemort* did, and he's gone now. The wizard I married can feel remorse, and he does regret taking my family from me," Harry explains, trying to get Sirius to understand. He shakes his head a little and goes on, "I'm not an idiot; I know that they are one and the same, but Tom is the wizard Voldemort was *before* he lost his mind; before he did all those horrible things and before he went mad. This version of Tom has a soul; he did not kill my parents."

"I see what you mean, Pup." Sirius sighs and bumps shoulders with Harry. "He's still a huge prat with a serious control complex but he takes care of you, and although I want to kick him in the bollocks, I respect him for loving you. And now I'd like to kick myself in the bollocks for admitting it out loud."

Harry cracks a smile.

"The point I was trying to make is that when he's with you, he's not a homicidal madman. I have no doubt that without you, he would be exactly like the old Voldemort, if not worse. You make him a better man, Pup. That's all on you."

"You think so?"

"I *know* so," the Animagus intones. "Trust me. Even Luce thinks Tommy has lost the stick in his arse. You'll never hear him say it though."

"I'm trying to teach him a few things about loyalty and respect. He no longer needs fear to keep the Death Eaters loyal, but he's used to it; it's hard for him to accept it. Take Lucius for example. He has been a Death Eater for two decades and has devoted himself to Tom. Even after he went round the bend, Lucius still stayed and suffered through it, and for the past few years, Tom has treated him more like an advisor than a servant. He might even think of him as a friend, even if he doesn't like admitting it."

"Whatever you're doing, just keep doing it because it is working."

Harry smiles with approval and says, "You know, I hope he's down in the dungeons, beating the shite out of Ron."

"I would be happy to join him," Sirius half-growls, his eyes darkening like an upcoming storm. "The boy must take after his mother because Arthur is a decent bloke. Completely under Molly's thumb, but he can be reasoned with. That bitch wife of his—well, I've never wanted to hit a woman as badly as I want to smack her around."

"I imagine she'd turn any man off women for life with her nagging and screeching."

"Snape wanted to poison her once. It was one of those blasted Order meetings at Grimmauld and she insisted on cooking, pissing off Kreacher in the process, and Snape was there giving his report on Death Eater activity. The Weasley woman was rattling on about evil abominations, dark scum and how they all deserve to hang."

Harry snorts. That kind of talk *will* get you poisoned pretty fast. Harry asks, "Seeing as she is still alive, Sev must have held back."

"But he wanted to, you could practically see him grinding his teeth in agony. Molly was going on and on about the Light and how the sun shines out of Dumbledore arse, making snide remarks about my lack of interest in fighting against Voldemort's dark plague."

"She does seem to have tunnel vision," Harry points out. "She was nice enough to make me believe her sincerity but, in truth, it was all an act. She only saw a pawn in me and Ron saw me as a walking
piggy bank he could latch on and use. He never wanted to be my friend; as soon as he saw my scar, he saw fame and fortune. A chance to be someone other than another unfortunate member of the Weasley brood."

Sirius knows that Harry feels a deep-seated loathing for the Weasley family, naturally leaving aside the twins and Bill. Harry detests being lied to; it is probably the one thing Sirius knows for certain about his godson. Dumbledore had kept up with the lies until his death. Sirius is glad that the old fuck is already dead because that way he doesn't have to hunt him down and practice every torture curse he knows. Dumbledore is out of the picture and resting uncomfortably until he is good and ready for his last trip down to the burning pits of hell.

Harry has had so little control over his life and Dumbledore had taken away the last of it when the boy had entered the ancient castle. It is one of Sirius' biggest regrets; not being there for Harry. He shouldn't have gone after that snivelling rat after discovering what had happened to the Potters. It had been a stupid impulse; a decision forged in rage and pain. Ultimately, it had cost him dearly. Twelve years of Harry's life—twelve years of freedom and some sanity added into the mix; that is the price he had paid for being a reckless, anger-driven Gryffindor with little sense and plenty of dark curses to help him get revenge.

"You've gone quiet on me."

Sirius clears his head. Thinking about the past is pointless and requires too much energy. He manages a weak smile as he says, "Got lost in some bad memories, that's all."

"That's why we're making new ones; better memories for all of us."

"When I escaped, I could hardly believe that the sky above me was real, not a comforting memory to keep me sane. The first moment I felt the clean air, the coolness of it, the taste of it—I fell to my knees and cried. I didn't shed a tear when they hauled me into the cell and threw away the key. I didn't even cry when I found out about James and Lily being dead, but I bawled like a baby when I finally reached firm ground and touched the grass and saw the rock fortress behind me, standing far in the crashing waves."

Listening keenly, Harry blinks and forces down the tightness in his throat. The man's face is taut with pain, but there is also a lightness about him; it is like a bittersweet afterthought.

Sirius sighs and goes on, "Eventually, I found you and then I was furious. Twelve years suddenly had a solid shape; it hit me like a ton of bricks because I saw you and you weren't a baby anymore. I knew I couldn't just walk up to you and tell you who I was; I didn't even know if you knew me at all so I couldn't risk it, even if I wanted to."

"Mass-murdering maniac, a deranged killer, an insane psychopath—they painted a rather vivid picture, making sure that I would hate you. Although Dumbledore was clever; he kept his hands clean by keeping his mouth shut. He didn't want to implicate himself."

"But you never believed any of it." Sirius smiles fondly, proud of the fact that Harry is so sharp and had not been easily fooled by the Order.

Harry grins. "Would you believe me if I said it was Severus who told me not to pay attention to whatever was being said about you? Because he did. He told me the story how you had betrayed my parents and how you were convicted for killing Muggles and poor Peter Pettigrew—and after telling me all that, he said that only an idiot would believe it."

Sirius grimaces and falls back against the sofa cushions. He looks like Harry has forced something
nasty down his throat. "Snivellus defending me? It's a joke, right?"

"He despises you, of that, I have no doubt. But he didn't believe that you had actually sold out my parents. Knowing now that you were both working for Tom, I can't say that it surprises me, but back then when I didn't know about your true loyalty, I really was shocked to hear him defend you. I knew he didn't like you very much; it was obvious in the way he drawled out the name Black like it was the vilest thing one could force him to utter."

"You know, I can't actually remember why we started hating each other. I guess it was hate at first sight. I instantly knew that he was a greasy, snarky git and I loathed him from the moment I saw him get sorted into Slytherin—the house of smug rich kids and evil little trolls."

"I think he'll say the same about you." Harry gives Sirius a pointed stare. "And for the record, it's a tad bit hypocritical of you to make it sound as if getting sorted into Slytherin is the worst thing that can happen to a child. All your family has been in Slytherin and you are in a relationship with a former Slytherin."

Sirius gives a snort. "Yes, and he's that smug rich kid with a silver spoon up his posh arse."

"I have never fully understood the Gryffindor-Slytherin rivalry. I realise that some snakes are a bunch of pure-blood jerks with bad tempers and pride, but it's not like that the lions are any better. Loud-mouthed, rude and some have shite for brains—not something to be proud of."

"It certainly has changed since I was there," says the Animagus, "because back in my day, Slytherins were evil and Gryffindors were valiant and great on their brooms."

"Are you saying Slytherins aren't great on their brooms?" Harry asks.

"Are you even talking about Quidditch?" Sirius counters with a raised brow.

Harry snickers and says "I am if you actually referred to Quidditch when you said Gryffindors were great with their brooms."

"Both on and off the Quidditch pitch."

"The sexual prowess of Gryffindors is something I am not familiar with, but I can tell you that some Slytherins are brilliant with their brooms. A certain Slytherin I'm intimately acquainted with."

Making a disgusted sound, Sirius groans.

Harry starts laughing in earnest and tells the wizard, "Need I remind you that you were the one who started it."

"I guess some Gryffindors can get along with Slytherins," Sirius concedes with a small frown but he is quick to add, "but I can only handle one. I refuse to acknowledge any good qualities in other snakes."

"Trust me," Harry quips, "they won't acknowledge your charms either. Lucius is the only Slytherin who actually wants to handle you or be handled by you for that matter. Which makes my life easier because it means I don't have to keep you out of trouble."

"You make me sound like a bothersome puppy who chews on boots and pisses on the carpet."

Harry smirks, seeing the grouchy expression on the wizard's face, but he remains silent. He takes the album and tucks it under his arm. Harry stands and gives Sirius a smile. "I think I'm mentally
prepared to face Narcissa and put my foot down without agreeing to everything she says. Sometimes
she just gives me that warm smile and I just agree with everything she wants."

"She used to manipulate people with it," Sirius tells the younger wizard, remembering their
childhood and teenage years, "but once you've been exposed to it for too long, you become immune.
However, you are susceptible. Avoid eye contact."

"She's not going to lure me in like a siren."

Sirius levels Harry with a look. "Well, if you want to eat duck for dinner..."

"Avoiding eye-contact," Harry quickly surmises, "sounds like a great plan."

"The other day, she gave Snivellus that look and he almost walked face-first into the doorframe.
Thankfully, he didn't because he can't afford to break his nose."

Harry sighs. "You're never going to stop with the petty insults and childish fights, are you?"

It isn't a question that requires an answer because Harry already knows what it will be. It is the same
with Severus, who will keep up with the hostility until his dying breath. Perhaps even in the afterlife.

"I promise to be on my best behaviour tonight," Sirius says and Harry actually believes him, though
he is sensible enough to know that it is near impossible for the two wizards to sit behind the same
table and not make spiteful comments or send barbs back and forth.

Harry is allowed to hope and he does because Tom will be there and he will have no problem with
cursing both men mute. "All right. Promise me that you will try your best and I will be content."

"I promise to be a good boy and play nice with the other children." Sirius has his hand over his heart
and all. And he looks sincere. Harry knows that Sirius will try and even if he fails, at least he had
meant well. Harry's happiness is a priority for Sirius, and it enfolds Harry's heart in a ball of warmth
to know that he is loved and cared for by his godfather.
Thirty minutes before Harry's big dinner, the invited guests start gathering; apparating in one by one or stepping out of the Floo. The Malfoys and Severus wait in the sitting room, having drinks before the small-scale banquet put together by Harry and Narcissa.

Fred and George have settled on the sofa, trying to convince Severus of their brilliance and their talent in potion-making. They have numerous products with them to show around, and even though they are not allowed to prank anyone, the twins still plan to cause some havoc. When Lucius steps closer to inspect their products, he says, "I loathe to admit this but you may be smarter than I previously believed you to be."

Fred and George grin and high-five each other. They both give Lucius wide smirks.

Severus drawls out with venom. "As if they need more encouragement. Their heads are big enough."

"Don't be so sour, love," Narcissa says, gliding over and twisting her arm around Snape's. "Those boys are very clever. I never thought I'd say such a thing about a Weasley, let alone two."

Severus harrumphs and keeps up his scowl. But he doesn't exactly argue. The twins are not regular Weasleys. There is something about them that just seems a tad too dark, although both the Weasley line and Prewett line have been considered Light for several centuries.

"We actually loved Potions, you know. Most of our products require more than just passable potion-making skills, and we make everything ourselves. We don't trust anyone else near our creations."

"You have to admit that we were pretty awesome, Professor."

"I will admit to no such thing!" Severus grits out.

Fred croons. "Yeah, you love us, Professor."

Sirius arrives, for once wearing pristine wizarding robes, and greets the others, but reserves his most intense greeting for the blond wizard. Knowing perfectly well that Lucius doesn't really like it when he is grabbed and groped in public—not to mention snogged in full view of others—Sirius smirks and slides his arms around the wizard. Lucius does not protest, but his silver eyes hold a warning. Sirius better not attempt to move any further. He only gets one of those.

Sirius relents and just keeps one arm around Lucius' waist, but he still has a spark of mischief in his eyes. He is going to keep infuriating the snooty Malfoy, but for now, he wants a drink. He goes to fix himself one when the Dark Lord walks in, wearing a very acid smile.

"Welcome to my home," Tom says, but it sounds forced; as if someone is standing behind him and poking him in the back with the tip of a sword.

Severus is on the verge of snorting, but Narcissa's elbow gently jabbing him in the ribs is a clear warning. The Dark Lord is in a foul mood and liable to cast the Cruciatus without blinking. They all
know that this dinner is Harry's idea; therefore, the Dark Lord had been manoeuvred into agreeing—and he is not happy about it.

Harry walks into the room just moments later, wearing a big smile. He spots Fred and George but no other redheads he considers family. "Bill isn't coming, is he?"

Fred shrugs. "Too many Slytherins in one place."

"I reckon he's still upset about Ron," says George, "but he doesn't blame you; if anything, he's pissed at Ron for being such an evil little git."

"He's probably sitting at home, brooding in silence." Fred nods.

Harry seems in thought, going over a plan in his head. He wants Bill to take part in his idea of a family dinner. As he settles on it, he calls Sirius over. The Animagus frowns but complies. He follows Harry into the hallway. "What's going on? Did the dinner get cancelled?"

"Could you possibly sound more excited?"

Sirius smirks, certainly not sorry for his excitement. "I can certainly try."

"Never mind." Harry rolls his eyes and says, "I need you to do something for me. I need you to go to Bill's—"

"Pup, I get what you're trying to do, but don't you think Bill has had enough of us for now? He supports you, but he has lost half of his family to Dumbledore, two are suddenly Dark, one of his siblings is dead and another as good as—all I'm saying is that maybe you should leave him alone for a while. You'll do him no favours by making him stay in the same room as Voldemort and Lucius; you know that both of them played a part in his sister's death. Let him get used to the situation and when he's ready, he'll contact you."

Harry's expression changes and he seems to consider it. "I'm being selfish."

"No, not selfish," Sirius tells the teen. "Just let him think it over. He'll be here soon enough to collect his brother. You should talk to him then."

"Since when do you make sense, Siri?"

The Animagus barks out a laugh, "It's known to happen. I can be a very sensible wizard if the situation calls for it."

"I get what you're saying, but I wanted this to be a family thing, you know."

"You'll have other holidays to turn into a family event, just not this Christmas. Who knows, maybe he'll agree to attend next year."

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Harry isn’t pleased about Bill missing the dinner, but he can see the point Sirius had made; it is just too early for Bill to accept Harry’s new life and the family that comes with it. Draco and Luna turn up ten minutes later and Harry is happy to see the pair, not to mention glad to see both wearing cheerful smiles. Or in Draco’s case, a smug smirk.
After greeting them, Harry pokes his head through the doorway, making sure that no one has slipped away. He spots Severus and Narcissa standing by the window; Severus is, as usual, dressed in black, but it isn't a teaching robe. The witch is dressed in dark green, but it is her necklace that catches Harry's attention more than her choice of attire. It is a choker with black and violet gems. It might have seemed just like any ordinary piece of jewellery, but the shape of it is intriguing. The gems make up a scorpion that rests just under her throat, dipping slightly down her neckline.

"It was a gift from Severus."

Harry turns and finds Draco standing beside him. Harry asks, "How do you know I was looking at her necklace?"

"What else could you have been looking at, Potty?"

"Your mother is a very lovely witch, Dray."

Luna giggles and interrupts the wizards before Draco can snap his reply, "Professor Snape had it specially made for Cissy."

"How romantic of him," Harry states with surprise lacing his words. It's not like Snape seems the gift-giving type. "I didn't think he knew how to romance a woman."

"She adores it, hasn't taken it off for days," Draco mutters, looking at his mother and godfather. "Uncle Sev is courting Mother, and she is smitten. Honestly, she's like a first-year Hufflepuff meeting that idiot Lockhart for the first time. Father used to throw jewellery at her and she didn't bat her eyes like that."

Harry shrugs. "If I were to gift Luna with pretty trinkets, she wouldn't bat her eyes at me either because we're friends and we don't have sappy feelings for one another."

"Very true, Harry," Luna smiles and adds, "I suggested getting Sirius a collar with diamonds."

Harry bursts out laughing, "That's brill, Luna."

"I wonder why Sirius didn't think so."

"I think Father likes it that Sirius doesn't need to be dazzled with the Malfoy gold. Sirius is the one who insists on getting my father gifts. He practically worships my father. It's a bit disgusting, really. Do you have any idea how many times a day I have the misfortune of walking in on Black's tongue down my father's throat?"

"Give the wizard a break," Harry tells Draco with a beaming smile. "He's a free man now. He had his name cleared, he finally got rid of the Order, he has his vaults back—Sirius is finally happy and he wants everyone to know."

"I didn't mean anything by it," Draco explains. "I merely stated a fact. You won't hear any complaints from me. I want my parents to be content and they weren't with each other, simple as that. I've known Severus my whole life and I know he will treat Mother with respect and cherish her as she deserves to be cherished. I have not known Sirius for long but he's honest about what he wants and I believe he wants to stick around for a long time."

Harry nods. "He loves Lucius and wants a life with him. A very long life."

"He's already living in Malfoy Manor, so I'd say that they have decided to have a go at a real relationship."
Harry looks over to where Sirius is standing, bent over the backrest of the armchair Lucius is sitting in. They are talking in hushed voices but there is deep affection in Sirius' eyes; a warmth that is reserved for those he cares deeply about. Lucius doesn't display his emotions on his face; it is rare to see the wizard smile unless it is a smirk. But Harry can see that the cold gaze is somewhat softened and whatever Sirius is saying has the blond wizard entertained.

Then Neville comes in, having been shown in by a house-elf, and greets Harry, Luna and Draco. He hands his robe to the elf, who pops away and returns in a blink to say, "Master Harry, dinner be served."

"Thanks, Pebble," says Harry and addresses the room, "Enough with the idle chit-chat, dinner is waiting."

Severus seems actually pleased to hear it and takes Cissy's arm. Draco and Luna follow the pair and Neville hurries after them. But he walks back to Harry and looks a bit wary when he asks, "Not to sound rude, but the Lestrange trio isn't going to come, right? I don't think I can—"

Harry cuts the Gryffindor off by saying, "No, they're not coming. I wouldn't make you sit next to Bellatrix, Nev. I'm cruel, but not that cruel."

Neville gives a nod of thanks. Harry considers his words and knows that Bill's absence is probably a good thing; he wouldn't make Bill sit next to Tom or Lucius either. Sirius walks past Harry and his face looks resigned; there is no getting out of this dinner. Harry grins to himself as the Animagus tries to grab Lucius by the hand but the blond only gives him a push and an icy glare. Holding hands is something Lucius Malfoy does not do... at least not in public.

There is nothing modest about the dinner Harry and Narcissa have organised. The table is filled with rare delicacies and various dishes only the wealthy can afford. Tom, like the menacing storm cloud he typically is, strides into the dining room and sits down at the head of the table without any ceremony. Harry ignores it and just lets out a small sigh; a petulant Dark Lord is not something he wants to deal with at the moment. Being a gracious host, Harry arranges everyone around the table and takes a seat as well. The Dark Lord is already downing his wine.

"Dearest, please show some decorum," Harry hisses through a smile.

Tom only huffs a noise through his nose, but he does place the goblet down, much to Harry's satisfaction.

The elves pop in and out, doing all the necessary tasks that elves normally do when there is a dinner party. The first moments are certainly quiet; one might even call them nice. It all shatters rather spectacularly after the first ten minutes when Severus and Sirius start bickering.

Narcissa's delicate voice is positively frosty when she hisses out, "Wizards, please stop quarrelling like children."

"I would if that greasy bastard stopped being such a bloody prick for one minute."

"Sirius, you are a mature wizard," Draco butts in, looking a bit peeved, "and you should act like one. At least I think you're an adult."

"Why am I being targeted here? He was the one who started it!"

"Go fetch a stick, Black," Severus sneers.

Neville can't contain his chuckles and Luna is smiling so brightly that it is giving the chandelier a run
for its money. The clinking of tableware dies down as arguing replaces it. Fred and George are both
grinning into their drinks. At the head of the table, the Dark Lord is casually leaning back with a
goblet of wine; watching the scene play out. He isn't exactly amused but he is not in the mood for
torture just yet. Sirius Black and Severus Snape will never learn to get along, even for the sake of
those around them.

"Oh, that's original, Snivelly," Sirius snorts and goes on, "Then again, you never had any
imagination or a sense of humour."

"I don't recall asking your opinion, dog."

"You don't have to ask, I'll just give it."

Severus drawls coldly, "That's the problem with you Gryffindors, always sticking their nose where it
doesn't belong."

"Sort of like you then," Sirius hums around his goblet as he sips his wine. "Why exactly am I being
forced to sit so close to you, Snivellus?"

"Don't ask me," Severus snaps. "A bowl on the floor should suffice for you, mutt."

"Sitting near you is enough to make me lose my appetite altogether."

"It pleases me immensely, you half-wit." Snape intones with a smirk.

Sirius smirks and cannot stop himself, "Good to hear that something pleases you, otherwise one
might think that you're dead already."

"It is clear that you left most of you wit behind in Azkaban."

Tom has decided to stay out of it—up until Harry gets up from his seat, his fists clenched and almost
bellows, "Shut up! Just shut the fuck up, both of you! Why did I ever believe that you could act like
grown-ups instead of toddlers throwing their toys out of their prams? Siri, you know how important
this is to me, you know damn well why it's important to me and still, you just couldn't fucking control
yourself, could you! I expected better from you. So thanks, a big hurrah for Sirius Black, for ruining
a perfectly planned Christmas dinner for my family."

Harry throws one last toxic glare at Severus and then he is gone, stalking out in a huff. Tom,
however, is very quick and has the proper reflexes for a Dark Lord. When Harry disappears around
the corner and is no longer visible, Tom flicks his wrist and throws Sirius against the wall—with the
chair and all. The wizard groans and they all hear the distinctive sound of a bone breaking; which
one, however, they don't know. On his back, teeth set in a snarl, Sirius attempts to get back on his
feet, but he doesn't get the chance because Tom is already thinking ahead and he has Sirius under the
Cruciatus before anyone can utter a single word.

The Animagus isn't tickled by the torture curse; in fact, it is the single most painful experience in his
life. Tom dishes out the Cruciatus daily, but those are mild compared to the one he is keeping Sirius
under. The wizard on the floor is trashing, his fingers clawing at his chest and throat. He's in agony.

"My Lord—"

Severus stops Narcissa from rising and wraps his hand tightly around her wrist. She can't just stand
by as her cousin thrashes on the floor, making choking noises as the curse cuts off his breathing.

Tom doesn't stop; he doesn't want to stop because he only sees Harry's crestfallen expression before
his eyes. He can't abide Harry's sadness and the young wizard's disappointment is enough to fill Tom with cold fury. George and Fred both get to their feet, unsure how to act. Neville actually trembles; the image of his parents being tortured insane with the Cruciatus suddenly flashing through his mind.

Blood trickles from Black's nose, the whites of his eyes are visible and his muscles twitch with involuntary spasms that go through his body. The curse is wrecking devastation inside the wizard. Severus does not care for Sirius Black, but he cares for the people who—for some insane reason—care a great deal about Black. Narcissa's tears are a bitter pill to swallow, but Severus does not think it wise to interfere; even if the witch next to him is distraught and ready to stick a fork in the Dark Lord's eye.

On and on it goes for several more minutes and Severus is sure that Black's end is near, but he sees movement from the corner of his eye. The Potion Master is shocked when Lucius stands, his chair scraping the floor, and very calmly draws his wand, pointing it at their Lord. His expression is perfectly aloof, but underneath the pure-bred mask of indifference, Lord Malfoy is enraged and scared witless. Perhaps that is the reason for his reckless behaviour.

Of course, Tom notices the wand pointed at him, and he can see a violent storm in Malfoy's eyes, but he can't say that he had expected it. It irks him. "You dare defy me, Lucius!"

"Release him," the blond's gives a cold reply. The tone of his voice does not suggest but rather orders Tom to end the curse.

For Tom, this is something unfamiliar, for Lucius has never before disobeyed him. It only fuels his rage. There is no wand in his hand—the Crucio he is casting is wandless—so there really is no wand for Lucius to flick from his hand, but having taught the wizard, Tom is also aware that Lucius can curse a hole through his chest, and by the look of barely controlled anger on his face, he will do it should it come to that.

"You dare go against me, and for what—this worthless mongrel warming your bed?"

Severus, knowing that a curse is about to sever the Dark Lord's head from his shoulders, rakes his brain and quickly pulls out his wand from his sleeve. He casts his Patronus and sends it to Harry, in the hopes that the boy will be able to get his husband to stop cursing the dog.

"Father, please..." Draco mutters, shaken by the violent turn of events. He is about to speak further when his mother stops him and glares. Draco is unsure whether she is angry at him for speaking or angry at him for trying to stop Lucius from cursing the Dark Lord.

"Release him from the curse," Lucius tells the Dark Lord, "I will not ask you again."

It is that spectacular and yet horrifying scene that Harry walks into. He stands by the door, his eyes landing on the unusual confrontation, but then he sees his godfather, unconscious on the floor by the fireplace, with blood running down his face, which has taken a bluish tint from the lack of air.

Narcissa utters an almost silent 'thank Merlin' upon seeing Harry. The twins gesture Neville and Luna to get away from the table. They know Harry's temper well and the green-eyed wizard is about to unleash it on his husband. Without being seen, Severus slips away from the table and pulls Narcissa with him by the hand. She immediately goes to kneel by her cousin's side and checks for any signs of life.

Without thinking about it for too long, Harry sends a hex at his husband, cutting off his airway. He had used the same curse on Ron but the Weasley boy had not been as strong as Tom. The wizard demonstrates it by getting out of the curse Harry had sent. He looks furious, but seeing Harry
standing there makes his expression soften. That is not the appropriate reaction because Harry's eyes narrow and not in a fun way.

"If you do not release Sirius from the curse, I will kill you where you stand, Tom. You have no right!"

Tom baulks a little, but sneers, "I have every right!"

Harry does not like the reply and slams Tom several feet away with another hex. It gives Harry enough time to raise his eyes and look upon everyone else. He is shocked by the anger and fear he sees displayed on Draco's face and the barely contained trembling of Neville's shoulders. Luna's eyes are beginning to fill with tears and she clings to Draco arm.

Harry doesn't need to look at Narcissa's face to know she is in a frenzy and that her hands are shaking. She can't even get a hold of her wand.

"Is he alive?" Harry asks, voice wavering and thick with emotion.

"Barely, but only a Healer can tell how much damage has been done. He was under the Cruciatus far longer than any of us have ever been. If he's still alive in the morning, he might recover," Snape gives a clinical answer.

Harry swallows the lump in his throat. He can't be bothered to look at his husband and instead walks over to Lucius. Touching his arm, Harry cuts through the red mist of anger that is clouding the wizard's mind. He urges the blond, "Lucius, take Siri home, he needs to see a Healer as soon as possible."

Snapping out of it, Lucius gives a curt nod and slides his wand back into its holster. He, Narcissa and Severus all Disapparate with Sirius' unconscious form. Draco and Luna share a look with Harry and Disapparate as well.

"Little bro, we're going—"

"—with the Malfoys."

Harry said, "Yes, I'll be there as soon as I can. Take Neville with you and make sure he's all right."

"We know he's your husband—"

"—but that was a rotten thing to do."

Harry agrees completely and when everyone is gone, he casts a spell that empties a bucket of ice water on Tom. The man splutters awake and immediately gets to his feet, ready to curse the first person in sight. He sees Harry and no longer wants to be in the room.

"If you've caused him any permanent damage, I may never forgive you. I will kill you myself."

"He ruined your Christmas."

Harry seethes, barely able to keep himself from blowing up. "No, you ruined my Christmas because you cursed my godfather until he couldn't breathe. Siri does shit that pisses me off, but that's because he's a childish person and I know that he doesn't mean any harm. Yes, I was angry because he promised me that he would behave, but you had no right to hurt him."

Tom snaps back at the younger man, "He was being disrespectful and I will not allow it."
Harry lets out a breath. He is so disappointed that he can't even look at the man. "You disrespected everyone here tonight. You do remember that Neville's parents were tortured with the Cruciatus into insanity by your followers and they no longer remember their son, let alone function as human beings? Did you see how scared Luna was, did you see her tears? Did you really think Lucius would have chosen you over the wizard he's in love with? You've learned absolutely nothing if you think it's your right to torture those who cause you offence."

"Harry—"

"No, I don't want to talk to you. I'm going to Malfoy Manor to see if I still have a godfather. I won't be coming home tonight because I really don't want to be near you right now. Don't come after me because I will curse you again."

Tom tries calling out Harry's name, but the younger man just raises his hand to stop him. Harry shakes his head and walks out of the room. He can't stay in the same room with the wizard any longer.

Tom grits his teeth together and with one angry swipe of his hand, plates and cutlery clatter and glass shatters upon meeting the hardwood floor. House-elves scamper away as they hear the noise; they don't dare approach their Master when he is so angry.

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Harry steps out of the Floo and hurries upstairs where he runs into Draco. The young Malfoy looks dazed and doesn't even acknowledge Harry at first.

"How is he?"

Draco blinks and focuses on Harry. He says heavily, "The Healer is with him at the moment. Come on, I'll take you to him."

As they walk, Harry mutters, "It's all my fault."

"How can it be your fault? You didn't make the Dark Lord curse him."

"No, but he did it because he thought he had a right to avenge my sour mood. I blew up in Sirius' face because he made me angry and Tom took it upon himself to punish Sirius for ruining my Christmas. So it's my fault because I shouldn't have yelled like that. I was upset and wasn't thinking about how Tom might react."

"Don't be ridiculous," Draco huffs, "none of it was your fault. End of story."

They walk the rest of the way in silence. Narcissa comes out of the room they are heading towards and her eyes seem red-rimmed. She catches Harry's wide, shining eyes and assures the young wizard, "He's still unconscious, but we managed to spell potions into him that will help relax his muscles. He can breathe on his own now."

"Can I see him?"

"Of course, dear. I'll go get some more potions from the brewing room."
As Narcissa scurries past them, Harry takes a deep breath and pushes himself through the door. He doesn't notice that Draco does not enter with him, having gone with his mother instead. A Healer stands by the bed. He turns his head to look at Harry and he has a disapproving look etched on his features but Harry's stare is vibrant with authority. He raises a brow at the Healer's scowl and then dismisses him completely. Harry's expression mellows somewhat when his gaze lands on Sirius. He looks rather haggard and abnormally pale, but otherwise intact.

"Will he be all right?"

The Healer gives a nod, probably realising that he doesn't need a quarrel with the dark-haired wizard. "He needs rest. He should to stay in bed for a few days and give his muscles time to relax on their own."

"Tell me about his injuries," Harry orders, growing angrier now that he can see Sirius' almost lifeless-looking form. "Please list them for me."

"Two broken ribs, possible concussion, potential nerve damage from the prolonged exposure to the Crucius curse."

Harry exhales heavily. "When will you be able to tell if there is any lasting damage?"

"The broken ribs have been fixed, though I suspect he will be sore for at least a few days. Once he is awake, he needs to be checked for any signs of concussion and any other head injury. I recommend a small dosage of a muscle relaxing potion until the tremors disappear completely. Bed rest and the right potions should cure him of any effects of the curse."

The door opens and Harry turns to see Lucius come in. He isn't looking his best either; a detached expression is covering the turmoil underneath. The Healer gathers his things and leaves the room. Harry isn't sure if Lucius can't maintain his mask or simply doesn't care, but he is a bit surprised to see the blond crumble just a little.

"Will it be okay with you if I stay the night?" Harry asks.

Lucius doesn't give him an answer right away, but eventfully he offers a brief nod and says, "The elves will prepare a room for you."

"You don't have to agree if you don't want me in your house."

"Don't be daft."

Harry doesn't push and takes a seat on the edge of the bed. "He'll be fine. He survived Azkaban and Molly Weasley's screeching; he'll just be pissed off when he wakes up."

"I am worried about the nerve damage," Lucius sighs, "for it might have long-lasting effects."

"The Healer said that he'll need to take potions and he needs to stay in bed for a couple of days." Harry, now sure that his godfather is alive and somewhat comfortable, decides to leave. He stands. "Take care of him."

Lucius doesn't articulate his answer; instead, he gives another concise nod to Harry as the younger man prepares to leave the room. As the door clicks shut, Lucius releases a shaky sigh. He removes his robe, never noticing his slightly shaking hands and fumbling fingers that pick on the little buttons. He can't get his cufflinks open either. He does not notice Narcissa come in, but there she is, gently covering his hands with her smaller ones. With a few quick and steady moves, Narcissa has the cufflinks undone and she wraps her fingers around the man's wrists. "Your anger won't change what
"Did I really threaten the Dark Lord or did I imagine myself committing such a reckless Gryffindor act?"

Narcissa's light chuckle conveys her amusement. "Then we must have all imagined the same thing because you indeed committed such a Gryffindor act. Perhaps not Sirius, but I shall put my memories of it into a Pensieve and show him once he feels well."

Lucius can't make sense of what had possessed him to point his wand at the Dark Lord and order him, but frankly, he does not care to make sense of it; at least for the time being. He sits on the bed and looks over at the wizard resting there, feeling a tight clamp inside his chest.

"While careless and positively fatal, you did choose to disobey our Lord, and I must admit that I feel a little proud. I do believe that it was possibly one of the dumbest ideas you have ever had, but I would have done the same; I almost did, had it not been for Severus stopping me."

"It did little to stop him; I only managed to tie a rope around my own neck."

"It will be all right, you'll see," Narcissa assures him. "Look after my cousin, Lucius."

"Perhaps I should stay in one of the guestrooms," Lucius looks utterly confused. It would be amusing in any other situation.

"You need to stay right where you are; it is the only remedy Sirius will need."

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It is during the night that Sirius stirs. It is not a pleasant awakening for the man. There is pain and there is definitely a weird buzzing in his ears. Sirius really hates it. He can't move. Well, he can, but doesn't feel like moving because it seems like a painful thing to do. It is dark and he is in bed; that much he can tell. But there is still something wrong with his head—everything is rather bleary and strange. Has he been drinking something illegal? Has Snape poisoned him? That seems like a reasonable explanation because Snape hates him. His chest hurts; in fact, breathing hurts, but his chest is tender like someone had clubbed him. He has a headache, but it is a dull pain and doesn't directly bother him. His muscles feel twitchy and sore. He can't really remember anything beyond waking up—oh, right. It's Christmas, isn't it? He had plans, he wanted to celebrate, there was a dinner party. Harry’s party. Shit, the party!

The Dark Lord had viciously cursed him because he had hurt Harry; Harry had been angry at him and he—Harry's face had been so dejected, so disappointed. How could he have done it? Why had he been so...self-centred, arrogant, careless? All of those apply. Hurting Harry is unacceptable and the last thing he wants. He is such an idiot!

"Fuck it all to hell!" Sirius manages a ragged breath before he feels the pain flare up. It isn't even comparable to the pain eating him inside; he is disappointed in himself. All he had wanted to do after his escape from Azkaban was to find Harry and protect Harry and be responsible for Harry. Everything has been about Harry and for Harry.

A soft light appears in the room. Sirius stares at the familiar ceiling.
"How are you feeling?"

Like shit because Harry hates me now. Instead, Sirius mutters, "Brill. Could do with a stiff drink."

The silence that follows isn't particularly pleasant; in fact, it makes the room seem a bit chillier than before. Craning his neck to the side, Sirius feels like an absolute dick. No, really, he compares himself to the lowest form of dirt under someone's shoe because Lucius is sitting there with a face that is far from blank. It is a bit scary to see so much emotion seeping through a perfectly crafted mask and he isn't even looking at Sirius. The wizard is glad that he doesn't have to see those glassy eyes because he is certain that they look a lot like Harry's had—full of frustration and anger and something that makes Sirius want to rip his chest open.

"I don't deserve nice things, I ... I've been disappointing people since birth, so nothing has changed there."

"You absolute twit! Stop making this about you."

Despite the pain and the raging uncertainty, Sirius jokes, "Oh, sorry, didn't realise it's not about me. It's not like I'm injured or anything."

Silver eyes flash, like a glint reflecting from a blade of a dagger. "Are you seriously trying to be funny right now?"

"A little situational humour." Lucius leaves the bed and Sirius wants to bash his head against something hard. "Luce, I'm sorry ... don't leave me here alone, come back."

After some silence, Sirius feels the bed dip and a glass bottle is pressed against his lips. "Drink it."

"I wouldn't be surprised if Snivellus—"

"Drink or I will leave," Lucius orders, his tone nippier than a November afternoon. "Do not test me."

Sirius doesn't want to swallow the bitter potion, but he does it because he is sure that Lucius isn't joking. He doesn't want to be alone. After a little while, the pain starts to ebb away; the edges of it are less sharp now. Bless whoever came up with pain relieving potions.

"Any pain?"

"No, just a bit sore," Sirius grumbles as he tries to sit up. He tries to keep himself from smiling when Lucius arranges the pillows behind him and helps him stay upright. It is less painful than before, but still bloody hard to move without causing his muscles to tense up. As he settles himself, Sirius grabs the blond's arm. "I'm sorry for being such an arsehole. I'm a bloody child and I know I'm totally undeserving of you, but don't leave. I'll be all miserable and pitiful and I'll pine after you. Like a discarded puppy."

Lucius sighs and looks away; mostly because he doesn't want to seem pitiful himself.

"Luce? Don't—I'm sorry."

"I thought he was going to kill you. You were convulsing on the floor, you weren't breathing. I didn't even know how badly you were hurt or if you would still be alive after he lifted the curse, and I kept thinking that you would die without ever hearing... I hadn't even told you—"

Sirius realises what Lucius wants to say and smiles, "I know, Luce. You don't have to say it."
"I cannot abide the thought of losing you."

Sirius feels a scratchy lump in his throat, and he tries to swallow it before he says, "I can't really stomach the idea of leaving you, so you don't have anything to worry about."

After a moment of silence, Lucius says, "I did something foolish."

Sirius raises a brow, "And you're admitting it?"

"Yes, because it could possibly cost me my head."

"Oh, now I have to hear about it," Sirius grins and teases, "What did you do?"

Lucius states, completely solemn, "I threatened to curse the Dark Lord."

Seconds tick by without one word from Sirius, but then he starts laughing and instantly regrets it because it bloody well hurts and because Lucius starts glaring a little too frigidly again. "I'm just trying to picture Tommy's face. Merlin, that's enough to cure me on the spot."

"You should have seen his face when Harry actually did curse him."

Sirius stops laughing and his eyes turn sombre, "Harry did what?"

Lucius explains with an amused smile, "While you were being cursed within an inch of your life, Harry came back. Once he saw your nearly lifeless form twitching on the floor, he reacted rather violently and sent a hex at his husband in order to stop him from killing you."

Sirius can only gawk like an idiot.

"Did you really think that Harry would hate you for being...well, you?"

"Yeah, I mean...maybe. You know, not hate me, but feel disappointed and angry."

"Oh, he was," Lucius says and notices a subtle change in the other's expression. He goes from slightly glum to positively grim, "but his ire was mainly directed at his other half. He was livid but also concerned about you. He is staying the night in one of the guest rooms."

"Harry's here, right now?"

Lucius gives a nod and watches the conflicting emotions dance across Black's face.

Sirius seems happy with the news and asks, "So, why did you want to curse Tommy?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

Sirius smirks a bit too wickedly. "It was very sweet of you to jump to my rescue, even though Tommy will probably demote you so far down the food chain that you'll want to throttle me yourself."

"He will try but he won't be able to punish me for going against him. Harry won't let him."

"Love it when you're being devious," Sirius tells the blond and urges him to move closer. Despite the fact that it hurts like nothing else, Sirius tips forward and pulls Lucius close enough to slant his lips over the blond's. He wants to do a lot more than place a chaste kiss on his lover's mouth, but his chest starts aching and it is bothering him somewhat fierce.
"Any chance of getting another potion?"

When Lucius goes looking for another potion, Sirius releases a heavy groan. Harry doesn't hate him and won't want another, more competent godfather. He isn't dead and Lucius isn't going to dump him for being an idiot. Life seems good.

"The Healer only gave me one bottle," the blond wizard says as he slips back to bed and Sirius immediately feels himself relax. "I'll order more for you."

"Let's bother the Healer in the morning. I'll manage without it for the night."

"If you're sure."

Sirius hums in agreement and smiles to himself when the other wizard nestles closer and curls an arm around his middle. He falls asleep with his thoughts centred around Harry and how he is going to make it better.

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Harry is unhappily prodding his fork into the plate of scrambled eggs when he spots Lucius entering the dining room. Narcissa greets him and a house-elf pops into the room, waiting for orders.

"Take a breakfast tray to the master bedroom. Something light."

The elf is eager to follow orders and disappears. Harry places his fork down and keeps his eyes on Lucius.

"Sirius is awake and complaining," Lucius says as he notices the teen's questioning eyes. Harry stands, but then he sits back down and frowns. Lucius understands the teen's hesitation and goes on, "Your godfather is under the impression that you now hate him and he's being overly immature about the situation."

"I don't hate him!" Harry exclaims. "He really thinks that I hate—"

Lucius gives a nod.

"Stupid mutt," Harry mutters and gets up again. "If you would excuse me, I have a godfather to yell at."

Harry stalks out of the dining room, jogs up the staircase and takes a right. Behind the door of the master bedroom, Harry feels a bit awkward because it isn't just any random bedroom; it is the bedroom Lucius shares with Sirius. Hearing a coughing fit coming from the room, Harry opens the door and hurries over to the bed.

Sirius is clutching his chest and coughing like mad. Actually, it sounds like he is choking. Harry feels helpless; he has no idea what to do until he remembers what the Healer had said. Sirius needs potions to help his muscles relax.

He spots a few bottles on the bedside table that are out of Sirius' reach and scurries over. Quickly, Harry opens one of the glass bottles and reads the label, confirming that it is the correct potion. Pressing the bottle to his godfather's mouth, Harry dips it and forces as much as he can down Sirius'
throat. After a moment, the wheezing stops and Sirius starts gasping for air, filling his lungs with the precious stuff. Harry notices his hands shaking a bit as he watches his godfather settle down.

"Are you all right? Do you need me to get the Healer?"

Sirius shakes his head as he slumps into the pillows. "No, I'll just stay like this for a while. Had a bit of a disagreement with the house-elf. It seems that I'm not allowed to drink coffee at the moment. Healer's orders or some rubbish."

Harry can imagine Sirius yelling at the poor elf.

"So...you stayed in the Manor?" Sirius starts, looking unusually sheepish.

"Whatever you're thinking, Siri," Harry speak with a smile, "you couldn't be more wrong."

Sirius mutters to himself, "Bloody Lucius."

"Do you really think I would hate you for being childish, which you are most of the time anyway?"

"Never seen you so angry before," Sirius mumbles, picking at the edge of the bed cover. "I figured you finally had enough of my shite. You've never walked out like that and the next thing I know, Tommy is throwing me across the room."

Harry growls, "He had no right to hurt you."

"He's been itching to off me since he first met me, so I can't say I blame the bloke for trying."

"It's not funny, Siri," Harry tells the Animagus with a glower. "He could have killed you! Just because I yelled at you. I never wanted you to be punished by my zealous brute of a husband."

"I'm a bit banged up, but I'll be back on my feet in no time."

Harry makes a face. "You had broken ribs, you couldn't breathe—who knows what sort of damage the Crucius Curse did."

"As long as you don't hate me, Pup. You don't hate me, right?"

"Of course not! Idiot." Harry snaps. "Lucius definitely isn't in it for your superior intellect, that's for sure."

Sirius barks out a laugh, "It's my rakish charm and staying power."

"He was very worried, you know," Harry states with a small smile. "I've never seen him show that much emotion in front of other people."

"I know." Sirius gives a smug smirk. "You'll put in a good word for him when Tommy gets over his shock and comes here to punish him, right?"

"If he ever wants to see me again, he'll need to learn a few new tricks. Grovelling for example, and begging—can't wait to hear him begging. If he thinks I'll just forget about this, he has another thing coming."

"Even though he almost tortured me to death, I understand why he reacted so violently," Sirius says and adds when Harry looks ready to protest. "I'm not saying it excuses him, but he does seem to love you and he blamed me for making you so livid that you couldn't even stay in the same room with me."
"You're right," Harry points out, "it doesn't excuse him. He can't just curse people who piss me off."

Sirius raises a brow. "Pup, he does it all the time. If someone dares to annoy you, he gets right on it and curses the life out of them. Remember when that Carrow bitch got mouthy with you? Tommy kept her in the dungeons for a week. Why else is she so meek now whenever you're around. Or that bloke who kept calling you 'Potter brat'? And Weasley isn't exactly having a good time in the dungeons, now is he?"

"That's different!"

"How is that different? I disrespected you and he did the only logical thing his reptilian brain could come up with."

"Shut up, Padfoot."

Sirius chuckles. "You know I'm right, but that doesn't mean you should forgive him so easily. I want front row seats when he's ready to beg on his knees."

"Oh, he will," Harry promises with an evil smirk.

"I'm sorry I ruined Christmas." Sirius shifts guiltily. "I know how much you wanted it to work. Snape was being a git and I couldn't help it. I tried, Pup, I really did, but he's just so irritating."

"Severus shouldn't have goaded you like he did. I'll be having words with him as well. I just expected more from you, Sirius Black." Harry pins the man with a narrowed look.

"I let you down again."

Harry sighs and nods. "Yes, you did. I don't hate you for it, but I'm disappointed that you broke your promise to me."

"You won't be looking for another godfather then?" Sirius jokes, but he seems cautious.

Harry snorts a little too bitterly. "Oh yeah, I'm having tryouts for the position next week. I'm sure Severus will be first in line, what with his obvious love for me, or maybe Remus who I haven't even seen since Dumbledore's funeral."

Sirius' face darkens upon hearing Remus' name and he says, "Dumbledore had him on a leash and even now with the old goat dead, Remus is still loyal to the Order. He doesn't want to fight, but he has no choice. When you're in the Order, you either fight with them or you're the enemy. Moody won't let him just walk out."

"You did it, though; you just walked out."

"I kicked them out, and besides, I was never actually in the Order. During the First War, I was somewhat useful but after Azkaban, I was kept out of everything that really mattered; never knew about important missions or took part in meetings. Moody and Shacklebolt kept me away from everything, thinking I wasn't any use to them because I was just another Black who went mad; an Azkaban fugitive with a few loose screws."

"It won't be long now," says Harry, "soon, the Order will be nothing more than a remnant of the past."

"We have waited long enough, it's time to make a party of it."
"You can do whatever you want with Mad-Eye." Harry shrugs. "As long as I get Umbridge. We are going to have so much fun in the dungeons. I've got big plans for Dolores."

Sirius laughs and immediately regrets it as the healed ribs start aching again. "Bloody hell...forgot about the pain."

"Do you need another potion?" Harry asks.

Sirius shakes his head. "It will pass if I stop moving. I can't believe I have to stay in bed for the rest of the week. Three bloody days with nothing to do."

"We will keep you company."

"It's a fucking nightmare, Pup," Sirius groans. "Do you expect me to stay sane?"

Harry snorts and gives his godfather a look that clearly asks 'are you sane now', but the Animagus only glares. "It's just a few days, Siri."

"Yeah, a few days," Sirius mutters. "I can't believe I have to spend my favourite time of the year in bed. I used to love Christmas hols as a kid, mostly because I had a chance to prank Bellatrix. One time that bitch cousin of mine hid a venomous snake in my bed after I made her wine spill all over her. I was rather hoping to do it again."

"Do you really think Bellatrix would just be satisfied with slipping a snake between your sheets?"

Sirius grins, but changes the subject and asks, "Any chance we can have a repeat of last night, without the hexing and cursing part?"

"Maybe," Harry replies with a smile, "if you don't keel over, that is."

An elf pops into the bedroom, making Sirius' answer die on his lips. The house-elf is wringing his hands as he says, "Harry Riddle, sir. There be a letter for yous, but the stupid owl not give Dinky the letter."

Surprised that someone has sent him a letter, Harry presents the house-elf with a nod and sends him away. Sirius grins. "Want to bet it's from Tommy?"

"No, he wouldn't send me a letter," Harry explains as he stands, "and it's way too soon. He'll sulk for at least a week."

The bedridden Animagus huffs a laugh. "His Royal Arseness does have a knack for acting like a little shite. And they say I'm childish."

"You are childish, just not for long periods of time," Harry remarks. "Should I send Lucius up here?"

"He has Ministry business," Sirius replies, looking put out, "so I'll have to suffer in solitude until he gets back."

Harry says in an amused voice, "He really does love you, Siri."

"I know," Sirius states with a certain amount of self-satisfaction. "One day, I'm going to make him say it out loud with people watching. Make him lose all that Malfoy training. It was bloody hard work to get him, I'll do everything in my power to keep him."

"I'm happy for you, Siri. You had such a haunted look about you when you were forced into hiding, but now you look healthy and content."
With a tired sigh, Sirius shrugs. "I didn't have a reason to be happy before. Just you, Pup...and I
didn't get to spend as much time with you as I wanted. Now I have a life that's worth the effort."

"Good. I'd hate to lose you, Siri. So please, for my sake at least, stop being reckless with your life
and don't get in trouble again. I'm going to have a talk with Severus as well, and maybe he'll actually
listen this time."

Sirius snorts but doesn't try to argue with his godson. By the door, Harry tells the man, "I'll see what
I can do about that Christmas dinner."

The Animagus watches Harry leave and feels himself relax. Harry doesn't hate him and there is still
hope for a nice family gathering later. It isn't perfect, but it isn't all that bad either.

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Harry gives the owl a treat after yanking the letter from its beak, the feathered menace screeching and
flapping its wings in agitation. It is no wonder that the elf hadn't been able to get the letter.

The missive is from Bill. In the midst of everything, Harry had once again misplaced the knowledge
of Ron being in the cellar, awaiting his fate. His magic is bound and he can't even summon a speck
of dust with it, but Harry still considers him a threat. It is only thanks to his brothers that Harry had
decided to let the redhead live out his days. Bill is writing to him, wishing him well and delicately
asking when he can come collect his rebellious brother.

There is also a few words about Arthur; apparently, Bill has been watching his dad and he is quite
sure that Arthur isn't agreeing with the Order's tactics or their stubborn streak regarding the continued
attempts to win a war that is already over.

Now Harry has to figure out how to deal with the rat in the dungeons. Bill is asking for a time, he is
asking where he can take Ron—frankly, he is asking all sorts of things Harry doesn't know how to
answer yet. Harry pockets the letter and mentally lists all the things he needs to figure out before he
can contact Bill and give the man an answer.

Harry doesn't want to go home, for he has no desire to run into his husband. The green-eyed wizard
figures that there are two possible outcomes. Tom will either apologise or deny his part in the
incident and just hope that Harry will forget about it. While Harry doesn't want to go to Riddle
Manor, he really wants to pay Ron a visit. It is a shame that the redhead is currently in the cellar
under Riddle Manor. Another thing Harry wants to do is check on his friends. Mainly Luna and
Neville who had both displayed a certain level of fear and distress the other night.

Fred and George had taken Neville home after the disastrous dinner but Luna had been escorted to
Malfoy Manor by Draco who had wanted to console his girlfriend. Harry has nothing better to do, so
he goes looking for the two.

After some aimless walking around the house, Harry spots the girl from a window. Luna is walking
outside in the garden, seemingly doing nothing. The witch is bundled up in a bright yellow coat and
wearing fluffy earmuffs. She turns and greets Harry with a wave, which the wizard returns.

It is snowing a bit. Harry calls for one of the elves and asks for some sort of warm coat to throw on.
A moment later, the elf pops back into the room with a winter coat. Harry doesn't know and doesn't
care who owns it.
"Good morning, Luna love." Harry approaches the witch.

With a smile, Luna says, "It's such a lovely morning, isn't it? Would you like to walk with me, Harry?"

"Sure." Harry agrees and they start walking alongside the yew hedge that seems to be infinite, but then they reach the fountain and Harry sees beautiful ice sculptures. He knows that the sculptures have been crafted by the elves; it is a tradition that had been started by a distant ancestor, but it does lighten Harry's heart to know that the elves actually enjoy sculpting them out of blocks of ice. They consider it entertaining. Luna is quiet as they walk. Harry clears his throat before he speaks, "So about last night...I'm sorry you had to see that, Luna."

"It's all right," Luna hums. "People do silly things for silly reasons."

"Yeah, he can be an idiot at times."

"I wasn't upset because of the violence. I have seen all sorts of violence in my life, especially since meeting you, Harry. It upset me because the Malfoys have become my family as well and even though Lucius thinks he does a good job of hiding it, I know how much love he feels for Sirius. It hurt me to see him so frightened."

Harry is a little surprised but doesn't want to mention it. "I know they have feelings for one another. Sirius won't shut up about it."

"You were alone before you found Tom," Luna goes on and waits until Harry gives her an affirmative nod, "you did not feel cared for; no one made you feel loved before Tom came along. Now, you feel complete; all those missing parts of you were united when you met him. Right?"

"I guess you could say that, yes," Harry shrugs, not wanting to get into that at the moment. "What has that got to do with Sirius and Lucius?"

"Lucius was much the same way before Sirius came along. He had friends, a wife and then a son, a master to serve; all of those wonderful things made him feel content for a while. But I think only Sirius can make him truly happy because human beings need love to be truly happy. He was alone like you were, but now he isn't alone anymore because Sirius loves him. Do you understand, Harry? How much love can change us?"

"It can also make us afraid. I think Tom was afraid of being loved; in particular, by someone who he believed should hate him. In a way, I did hate him for taking away my parents, but my parents were fools to trust Dumbledore. They could have left the country, made sure that no one knew their location, but they didn't. It was Pettigrew who betrayed them and Dumbledore who led them into danger in the first place. Why couldn't I matter more to them? If they knew that Tom was after me, why did they risk it? That's why hating Tom for killing them isn't warranted. He was fooled by the prophecy. They were all stupidly trusting and blind." Harry stops himself and sighs. "Sorry, didn't mean to rant."

"It's good to get it all out." Luna encourages the wizard with a smile. "You forgave him because there really is nothing good about keeping all that hatred inside you. You forgiving him helped him do the same; he could forgive himself for all the senseless pain he caused you."

"He is very much like that boy he once was before the Dark Arts consumed him completely. You know about the diary, so you know what he did."

"Yes, the piece of his soul hidden inside the pages."
Harry nods. "That was his Horcrux, which means it was half of his soul. When the diary was in
Ginny Weasley's possession, Tom used it to tap into the girl's life force and he created a physical
body for the soul piece inside the diary. He has all of Voldemort's memories; he knows and
remembers each and every crime he committed, but he's also young now. At first, I was confused
and I couldn't make sense of my feelings, but now I just can't hate him for something he basically
didn't do. He really is Tom Riddle now, that young man who has no actual connection to the death
of my parents because his soul is that of a sixteen-year-old boy who later grew up to be a maniac.
Am I making any sense, Luna?"

"He is Tom," the girl assures the green-eyed wizard. "You gave him a second chance; to have a
different life but also conquer the world as a Dark Lord. He's just a cuddlier version of the
Voldemort the world once knew."

"He has his moments as an evil git," Harry reminds the girl. "I don't think he would have killed
Sirius. Sometimes his anger makes him blind. He still goes all caveman on his minions when they
mess up."

"It will all work out in the end, Harry," Luna states with a knowing smile.

"I wish I had your optimism."

"It's not optimism," Luna hums, looking at Harry with sparkling eyes, "it's what will come in the
future. You'll figure it out when you are ready."

*****

Tom Riddle is in a homicidal mood. It is not an unusual state, for the Dark Lord is by definition a
menacing tempest with superior magical prowess, but this time it has nothing to do with other inept
wizards messing up some carefully crafted plan or even annoying him with something or other. No,
this time he is a looming torrent because of his own failure to keep himself in check. Close to three
days ago, he had committed an error. Oh, how he had enjoyed cursing Black. It had been exquisite.
It stopped being delightful when Harry had gazed at him with those brilliant green eyes that had been
filled with fear and loathing simultaneously. He had looked at Tom as if he could not recognise the
man before him; as if the wizard had been replaced with a golem.

It makes Tom violently ill; the thought of having completely fucked up his life with the only person
he can ever love. The thought is so troubling that he has to sit down and cradle his head between
shaking hands. What if Harry doesn't want to see him ever again? What if Harry decides to leave
him? What if Harry—

His thoughts are interrupted when a slight shiver of magic courses through him, alerting the man of
visitors. Someone has stepped out of the Floo. There are not many who have been given such rights.
Sauntering into the parlour, Tom comes face to face with Narcissa. The witch does not seem hostile
but her gaze is not particularly warm either when it lands on the wizard.

"My Lord," she speaks, voice perfectly even and devoid of colours. "I have come to collect your
husband's belongings. He wishes to stay at Malfoy Manor for another few days. We do not see a
reason to begrudge him. On the contrary, he is most welcome to seek sanctuary with the Malfoy
family."
"Spare me the histrionics," Tom sneers, his head threatening to split open with unwanted pain. "I know perfectly well that Harry wishes to distance himself."

"With good reason, my Lord," the witch smirks sharply, "for he is quite distressed at the moment. Having nearly lost his beloved godfather; surely, you understand his need to spend some time away?"

"I will have his things packed and ready," Tom flippantly offers the lady and inwardly smiles as he sees Narcissa's calculated smile falter a little. She has no idea that Tom is laying a trap and she is about to step into it. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I shall get back to my work. Have a nice day, Narcissa."

Only her upbringing stops her from stammering out her reply. She had been instructed by Harry to come and play out the little scene. The young man had wanted to test out his husband's mood after days of silence, but the witch has received a surprise instead. Tom Riddle is acting like a total pillock. She is ready to go back and tell Harry how brutishly his husband had acted.

She just doesn't know that it is Tom's plan to lure Harry back. Narcissa, thoroughly appalled, goes back home with a trunk of Harry's clothes and personal items. The elves had even packed up his broom and thrown in a pair of Quidditch gloves for good measure. Of course, she had not dared to tell Harry right away.

The next day, the young wizard is preparing another small Christmas supper; this time without curses and broken bones. They are all sitting in the drawing room where a beautifully decorated tree has been set up. It is significant to have a family meal now that Sirius is feeling well enough to roam around Malfoy Manor again. Severus had agreed to attend but only because Narcissa had asked him to stand by her.

Harry had threatened the wizard with inconceivable torture and a permanent silencing charm should he pick a fight with Sirius again, but Narcissa's threats of depriving the man of her company for a very long time have made him reconsider his attitude for the night.

Sirius, still feeling some discomfort, has settled on the sofa with a few pillows propping him up. The meal itself is nothing extravagant; a platter with fruit and cheese, various pastries, baked potatoes, fresh salad and some roasted venison that looks appetising. Never one for stiff decorum, Harry forces everyone to sit wherever they like with their food placed wherever is convenient. Harry and Luna both snicker at the sight of the Malfoys uncomfortably balancing their plates and wearing matching expressions of distaste for such beastly way of eating. It's barbaric to eat on the sofa.

"I would like to make a toast," Luna stands and holds up her crystal goblet. "To friends and family, to those who love us and who we love in return. To the spirits that have blessed this meal and of course, the Nargles inhabiting the west wing."

"To Nargles!" Harry echoes with a silly smile.

"I've been grateful for many things in my life," Sirius begins his speech. "I had extraordinary friends; James and Lily were my family when I didn't have my own. As you all know, I hated the lot of them. But there were a few I cared about. I would have gone barking mad without you, Cissy."

Narcissa leans over to squeeze the man's hand.

"Azkaban wasn't all that enjoyable, but I had something that got me through it," Sirius goes on and looks at Harry with a fond smile, "I had a godson who I was willing to stay sane for, although the sane part is still debatable."
"You are a little insane." Harry laughs.

"Who said I was of sound mind when I was sent to Azkaban?" Sirius jokes. "Bellatrix is just abnormally mad; makes me look good in comparison."

"I'm grateful you aren't a raving lunatic," Harry adds, "just slightly so."

Sirius snorts but says, "Anyway, where was I? Oh, yeah...things I'm grateful for. Obviously, my rakish charm and brilliant mind."

"Get on with it, you mangy mutt." Snape makes a grimace.

Sirius, always in the mood for some verbal sparring, says, "Go play with your potions, Snivelly."

"You are not starting this crap again," Harry warns and he means it. "Be nice or I will sic Luna on you and believe me, she's very good at nasty hexes."

"I rather want to see that, so feel free to continue," Draco grins at the two wizards.

"First one to say something mean or cruel will get a taste of my wandless spell that I learnt from the Dark Lord." Harry points out.

Sirius makes a face but dismisses Snape and his comments. He doesn't want to upset Harry. "I just wanted to say, before I was so rudely interrupted with unwanted commentary, that I must have done something right in my life because I'm still alive and I am allowed to share it with a gorgeous, snooty, pompous, self-centred wizard who seems to want me around. I have no idea why, but I'm not complaining."

He desperately wants to embarrass Lucius and do something indecent, like snog the wizard with everyone watching, but he quickly stops himself. He can still see that open look of affection shining in those grey eyes and he doesn't want to make Lucius question his own sanity for sticking with a harebrained twit like Sirius Black. He knows that the blond doesn't like displaying any sort of affection with so many pairs of eyes on them, but he is pleasantly surprised when Lucius doesn't protest to him taking his hand and lacing their fingers. He even manages to sneak a kiss on the wizard's knuckles before the silver eyes he adores so much give him his first warning. Not that Sirius cares. He is almost giddy now; from just one small gesture of love.

"I am thankful for the chance to have seen my son grow into a man and for the chance to enjoy a life without duty," Narcissa says, sharing a smile with Severus who simply sneers slightly less.

"I think we all have things we are grateful for and people who we'd like to thank for them," Draco says, looking at Luna.

"I'm just very pleased that I'm not alone, that I have friends and family around me. Growing up like I did—it can change a person. It didn't break me or turn me bitter, but it didn't leave me unscathed either. I guess what I'm trying to say is that we all have bad days and not so bad days. Sometimes life deals you a bad hand and you have to play with the cards you were given, but sometimes you get to fuck up whatever plans destiny has for you. The Dursleys, Dumbledore, false friends, the meddling public—they didn't stop me from stepping away from the path that had been laid out for me. We're not pawns. We have a choice to be the puppet-master rather than the puppet."

"Well said," Lucius remarks.

"What are you grateful for, Severus?" Narcissa raises a brow.
The man remains silent for a moment but then clears his throat. "I never minded being on my own; it provided protection and it was what I had. I was grateful for the solitude, but it was a poor companion to have."

"You could have just said that you're grateful to have a witch like my cousin to tolerate your shite," Sirius snorts.

"Yes, that is what I meant." Snape states.

"Merlin," Harry's mouth falls open, "can someone pinch me right now. Did you just agree with something Sirius said? Did I really hear that?"

"Hush," Narcissa reprimands the young wizard, "you'll start another fight."

Sirius frowns and says, "I mean, look at her—she's way out of your league. But she seems to want you, for some completely incomprehensible reason. So do not make her unhappy, Snape."

Snape looks irked, but he doesn't disagree. He knows that Narcissa is completely out of his league. But he also knows that the witch loves him. So it's not all that hard to give Sirius Black a nod that signifies his understanding. He will never make Narcissa unhappy.

Draco gets up and says, "Well, I'm knackered. I should escort Luna home before she falls asleep."

The girl does seem drowsy and Narcissa offers, "Why don't you have the elves make up a room for her? You can accompany your young lady home in the morning after breakfast."

"She can sleep in my room."

Lucius cuts in with a pointed look. "She most certainly will not be sleeping in your room. We still do things properly in this family."

Draco's expression is close to disbelief. He glares at the two wizards. Two wizards who are not married but still enjoy a rather active and uncomfortably vocal sex-life. "Yeah, you are setting such a good example, Father."

"The kid has a point, Luce," Sirius pipes in, sneaking his hand behind the blond's neck. He just wants to touch his lover all the bloody time. "We're not exactly following the pure-blood guidelines here."

"I don't recall asking for your input," Lucius drawls.

"Isn't it a good thing that I gave it anyway? You know I'm right. We're living a life of sin. You're not even divorced yet, so that makes me the shameless mistress. Not that I object to it," says Sirius with a grin plastered on his lips. It is meant to be interpreted as lecherous.

Narcissa's melodic voice rings out, "Oh, I forgot to tell you. The Malfoy solicitors sent me the papers this afternoon and I have signed them. Congratulations, dear husband, or should I say ex-husband; we are no longer legally bound, which means I am Narcissa Black once again. Unless Sirius has any objections."

"Are you joking? You were and always will be a Black," Sirius says to the witch, feeling immensely proud that his favourite cousin is back in the family. "So...Luce is single again? Lucky me, then."

"Were you satisfied with the settlement?" Lucius asks, unsure what else to ask in a situation such as this. First Malfoy divorce since the last century and all.
"You gave me more than enough, Lucius. More than I asked. I would happily give some of it back, but I won't since you obviously can't manage your vast mountains of Galleons with sense."

"This calls for another round of drinks," Harry suggests and soon enough, an elf arrives with a new bottle of wine and fills everyone's glasses. The elf hands Luna a goblet with juice and slips her some caramel biscuits as well.

Severus motions Narcissa to follow him out of the room and Sirius whispers, "She probably forgot to mention it to Snivellus. He looks pretty sour and pissed off."

"Don't even start, Siri," Harry cautions the man with a dark look.

"Best Christmas ever." Sirius turns his gaze on Lucius and asks in low tones, "So, now that you are a free man again...want to go on a date with this devilishly handsome wizard? I'll wine and dine you before pushing you over the nearest flat surface and fucking you blind."

"How can anyone resist a charmer like you," Lucius only gives a brusque reply, but his eyes are telling a different story. He is ready to take Sirius up on his offer as soon as they can get upstairs.
"Have you been to Gringotts since being pardoned?"

"Yeah, but why is that suddenly important?"

"You need to get your Lordship rings from the Black Family vault. I will not be seen in public with you if you insist on not giving a damn about your House and status as its Lord."

Sirius grunts. "You don't fuck around, do you? Fine, I'll make an appointment first thing tomorrow if that pleases your demanding nature. You're such a snob, Luce."

"No, not tomorrow." Lucius shakes his head, his mouth curving into a sly smile. "You will be unavailable tomorrow. Unless you are not feeling well?"

"I'm feeling wonderful," Sirius is quick to say. "In fact, I'm feeling so well that I think I'd like to go upstairs right fucking now. Emphasis on the fucking part."

Harry doesn't have to think long and hard about the couple's intentions when they disappear. Luna's dreamy smile is pretty much a dead giveaway that they aren't going upstairs to sleep. She has really good hearing.
Sirius wakes up with a smile on his face. It is a full-blown grin that seems to be fixed on with a spell. He doesn't care how silly it looks; he is happy after a long period of misery. He shifts under the covers and grins even harder when he takes in the form of his lover sidled close.

Lucius had not been lying when he had promised Sirius an eventful night. Despite the odd twinge of pain here and there, Sirius had given a vigorous performance to demonstrate just how pleased he was about the divorce. He hadn't cared either way, but there is something about being with his lover who is no longer legally taken. It makes Sirius want to float around the room.

The blond, however, is not sleeping as Sirius assumes. The Animagus' breath hitches when he feels a hand slide down his chest to his now very interested cock. Slender fingers wrap around the hardening flesh and Sirius lets loose a keening noise in the back of his throat, muttering curses under his breath as Lucius straddles him, wearing a bold smirk.

"Luce, warn a bloke." Sirius groans.

"I do not make empty threats," Lucius says with an expression that is delightfully blasé. "I did say you would be rather occupied for the day and I meant it."

Sirius has no objections and smirks before rolling Lucius under him. "I hope you're prepared, for you'll not get another chance."

Receiving a self-satisfied look in return, Sirius rises to his knees, yanks his lover closer and plunges right into the tight heat that always makes him go a little blind. The blond wizard doesn't need any preparation, for they had had plenty of practice the night before and Sirius does not hold back when he thrusts in with force and slowly pulls out; only to repeat the motion again and again.

However, such tactics are pissing Malfoy off somewhat awful. He doesn't agree with the teasing tempo. "Siri, get on with it!"

"Patience." Sirius grins widely. "I don't want this to be over too fast. I want to savour it, savour you."

Lucius doesn't have the same opinion and gives Sirius a shove, making the man topple on his backside. With a resolute glint in his silver eyes, Lucius sits astride Sirius' lap and thoroughly enjoys the look of open need on the man's face as he lowers himself onto his cock. He purrs. "Savour me to your heart's content."

Sirius does not need to be told twice and his hips need no command, for they are already eager to thrust up. A prickling sensation dances on his skin and the blood in his body rushes through him in powerful waves. The incredible feeling of fire in his veins makes him slick with sweat. He moves without thinking about it, the mechanics of it too familiar. The sexy noises coming from Lucius is just another added element to push Sirius closer to the edge. But he doesn't want to surrender to it just yet. He wants to feel the rush as long as it can hold; he wants to imprint on Lucius and make himself at home inside. The other wizard, in contrast, is still determined to get what he wants and pushes Sirius flat on his back.
"You're playing dirty," Sirius pants out, unhappy with the position. He has nothing else to do other than lie there and let Lucius manipulate his body as he pleases. It is a battle between them, even though it always ends the same way; Sirius likes it as such. He throws Lucius off and makes quick work of the unruly wizard by capturing his hands and pinning them above his head. "Let's play it my way now."

Lucius smirks. "You seem to be feeling better."

Sirius' reply is to turn the wizard around, dragging him on his hands and knees. "Oh, I'm feeling loads better. Fuck, Luce...your arse looks so fine."

"Are you going to admire it or are you going to get into it anytime soon?"

"I can do both," Sirius muses and plunges in without a word of warning, almost making Lucius buckle. The Animagus feels his stomach tighten as he watched his cock sink into his lover's delectable behind. "You should see yourself, taking my cock so beautifully. Who knew you were such a slut."

"Only for you, Siri," Lucius grunts, his voice tight with tenderness and pleasure as Sirius slams inside over and over again like a well-oiled machine. "Don't stop...Siri, yes."

"Tell me you're mine, Lucius."

"Yours," Lucius moans out, feeling the muscles straining and his release coiling deep in his gut. He doesn't care for modesty and whimpers, almost pleading. "Please...Sirius."

"Gods, you should see yourself right now, baby. So wanton and hot," Sirius puffs out with some effort. His legs are ready to give out, the muscles in his neck are taut and he can practically taste his release trickling down into his abdomen like a flow of molten fire. Wrapping his hand around the blond's straining cock, Sirius clenches his teeth as Lucius quivers around him and cries out. It does not take long for Sirius to reach his own peak of ultimate pleasure. It's heavenly, almost poetic, in its pure form.

Slumped into the mattress, Sirius blinks hard and fast, waiting for the rush of blood to disappear from his ears. Pulling Lucius against his body, Sirius manages a weak kiss before he feels like passing out. Coupled with the activities of the previous night, Sirius is ready to sleep for a decade.

"Siri?"

"Hmm, what—"

Lucius nestles closer, pulling the covers over them and says with a sneer, "Don't call me baby."

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Harry fidgets like someone with fleas as he walks around the bedroom he's staying in. Narcissa had given him his trunk after supper and also conveyed the wizard's words. It makes Harry's blood boil with anger. He has not seen his husband for three days, going on fourth, and the feeling of loneliness is starting to kick in. He is still annoyed with Tom for the cursing incident, but he is also angry at him for not caring enough to rush to Harry's side, apologising and promising never to do such a thing again. Those things have not happened during the period of three bloody days and now Harry knows
of his husband's coldness and indifference. It is maddening.

Feeling particularly enraged, Harry tries to think up ways to provoke Tom into action. The wizard has to think that he is close to losing Harry, but every plan seems stupid and Harry knows that the Dark Lord will see right through them. He isn't an idiot, although he has his moments.

Sirius is feeling better and there are no lasting effects, but Harry still wants to yell at his husband for being so quick to dish out unwarranted punishments, especially when it involves Harry's family. Not only that—Tom's rash actions had caused Harry's friends to feel fear. And in Neville's case, remember painful things about his parents. An apology will not take away the pain it had caused him. In fact, everyone there had been shaken up and nearly traumatised by the Dark Lord's explosive temper. Harry knows that Tom isn't a nice man. He doesn't pet puppies or shake hands with adorable babies—no, the Dark Lord is one twisted wizard. But he has changed so much from the cruel and callous wizard Harry had first met. He isn't anything like the wizard who had killed dozens and tortured countless others; that is all in the past. And yet, the incident had made Harry think about the past. Was that Voldemort he had seen that night, mercilessly torturing someone he didn't care about or had it just been a tactless reaction—if only Harry could make sense of it.

Harry's pacing is interrupted by a growling stomach and he decides to have something to eat before going back to planning. Making his way into the dining room, Harry doesn't see anyone. It isn't very early in the morning and the Malfoy family always has breakfast together. At least they have done so during Harry's stay. Now he is surprisingly alone.

Without calling for an elf, one pops out from nowhere and brings Harry a tray with tea, scrambled eggs with bacon and tomatoes, as well as a copy of the *Daily Prophet*, which is particularly attention-grabbing with its front page. It offends Harry by just existing. The article itself is on page four and Harry is eager to read it as he seats himself.

**THE BOY WHO LIVED MISSING OR WORSE?**

*I'm sure my avid readers are all baffled to learn that Harry Potter has gone missing! The heroic young man who once defeated You-Know-Who has not been seen in public since the funeral of Headmaster Albus Dumbledore. The tragic death had Mister Potter crippled with terrible grief, as he was seen taken away by his infamous godfather Sirius Black (more about Sirius Black on page seven). According to my source, the boy was inconsolable.*

*I am sure we are all desperate to know where Mister Potter is at the moment, for there have been rumours that he has been kidnapped by Death Eaters. A close friend of Harry Potter's has revealed to this reporter that the young wizard has not been seen by his Muggle relatives either. To make matters worse, one Hermione Granger, Mister Potter's close friend and once romantic interest was found dead some time ago. With countless others missing, has Harry Potter truly been captured by the enemy? No comments have been given by his fellow students, but it is clear that something sinister is indeed happening. The Minister for Magic has also refused to answer these burning questions, but perhaps the Ministry should look into the unfortunate disappearance of Mister Potter. The public deserves to know the truth...*

Harry snaps the paper shut and folds it without reading any further. It goes on for another two pages, listing Harry's accomplishments, relationship history, tragic past and so on. The level of stupidity is enough to put him in a sour mood, not to mention make him lose his appetite. Why is his life suddenly everyone's business again and who is this close friend mentioned in the article? Perhaps it is Molly, trying to flush him out or Kingsley Shacklebolt himself, hoping to stir up enough public interest for his cause. Whatever it is, Harry wants no part in it.
His eyes snap up when he hears noises. Sirius walks in, wearing a navy blue dressing gown and a
smug look on his face. "Morning, Pup."

"You're suspiciously chipper," Harry comments with a hidden smile. He throws the newspaper on
the table and reaches for a croissant. "Did you sleep okay?"

"Slept great, thanks" Sirius grins, "at least when Luce allowed me any sleep."

"It's way too early in the morning for me to hear details about your sex-life."

"Give me a break, Harry. I finally get to have him all to myself without causing a scandal—well, a
huge scandal. Once the shit hits the fan, and it will, we will deal with whatever comes. Right now I
intend to enjoy every moment of it. I need to visit the Black Family vault and start paying more
attention to my duties as Lord Black. I didn't really care about all that before I got thrown into
Azkaban, but I realise now that it's my right and Luce is such a bloody toff that I have to step up my
game. I want to be worthy of him."

Harry has a sincere smile on his face. "You've changed, Siri. Not in a bad way; it's just surprising to
hear you talk about family pride and duties. You've always hated the Black family."

"Yeah, but it's mine now. The ones I hated in my family are dead and we're the future of the Blacks.
It's up to us to restore the honour and value the Black name used to carry. I'm done being the rebel
son because there is no need for it anymore. I have other aspirations now."

"I'm glad, really. And I am very happy for you," says Harry.

Sirius, having spotted the *Daily Prophet*, grabs the paper and before Harry can say anything to stop
the man, he unfolds it. After a few minutes, Sirius snorts and says, "Want to bet it was Molly who
blabbed to the reporter? Sweet Merlin, these people never know when to quit."

"It's pathetic and grinds on my nerves."

"Worried my arse!" Sirius barks out, having reached the end of the article, "Desperate is a better
word for it. The Order is completely fucked and they know it. They truly believe that you are the
only one who can defeat the evil Dark Lord. Kingsley and Mad-Eye are Aurors and they know that
a kid has no business fighting against someone as skilled and lethal as the Dark Lord. No offence to
you, Pup."

"I think they had plans to train me or toughen me up somehow. They're not stupid, although all
evidence points to that. In their eyes, I wasn't trained enough. Dumbledore needed me to be
inexperienced and kept on a short leash; he wanted me to be alone and feel worthless because that
way I wouldn't mind dying. The greater good always meant one thing to him—Harry Potter
sacrificing himself for it."

"He can rot for all the injustice he has caused us. I don't care what sort of man he was deep inside
because he sure as hell doesn't deserve any consideration from me. Everything he did always had a
way of hurting someone but he didn't let that stop him from causing more damage. I'm just sorry I
didn't get to kill him myself."

"Severus enjoyed it immensely, I can tell you that much," Harry smirks and goes on, "but enough of
Dumbledore. He's out of the picture now and we're still here."

"Dumbledore is an unusual topic to discuss during breakfast."

Sirius cranes his neck and smiles when he spots his lover. Harry hides his smile well, for Lucius
doesn't comment on it. Actually, he doesn't seem to notice Harry at all as he pulls out a chair and sits down. It is strange to see Lucius so casual but Harry has been a guest in his home for a few days now and he certainly doesn't care for stiff formality. Harry also doesn't comment on the lack of proper attire. Seeing Lucius Malfoy in a decadent silk dressing gown really adds another level of strange to the situation. Although Harry is pretty sure that even if he did point it out to the man, he wouldn't feel embarrassed. Lucius is the ultimate hedonist.

"We were just gloating about the old goat being dead," Sirius smirks.

"Severus was giddy for days after doing the deed," Lucius tells the wizard and snaps his fingers, making an elf pop into the room with another tray. "It is his most treasured memory."

Harry can just imagine it. "I think it's the fact that Dumbledore truly believed that he had Severus in his pocket. The look on his face as he realised the truth was worth more than a vault full of gold."

Out of the blue, Sirius grins and pushes a goblet with juice in front of Lucius. He then whispers something, making the blond wizard raise his brow in a haughty manner. Sirius is all wiggling eyebrows and suggestive smiles.

"I'll go and annoy Draco." Harry stands and gives Sirius a pointed look.

"See you later, Pup."

Lucius waits for the young wizard to leave the room before he speaks, "That was rude of you."

"Part of my charm," Sirius replies with a rakish smile. "Now, how about some dessert and then I'll help you work it all off after that. Can't have you ruining that perfect body of yours, now can we?"

"How about a relaxing bath instead?"

"Whatever you want, I'll still get my prize in the end," Sirius smirks and adds with a wily smile, "baby."

The Stinging Hex isn't very painful, considering the amount of indignation pushed into the spell. Soothing the inflamed spot on his chest, Sirius still manages an infuriating smile as he pours himself a cup of tea. He is going to pay for that remark, but then again, he usually loves his punishments.

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Later that day, Draco finds himself seemingly alone in the huge house. Sitting in the family lounge, Draco feels rather at ease with his thoughts. Luna had vanished with Narcissa, both witches overly interested in the new cloaks on display and Severus is once again brewing in solitude. However, Draco's peace is cut short when his mother appears with Luna.

"You're back earlier than I expected, Mother," Draco notes, his brow rising in question. Usually, such shopping trips last for hours and hours. "Did something happen?"

Narcissa, keeping her lips pursed, takes a seat. "It seems that a chatty secretary, hoping to earn her spot in the limelight, has carelessly shared our family secrets. She exposed the divorce and gave rather explicit details that she thought would boost her story into a full scandal."
Luna explains further, "We were rudely ambushed by reporters."

"Thankfully Luna here had a marvellous way of dealing with those nasty cretins."

Draco is eager to hear that particular story and leans forward, but Luna gives a snort and says, "I simply told them to bugger off."

"You did more than that, my dear," Narcissa cuts in, "in fact, you were simply magnificent. Not only did she tell them to bugger off, she hexed one of them and threatened to feed another to a Graphorn. Oh, it was delightful."

"Well, they were being incredibly impolite." Luna shrugs.

Draco grins. He is forever entertained by Luna's odd ways and flashes of lunacy.

"The story of the divorce will be on the front page of the Daily Prophet. I think they will have written a piece about it by tomorrow morning."

"How will it affect the Dark Lord's plans? Father did say that the Dark Lord wasn't against the news of your divorce getting out, but I can't really see it working in our favour either."

"That is something your father will have to figure out," Narcissa replies with a smile. "Where is your father anyway?"

"Celebratory shagging with Sirius. They've hardly left the bedroom all morning and they're not using silencing charms either. My delicate psyche cannot take any more lustful moans." Draco sneers. He really does not want to hear anything about his father's pleasure-seeking ways or his indecent whimpers of an entirely slutty nature. There is only so much a young man can endure before snapping.

Luna offers a soft laugh, "Imagine how happy they must feel now that they can be together without secrecy."

"Imagine how happy I feel now that I don't have to marry some silly bint of good standing as part of my duty to the Malfoy name."

"Your father never wanted you to suffer in a loveless marriage. I love him dearly as a friend and brother, but not as a husband. We were the lucky ones, for many marriages in our circles were the products of a debt being paid off or a business deal between feuding families. It is a rare thing to marry for love, Draco."

Draco nods and asks, "Will Father make an announcement regarding your divorce? It is best to control the narrative."

"Again, that is a question you will have to ask your father. I am once more Narcissa Black and quite happy with it."

"You will always be a Malfoy, Mother."

"True, but I enjoy being my own witch far more than I enjoy being a socialite. Besides, Lucius was more than generous with the divorce settlement. I think I'd like to continue my charity work and maybe even set up another charitable trust, perhaps something to do with children or magical creatures. I have ideas I wish to bring to life now that I'm free from the obligations that being Lady Malfoy entailed."
"Times are changing," Luna remarks, causing both Draco and Narcissa to look at her. "The old will have to give way to the new. If we—as a magical society—want to flourish, we must move forward and understand that something tradition isn't a good thing."

"I do hope you're not talking about making room for Muggles in our world?"

"No, but Muggle-borns who truly wish to be a part of this world deserve a chance, do they not? If they want to live their lives as wizards and witches, adapting to magical customs and making their home among their kind—well, I for one think we have to give them a chance to prove that they indeed can belong here."

Narcissa seems pensive. "I do agree that they have to truly want this. We cannot allow fickle Muggle-borns to travel back and forth, thus risking the concealment of our world. The Dark Lord wants to renew the Secrecy Act and make it impossible for Muggle-borns to speak of magic, lest they wish to lose theirs."

"It is sensible to restrict their movements but it won't matter to a Muggle-born child who has abusive or hateful Muggle parents. They would be completely stupid to go back to the Muggle world. Just look at Harry's relatives—they were horrible and despised him. They made him sleep in a cupboard, for Merlin's sake!" Draco grimaces, his anger showing.

"Perhaps that is something you can help with, Narcissa? There are magical children suffering abuse and injustice because their parents don't understand or consider them ill. They can be removed from harmful environments and magical families can adopt them or simply help them adjust. An organisation that helps mistreated and neglected Muggle-borns to have a better life with their own kind."

"That is a wonderful idea, Luna. If we can help magical children like Harry, who suffered terrible neglect at the hands of ignorant and vile Muggle guardians, we can make sure they start their life in the magical world without prejudice. Oh, I must discuss this with the Dark Lord."

Luna adds with a sombre smile, "Not all Muggle-borns have abusive parents. We must focus on the ones who truly need to be rescued."

"Of course." Narcissa nods in understanding. "There must be records of such things. How else would they know to send a Hogwarts letter? I think once the Dark Lord takes over completely, I will need to put together a group of people who will aid me in this." She stands, wearing a serious and determined expression. "I will discuss this with Severus and see what he thinks."

As the witch disappears upstairs, Draco lets out a sigh, "I think Mother won't shut up about this until she can save all the poor ill-treated Muggle-borns."

"I think it is a worthy cause and it will give your mum something to do with her time. If we want to create equal rights for all it must also include Muggle-borns, for you know as well as I do that pure-bloods are dying out. As I said, times are changing and the change must start with us; the ones in power have to set an example."

"Luna, you're making sense again. It's scary."

"Yes, it is scary. I hate it when that happens."
Sirius doesn't mind staying in bed all day, but instead of acting like a randy teenager, he thinks it best to leave Lucius under the covers as he himself goes to deal with another pressing matter. Leaving the blond a scribbled note on the bedside table, Sirius dresses and casts a parting look over his shoulder. Lucius is sound asleep, finally passing out after a rather lively bath together with his lover. Sirius is rather proud to have shagged his lover into physical exhaustion.

The Animagus doesn't see anyone around as he steps into the Floo and declares his destination—Riddle Manor. The house is dim and an elf tells Sirius that the Dark Lord is sitting in his study. Making his way there, Sirius considers what he is going to say and decides that he is going to play it by ear.

Tom sits in his great wingback chair like a brooding king, nursing a glass of cognac in the dark and Sirius finds it rather amusing as he waltzes right in, giving the door a few knocks as an afterthought.

The Dark Lord's gaze is burning. "Here to exact your revenge, Black?"

Sirius' expression is flippant and totally unafraid. If anything, he seems relaxed as if he is having a chat with a mate. "Nah, don't really see a need for it. I mean, I could evoke all sorts of ancient pure-blood revenge strategies and make you pay, but every single one of those tactics will hurt Harry and that is the last thing I want. As far as I'm concerned, we're good. I get why you went a little insane."

"You have an interesting way of dealing with such actions against your person."

Sirius slumps into an armchair and gives a dismissive wave of his hand. "I'm not saying that I enjoyed it because I didn't; it hurt like a son-of-a-bitch. But I understand why you felt the need to blast me against the wall and torture me. Harry means the world to me and I would have done the same, if not worse, had someone caused Harry any pain. He's mine too, you know—my kid, my Pup—and hurting Harry is like sticking a dagger into my own heart."

"If you're waiting for an apology—" Tom begins.

Sirius snorts. "Are you not hearing me, Tommy? I said we're good. I'm not expecting you to apologise because I know that's not your style."

Frowning, Tom tilts himself back in his seat. "What is it that you want then?"

"Just one thing," Sirius boldly states, "no, actually...two things. First, I want you to swear to me that you will always treat Harry with respect and never lie to him. I know you love him. So consider this as a threat—don't fuck with my Pup or I will find a way to destroy you. Got it?"

Tom chuckles but nods. It is an easy promise to make, for he truly has no intention to ever hurt Harry. "And the second?"

"You won't punish Lucius."

Tom hasn't even thought about the act of insubordination, his thoughts circling around Harry more than anything, but now that he is thinking about it, the anger comes rushing back. "He defied me."

"So? You were torturing someone he cares about. I know loyalty is a big deal for you, but a Malfoy is first and foremost loyal to their family."
"You think Lucius regards you as family?" Tom's expression seems snooty and apprehensive.

"You can bet your royal arse on it. I'm sure you know the divorce was finalised and he is no longer legally bound to my cousin? We're solid, Tommy. I think I don't have to explain this to you, but I will anyway. You see, we're not just shagging for the fun of it as you like to believe. It's a real relationship, one we intend to have for a very long time."

"I must admit, Black," Tom drawls out. "I am surprised. I can't think of a single reason why Lucius would waste his time with someone like you, but it seems that I don't know Lucius as well as I thought I did. After all, he disobeyed me when he has not done so before."

Sirius smirks. "Not my problem."

"Now that you have made your demands—" Tom points towards the door with a bored look, but Sirius doesn't move and that irritates the Dark Lord. "Was there anything else, Black?"

"Harry is miserable, you know. I think he secretly expected you to show up a day, maybe even two days later, but here you are. Let me ask you something. Are you deliberately trying to piss him off or is there a point to this?"

"I'm giving my husband time to calm down."

"It doesn't work like that with Harry," Sirius explains. "The more you wait, the angrier he will get. Everything you do or don't do feeds into his insecurities and when you give him time to cool off, Harry's mind starts doing the exact opposite. He's probably thinking that you don't care about him."

Tom lets out an indignant huff. "Harry knows better!"

"Does he really? I mean, yeah...he does know; but at the moment, he's not thinking logically. You have to remember that Harry didn't grow up loved, he didn't feel wanted and by letting him settle down on his own, you are just making him feel unwanted again."

"He was supposed to come to me." Tom snarls out with panic, which he never displays. "I thought he would come home after I sent his trunk with Narcissa."

"Well, you thought wrong. Harry is moping around Malfoy Manor, feeling homesick and wondering about the future of your marriage. He is angry at you for blowing up like you did and he's afraid. You went totally psycho Voldemort on me and Harry doesn't know how to handle it."

"He doesn't know you are here, does he?" Tom quirks his brow, his mind working furiously. "Which means that once he finds out you came here—"

"I left a little note. But I assume that Harry will think the worst, like that you're whipping me in the dungeons, and he'll come here to rescue me. So, you're welcome."

"I might have underestimated you, Black. It seems you can be cunning and clever."

"How about a game of chess as we wait for Harry to run in wand blazing?"

Tom inclines his head. "I see no reason to refuse."
As an elf comes to collect Harry for supper, the teen tosses the newest *Quidditch Weekly* on the bed and follows the helpful elf to the dining room. Malfoy Manor is a huge place and Harry still gets lost.

Draco and Narcissa are already sitting at the table, the witch sipping wine and talking to her son. Luna is not present; after all, the Ravenclaw has a home she needs to visit from time to time and a father who wants to see his little girl more than just once a week. Harry takes a seat and is ready to inquire about the rest of the household when Lucius appears, his eyes gleaming feverishly. His furious expression grabs everyone's attention.

The blond wizard seats himself and states, "Sirius will not be joining us. In fact, I would be amazed should he come back in one piece."

"What are you talking about?"

"Sirius has gone to see the Dark Lord."

Harry shoots up from his seat and sprints out of the dining room with a frantic look.

Narcissa's shocked expression is aimed at Lucius. "Is he mad?"

Lucius hands the note Sirius had left him to the witch. "I do fear for his sanity but he might actually pull this off."

Narcissa glares faintly but reads the note. It says the following:

*Gone to see Tommy. I want Harry to settle this thing with the hubby. Stubborn idiots, the both of them. When you see Harry, make your best fuming yet sexy face and make sure he comes to Riddle Manor. Trust me, I know what I'm doing. Mostly.*

*Your gorgeous boyfriend (or is that too juvenile for you, baby?)*

*PS: I slipped that in just to imagine your incensed expression. Ha, you can't curse me.*

Narcissa snorts unlike any proper lady and passes the note to Draco, who does the same; only he is slightly horrified as well. Snatching the note back, Lucius casts *Incendio* on it and says, "As I was saying, it *might* work. I don't think the Dark Lord will do Sirius any harm, but one can never know with him."

"Harry will rush in to save him because that's what Harry does," Draco tells his parents. "I bet the Dark Lord will figure it out and refrain from killing Sirius."

"Such confidence," says a voice behind the young wizard. Severus, having stopped brewing for the evening, walks into the room and inquires further, "What has Black done now?"

"He went to see the Dark Lord," Narcissa provides the answer.

"Good riddance, I say."

Lucius pins the man with a cold look. "We have been friends for a long time, Severus, but I will not allow you to disparage Sirius in my own home."

Severus offers a curt nod but remains sullen. As they start eating, the atmosphere around the table stays tense. Inwardly, Draco is smirking. He knows that the relationship between his father and Sirius is—well, *serious*. Lucius Malfoy rarely displays such vehemence. It is reassuring to know that even though his parents are no longer married, they are happy. Draco has always known that the
marriage between his mother and father was never one of passionate or even romantic love. It was opportune and amiable, for the two people involved had always been good friends. So to finally see his parents with partners who truly loved them makes Draco feel at peace.

*****

Harry Apparates into the entrance hall of Riddle Manor and runs straight ahead. He isn't sure where Tom is keeping Sirius—the dungeons, the drawing room, whatever room Tom's find suitable for afflicting painful, bloodletting curses.

The green-eyed wizard hurries around the place, checking all the possible locations, and finds nothing. Until he walks past Tom's study and halts in shock. Sirius isn't being tortured at all, but rather getting massacred in... chess. The two wizards are sitting around a small table, deep in thought as they move chess pieces around. Both have drinks in their hands and there isn't any blood at all.

"What the fuck is going on here?"

Tom gives Sirius a shrewd look and says without looking at Harry, "I would think it obvious. We are settling our differences."

"But—"

"Hey, Pup." Sirius grins. "I'm getting my arse kicked here, a little sympathy would be nice."

Harry is truly baffled. "Stop! Just...Siri, what are you doing here? Why are you being so—"

"You know, I really should get going. Luce is probably waiting for me. Stuff to do tomorrow, so best get some sleep." Sirius stands and smirks. "See you later, Harry."

Then he is gone. Harry stares, gobsmacked and unable to form words. He is also looking at his husband, unsure what to do.

"Harry—" Tom gets up as well. "Perhaps we should talk."

"Oh, fuck you, Tom! I knew you'd be a pig-headed bastard about it, but I never expected you to be this unfeeling. Now you want to talk?"

"Don't act so righteous, Harry. You didn't initiate any contact either. I did everything to anger you enough for you to hurry over and confront me. How was I supposed to know you would revert back to a child?"

"I'm not a bloody child," Harry grits out, his eyes glowing with fury.

Tom sees the moment Harry decides to run and slams the door shut, casting a few locking charms on it. The fury intensifies and Harry rages, "Open the door!"

"Sit down, Harry."

"I'm not a dog, stop ordering me around like one. I want to leave right now. I can't even look at you."

"Your godfather forgave me. He even said that he understands why I felt such a terrible need to
punish him. I did it for you, Harry."

Harry snaps, "I didn't ask you to curse Sirius!"

"You didn't have to ask. It was a gut reaction. I just reacted, Harry. I saw how upset you were and it spurred me on. That's who I am—a cruel man. I didn't feel anything as I cursed Black."

"Is this supposed to make me change my mind? Because I have to tell you that you're just making it worse for yourself."

"Don't you see, Harry. I didn't feel anything as I cursed him but seeing your face, so hurt and your eyes...disappointment shining in them and that was all for me. You are my reason for breathing, beloved. I don't have a heart; you are my heart."

Turning away, Harry sighs. He wants to stay firm and not give in, but it's so bloody hard.

"I only sent your things to Malfoy Manor because I thought it would anger you and bring you straight to me. I was hoping to push you into coming here with confrontation on your mind. I thought I could trick you. When you didn't come that night, I confess to feeling more shattered than I thought possible."

"Tom—" Harry starts, torn between staying angry and giving it up, "You scared me, you know. If you could be so cruel to Sirius...I couldn't handle such madness."

"You were hiding from me."

"Maybe." Harry shrugs, unsure himself. "I really don't know, Tom. I was just so angry. Sirius could have died and he's my family, the only one I have apart from you."

Pulling Harry against his chest, Tom kisses Harry's temple. "I am sorry for causing you such pain and for making you doubt me. It was never my intention to upset you but you must understand that my anger took over and overpowered my sensibilities. I have yet to learn a different outlet for my anger."

"So...you worked things out with Sirius?"

"He said we're good." Tom sneers. "The fool just waved it off."

Harry chuckles. "That sounds like him."

Tom turns the green-eyed wizard around in his arms. "Stay for the night and let's talk. You can fetch your things tomorrow."

"You seem pretty convinced that I'll come back home."

"This is where you belong, Harry. However, I won't pressure you. If you don't want to—"

Harry pinches Tom's arm and states, "You're an idiot. A charming, manipulative, controlling arsehole."

"Is that a yes?"

"It's a maybe. We'll see in the morning."
Sirius finds Lucius in his study, going over some forgotten documents he had been assigned to work with. The blond wizard is deep in thought and doesn't even notice Sirius at first but the Animagus isn't exactly a quiet person. Lucius places his Quill down and watches the wizard with narrowed eyes. "I see you've returned without injury."

Sirius settles into the small sofa and spreads his arms on the back of it in a laid-back manner. "Were you worried about little old me?"

"It was extraordinarily stupid of you," Lucius points out. "You could have been killed."

"Do you really think Tommy would risk running into Harry's wand? The wizard was sulking in the dark, hoping to lure Harry back by questionable means and when I showed up, he was on his third drink."

That does nothing to cool Malfoy's anger and he says, "The fact still remains that you went to see the Dark Lord without speaking to me first. You left me a note, Sirius. A note!"

Sirius' expression softens. "You looked so relaxed and content; I didn't want to wake you. Besides, it wasn't something I planned ahead. I woke up and thought—why not? Harry is unhappy and maybe I could help with that."

Lucius does not seem to calm down at all as he goes on, "And the only thing you could come up with was to pay the Dark Lord a visit? Do you have any idea how horribly that visit could have ended had the Dark Lord not been distracted by Harry's absence?"

"Merlin, Luce," Sirius sighs. "I get it! I did an irresponsible thing...but it turned out all right, didn't it? I'm a Gryffindor or did you forget?"

"How could I forget that you're a reckless, arrogant half-wit with no sense whatsoever!"

"Because you are blinded by your profound love for me," Sirius smirks. He stands and walks over to the desk. Sirius figures that Lucius is more concerned than angry, but he is trying to mask his worry behind it as he has always done. Perched on the edge of the desk, the Animagus reaches out and curls a loose strand of hair between his fingers. "Look, I know you're upset and that wasn't my intention. Harry's happiness is important to me and I thought that by forcing him to confront Tommy, I could help him."

"You cannot act like a Gryffindor when it comes to the Dark Lord."

"I might be a Black, but I'm no Slytherin. I'm not cut out for scheming and manipulating to get what I want; that's all you. All I'm saying is that I made a decision to do something for Harry and while I agree with you, I came out alive and well. For once, Tommy was being rational and he figured out that I was trying to get Harry to follow me."

Lucius notes, "That was a rather Slytherin thing to do."

"No, that was me counting on Harry's hero complex to kick in. And I was counting on you to convey my reckless actions to Harry. So in truth, we both aided the Dark Lord in getting back into Harry's good graces. Now, how about we retire to our regal bedchambers and you can continue being annoyed with me in a much comfortable environment?"
Lucius changes the subject and informs the other man, "I have arranged for you to meet with your vault manager tomorrow. Grognuk has been managing the Black vaults and estates ever since your father's death and you are meeting him tomorrow to sort out your affairs."

Sirius makes a face of disgust, although he knows that Lucius is right. "Fine, I'll meet with the goblin, but I'd like for you to accompany me. I don't know the first thing about the Black Family."

Lucius asks with genuine curiosity, "You think it wise to appear in public with me?"

"Why the hell not? By tomorrow morning, everyone will know that you and Cissy are no longer married. Besides, it's not like I'm going to snog you in front of Gringotts. I'm a wizard in need of counsel from another respectable wizard."

"What of the Order? I know you cut all ties with them and they may very well believe you to be disloyal to Dumbledore's fraction but once they see that you are in contact with me, they will have no doubts about your true allegiance."

Sirius pushes away from the desk, taking Lucius by the hand. Pulling him towards the sofa, Sirius doesn't speak before they are both sitting. "I'm only worried what that might mean for Harry. You know they're looking for him. I haven't been seen for a while, so they are just speculating but once I resurface, they will try to get to Harry through me. I don't want to endanger my godson."

"Do you think they will try something in plain sight?"

Shrugging, Sirius says, "The Order is desperate and delusional. I wouldn't put anything past them."

"The Order is growing most tiresome. The Dark Lord needs to go ahead with his plans."

"Speaking of Tommy," Sirius gives a smug smile, "he's not going to punish you for disobeying him."

His brow rising, Lucius questions, "How can you be so certain?"

"Because I told him not to—and before you start complaining and bitching about not needing me to fight your battles for you and whatnot, let me just say that I don't think that you're incapable of sorting out your problems, but I do consider it my responsibility to defend your actions that evening. To a Malfoy, family comes first and I like to think of myself as part of that family."

Lucius sniffs, "I do not bitch."

"The point," Sirius goes on, rolling his eyes, "is that you are mine and I have no plans to hide it. I told Tommy that we're a sure thing and I meant it. As soon as I can get away with it, I will tell anyone who cares to listen that I, Sirius Black, am madly in love with Lucius Malfoy."

"You will do no such thing!"

"Yeah, in the middle of Diagon Alley. I'll shout it for all the world to hear," Sirius jokes, his grin infuriating the blond to no end. "Would that really be so bad? Don't you want everyone to know that you caught the infamous Sirius Black?"

"I didn't. You were being insufferable about it and I had no choice."

"No, I caught you." Sirius smirks suggestively and adds, "And now that you are no longer married to my cousin, we don't have to sneak around like horny teenagers."
"Here's an idea," Lucius suggests, "we'll go to Gringotts and after you get everything sorted, we'll see what happens."

"Are you telling me that you don't mind being seen in public with this dashing specimen of a man? In full view of other people? Without pretending that you hate my guts?"

"Only if you behave yourself, Siri."

"Don't I always?"

Lucius stands and ignores the other's light-hearted jibe. He is already in the hallway when he calls out, "I thought you wanted to retire to the bedroom?"

Sirius doesn't have to be told twice.

*****

Harry is pulled from a rather strange dream by the smell of coffee. Not just any coffee, it is Tom's favourite blend. The tang of it is more aromatic than anything else, with deep, rich notes and a touch of acidity. Harry doesn't like coffee, preferring tea instead, but he does like the aroma of it. So when the smell reaches that particular spot in his brain that stores valuable information about his husband, the young man's eyes snap open and the events of the previous night come back to him.

He cranes his neck and sees Tom sitting on the bed next to him, holding a steaming cup of coffee. He isn't even looking at Harry but seems to sense that the young man is awake and turns to him. "I had the elves prepare breakfast. Should I tell them to serve it in the dining room or would you like to eat in bed?"

"You hate it when I eat in bed. You told me that only savages do it."

"You could just appreciate my attempt to reconcile."

Harry sits up, asking, "Oh, are we reconciling?"

"I have apologised for my actions, for my distasteful behaviour and I even settled my differences with your godfather. Am I not deserving of some leniency on your part?"

"I don't know, Tom. Do you think you have grovelled enough?"

"I think you are drawing it out just because you can. You know I am deeply sorry for what occurred and I will never do it again. Perhaps never is a strong word, but I shall make an effort in the future."

Harry doesn't have a reply, but he can't shake the feeling of disappointment. Tom has it in him to do it again.

"Would it please you if I personally apologised to your friends? Would it convince you of my sincerity?"

"It's not about believing your sincerity. It just showed me that...I know you have that side to you, this violent streak, but seeing it with my own eyes just made it all the more real and now I'm not sure if I can trust you not to blow up like that again."
Tom's expression turns bitter and he disappears from the bed, leaving his cup on the bedside table. Harry feels like burrowing under the covers.

"I promised to never harm you—I vowed to never hurt you, Harry." Tom's glare is electrified as he comes to stand in the doorway, looking put out. "I realise that my actions caused you emotional harm and I fully admit that my behaviour was abhorrent. I regret my decision to curse your godfather. But you know quite well that you can always trust me."

"I trust you, Tom...but what I don't trust is your temper. Sometimes you act like a Gryffindor; cursing first, asking questions later."

"I do not act like a bloody Gryffindor!"

"You did!" Harry protests. "By cursing Sirius you gained absolutely nothing; you had no need to extract information, no need to discipline him. It was entirely impulsive of you."

Tom frowns. The mere idea of him acting like a Gryffindor is beyond absurd.

"The point I'm trying to make is that you could not remain level-headed during a situation that, frankly, did not even involve you personally."

"Anything involving you also involves me, Harry."

"So in the future, if someone annoys me or says something spiteful, you'll just curse them? That is not normal."

"It is perfectly normal when you are the Dark Lord and some ignoramus bothers your husband," Tom replies with a smug smirk. "I am very much involved in matters that directly concern you because a slight against you is also a slight against me. You are my spouse, my equal, and disrespecting you means disrespecting me. Feuds have been started for less, I assure you."

Harry doesn't understand even though he truly wishes to. He is not all that well-informed in the matters relating to pure-blood customs and protocol. He has no idea how things work. "That sounds like complete bollocks. I can take care of myself."

"It is not about your ability to handle these matters on your own. It is a question of honour and duty. A wizard of my station cannot allow such insolence against your person; not only because I love you beyond anything in this life but also because it would make me appear weak and undeserving of my titles as well as your hand in marriage."

Harry's eyes widen a bit. "So you're basically duty-bound to even the score with anyone who disrespects me?"

"To be brief, yes."

"I didn't know that," Harry muses and then everything makes more sense.

"Of course, I acted without thought and should have considered your parental relationship with Black before putting him under the Cruciatus, but the fact still remains that I was only doing it to punish him for causing you distress."

"Can we agree on something? Next time someone causes me distress, you don't curse them before consulting with me. Sirius will never change and he will continue to annoy me and I will not allow you to pull something like that again. We don't curse family members and friends."
"Black is in no way a family member in my eyes." Tom offers a disdainful sneer.

"You are married to me, so Sirius is a part of the family you and I have formed. You don't have to love him or even like him, but I do expect you to act like a civilised wizard."

"May we consider the matter closed then?"

"Between you and I, yes." Harry nods and adds with a pointed look, "however, you will apologise to Narcissa, Neville, Luna and the Weasley twins for acting like a brute and for frightening them. And you will settle this matter with Lucius as well because according to the rules, you owe him a chance to retaliate for almost killing his lover."

Tom snorts, full of disbelief and conceit. "There are no set of rules that stipulate that. They are not married and even if they were legally and magically bound, Black would be the one receiving the duty of protecting his spouse's honour."

Harry is about to protest but then snaps his mouth shut. "What exactly does that mean?"

Tom starts explaining with a small smirk, "It means that the House of Black outranks the House of Malfoy. The Black family line is older and essentially purer, thus surpassing the Malfoy line."

Harry's face does not show any sort of revelation or surprise and Tom sighs before going on, "It means that should a marriage come to pass, Lucius will legally take Black's name as the custom dictates. Of course, since he is Lord Malfoy, Lucius will keep his name and simply add Black's name to it. Your idiotic godfather will remain Sirius Black."

Harry considers it and even mouths the name—Lucius Malfoy-Black. It seems utterly strange but oddly fitting. However, the confusion remains and Harry holds up a finger. "Hang on—Narcissa joined the Malfoy family, giving up her maiden name but she is a Black. So why isn't she Narcissa Black-Malfoy?"

"Because she is not the Head of House Black. She is a female family member without a title. In that regard, Lucius had the higher status and Narcissa joined a more prominent family. But in your godfather's case, he is the Head of the Black Family and holds the title of Lord Black. In a sense, that makes Lucius his subordinate title wise."

"But they are both Lords?"

"Seemingly of the same standing, but the Black line is older and traditionally has more seats in the Wizengamot. It really is that simple."

"Do you think Sirius knows?"

Tom sends Harry an incredulous look. "He may be an idiot but he is a pure-blood and such things are taught from birth. He should know that his position is slightly higher in the wizarding world, even though both Houses are nearly equal when it comes to prestige. Lucius is aware of this, I'm sure."

"I still want you to make things right with Lucius." Harry flutters his eyes at Tom. "There is no point in letting your friendship suffer."

"We are not friends, Harry," Tom is quick to say, "he is just a competent servant I employ in my service. Acquaintances at best, if you insist."

Chuckling, Harry throws the covers aside and climbs out of bed. He is getting hungry and Tom had mentioned breakfast. The man is still haughtily scowling in the middle of the room, tempting Harry
"With the stern line of his lips."

"Sulking really is your thing, isn't it," Harry teases.

"An utterly ridiculous notion."

"We're having lunch at Malfoy Manor," Harry states, slithering into Tom's embrace with a cheeky smile, although his eyes are not playful. "While I gather my belongings, you will have a chance to apologise for being a total arse. Should it prove to be too difficult a task for you, I will unpack and remain in Malfoy Manor until you manage to utter those words of apology."

Tom is aware that it is not a request. "Very well, I shall convey those words. If only to please you and to make sure that you come home. Being apart has taken its toll."

"Do you know how pissed off Narcissa was when she returned to Malfoy Manor with my stuff? She was planning to come back and hex you. Maybe slip a few venomous snakes under your pillow."

"I needed her to tell you how dismissively I had acted and that was supposed to bring you back to me, angry like a kitten whose tail had been yanked. But you did not come."

Harry makes a face. "Let's face it, your plan sucked. I admit that I was angry with you for acting like a right sod, but I resisted the urge to storm over and slap your handsome face."

"Would that make you feel better?"

Harry shakes his head. "Not really. I could slap your arse instead."

"Breakfast first, I think," Tom states, wrapping one arm around Harry's waist and guiding him towards the door. Harry complies with a satisfied smile. He is happy to be home.

*****

Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes had been completely rebuilt some weeks ago and is now back in business. George and Fred can't possibly be happier with the situation.

Fred is in the process of rearranging the window display when he notices something and hollers over his shoulder, "George, come take a look at this."

"Is it Mad-Eye streaking while screaming 'constant vigilance'?" George asks as he walks out of the backroom.

"That would be wicked, wouldn't it?" Fred snorts. "Looks like Sirius is enjoying a stroll in the open."

"Can you spot any Order goons?"

Fred hums, "At least two, but Sirius has an eye on them. Shacklebolt's recruits no doubt. Sirius is coming over. Unlock the door, bro."

George aims his wand at the lock and says the incantation to take down the locking ward as well. The little bell above the door jingles as Black enters the shop, immediately spotting the redheads by the window. He grins. "Morning, boys."
"What brings you to Diagon Alley on this fine morning?"

"Gringotts business," Sirius tells them with a grimace, "have to get my affairs in order or so I'm told."

George raises a brow. "Did your luscious boyfriend tell you that?"

Sirius huffs, prompting both Fred and George to burst out laughing. The latter says, "This is brilliant, mate. The infamous Sirius Black is totally whipped!"

"Malfoy's got you collared, mate," Fred snickers. "Can't say that I blame you."

Sirius ignores the taunts and changes the subject, "Did you spot the two Order gits tagging along?"

"One of them has been eying the parchment on display for the past twenty minutes. I doubt stationery can garner such interest. The other one is just aimlessly walking up and down the alley, patting his breast pocket every now and then. Probably checking if his wand is still there. Bunch of idiots."

"They're not exactly subtle in their surveillance."

"To hell with them," Sirius waves it off. "So, anything new in the works?"

George says, "We have something in the works, but they are just prototypes right now. We've been planning ahead a bit, you know. We're thinking about expanding our business venture. Maybe a whole new line of products."

"That's fantastic," Sirius perks up, always interested in pranks.

"We're trying to find the funds right now, but we have some ideas how to get them. Not many options out there, but we think we might be able to sell—"

Sirius stops George and asks, "Have you two ever considered getting your heads checked?"

"Probably," Fred laughs.

"Mum took us to St. Mungo's once," George adds. "Why the interest in our mental health?"

Sirius shakes his head. "You didn't think to ask me or Harry for some help? We helped you rebuild your shop because that's what family does—we help each other out."

Fred manages a sheepish smile. "We didn't want to presume that someone would stick their neck out for us again. I mean, this might not even work out; it's a bloody miracle that we've managed to get this shop going and that we're actually making a profit."

"That's utter shite," Sirius grumbles. "You're successful entrepreneurs; your products are in demand and you have a great business sense. Investing in you would be a lucrative decision because you wouldn't just be handed the money, you would be expected to work with the people investing in your venture."

Fred has a slight frown on his face. "You mean we would have to share the business as well as the profits, right?"

"Well, yeah." Sirius shrugs. "Let's say I provide the funds you need to expand your business and launch a new line of products. What that would mean for us is pretty simple—you get what you want and I will get a percentage of your business. We're talking about twenty or so percent that belongs to me and gives me the right to stick my nose into stuff."
"But we would still be the ones to run the shops?"

"Of course. The fixed percentage of your profit I'm entitled to will be funneled back into the business. I don't need nor want a single Knut for myself, but I might want to use those funds in connection with some pranks of my own. Maybe a Marauders' prank line or something."

"You'd do that for us?" George asks, curious about the idea. "Strictly speaking, we're not family and you don't need to deal with our crazy stunts and harebrained ideas."

"You're insurgents like I was in my youth. You didn't let your family bring you down, you just kept doing what made you happy. I believe in you, boys. I wish someone had believed in me, so I know what it's like to not have anyone in your corner. Harry considers you his brothers and that makes you family in my book. Besides, I have nothing better to do with my money. I consider pranks a far greater cause than most."

Fred and George share a look and the latter nods with a wide grin. "I think this might be the start of a beautiful relationship."

Fred nods along. "This means the world to us, Sirius."

"Just keep doing what you've been doing."

"We won't let you down."

"I should get on with my Gringotts business. I've got an appointment with some goblin supervising my accounts and properties."

Fred disappears into the backroom and after a few moments, he comes back with a box of their products. He uses a shrinking charm before handing it to Sirius. "A little something for you to test out. We haven't really had the time to test these out and we'd love for you to do the honours. Maybe try them out on Snape."

Sirius is very interested and happily grabs the pocket-sized box. "Snivellus will definitely qualify as a test subject."

"Be sure to tell us all about it," George quips.

Sirius waves the two redheads goodbye and heads for Gringotts. The two men following him around see him leave the joke shop and instantly start walking behind him, still gazing at the display windows like interested shoppers. Sirius doesn't mind and enters the bank, knowing that the two morons will not follow him in because that would blow their cover and alert Black of their activities. Of course, Sirius is already aware of them, so he doesn't care either way. Lucius had promised to meet him there after dealing with Ministry business, so the Order members won't see them walking in together.

The goblin scribbling something down at the front desk notices Sirius approaching and places the quill down. He peers over his spectacles and laces his clawed fingers.

Sirius doesn't really like goblins all that much, considers them greedy and just evil little buggers, but he understands the need to play nice. "I have an appointment with Grognuk."

The goblin doesn't ask for specifics, already recognizing the wizard, and says, "Identification."

Sirius hands over his wand. The same wand that had been confiscated upon his arrest and later returned to him by Narcissa who had claimed all of his personal belongings as a member of Sirius'
family. It is an ingenious little law that had allowed Narcissa to walk off with everything Dumbledore had wanted for himself. Of course, had anyone bothered to check his wand for the Killing Curse, he would not have been left to rot in Azkaban for years. Chasing away the troublesome thoughts, Sirius waits for the goblin to verify his identity.

His wand is handed back to him and the goblin states, "Mister Black, appointment room eight has been prepared for you. Vault manager Grognuk will be with you shortly."

Sirius spots a few goblins shuffling about and notices a few curious looks thrown his way. Even the goblins know who he is, or rather why he is so notorious among the wizarding folk.

Lucius arrives a few moments later, carrying some documents. Then Grognuk the goblin comes and ushers them both into the room used for appointments but not before asking Sirius if he consents to Lucius being there as well, which he of course does.

Grognuk takes a seat behind the desk that has a mountain of parchment rolls and sheets of paper on it. He motions the two wizards to be seated and says, "First order of business is to establish the total number of vaults belonging to the Black Family and I have the documents here. Vaults 711, 715, 719 and 722 are in the possession of the Black Family. Vault 711 is the personal vault belonging to one Sirius Orion Black and the other three vaults are family vaults containing family heirlooms and valuables. The total monetary value of the combined Black vaults is two hundred and eighty-four million Galleons, forty-five thousand Sickles and twenty-eight Knuts.

"You're telling me that I have two hundred and eighty-four million Galleons in my vaults? Is that what you said or do I need to check my hearing in St. Mungo's?" Sirius practically gawks at the goblin who doesn't look very amused. He then shares a look with Lucius and the realisation sinks in. He's bloody rich. Of course, he knew about the few million Galleons in his personal vault and he definitely remembers some expensive artwork and statues being stored in the family vault, but to have that much money is a bit peculiar.

The goblin looks at Sirius and says, "Withdraws have been made by one Sirius Orion Black as well as numerous monetary extractions by Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore and Kingsley Michael Shacklebolt."

"Hold on," Sirius stops the goblin, "what extractions? I have never given Albus Dumbledore or Shacklebolt permission to remove money from my family vaults. Even if Dumbledore stated otherwise and waved a written permission slip in someone's face. Those extractions were made without my knowledge."

The goblin digs out a parchment from the pile and then calls for another goblin, who arrives shortly and scans the paper with narrowed eyes. Grognuk places the paper aside and states with anger lacing his voice, "Indeed, there has been a crime committed and the unauthorised withdraws will be confiscated and returned to you, Lord Black. It would seem that Misters Dumbledore and Shacklebolt had a signed parchment stating your explicit permission to allow access to these wizards and it was not properly examined by the teller."

Sirius wants to ask what sort of idiots they have working in the bank but keeps his mouth shut. Instead, Lucius' smooth tone replies. "Would it be possible to bring Kingsley Shacklebolt up on criminal charges? It is a most grievous act against Gringotts and the goblin nation itself to covet another's gold and gain access to a vault through trickery."

The goblin nods along, clearly disturbed that such a thing had been possible. "It is indeed a heinous act and punishable by not only wizarding laws but goblin laws as well."
Sirius shares a look with Lucius, who is smirking in a concerned yet devious way. The Black Lord states, "I would very much like to see Kingsley Shacklebolt face charges for stealing."

"Goblins do not take kindly to thieving," Grognuk says, his sharp teeth visible as he smiles. "By our laws, a thief's punishment is death."

Sirius realises that Lucius is very much aware of that law and inwardly grins because it would be a perfect way to deal with Shacklebolt. Clearing his throat, Sirius goes on, "Once the Aurors have arrested the wizard, I will make a formal request to have him punished according to goblin laws since Gringotts was among the ones wronged by the wizard."

Grognuk seems to like the idea. "That would be most gracious of you, Lord Black."

"With that out of the way," Sirius says, "might we move on and discuss estates belonging to the Black Family?"

Grognuk is only happy to move on and they go over the many estates that Sirius owns. Grimmauld Place is perhaps the most unimportant property when compared to a manor house in Cardiff and an outstanding a townhouse in Edinburgh and even an abbey in Dorset. There are many more that have been destroyed over the centuries and some that have been eviscerated by members of the Black Family. A nice manor overlooking the green hills of Devon had been blown up by a Black witch while trying to summon some obscure god and a lovely 16th-century château just near Loire Valley had been completely razed by angry Muggles who had wanted to hang the abominable witches living inside.

"The next order of business is to discuss the matter of the Black Family seats in the high Wizard court of law. As of right now, the seats have been filled with wizards selected by a random process, as was decided by the former Minister Cornelius Fudge and then Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore. However, those seats are rightfully yours, Lord Black; for you to control and give away should you wish it. The total number of Wizengamot seats belonging to the Black Family is twelve."

"So basically I have twelve votes, right?"

Lucius nods. "To be plain; yes, that is what it means."

"And if I want to claim my seats—" Sirius asks, "They are mine by law, correct?"

"You will need to petition the Ministry and make your claim on the seats that rightfully should be under your control. The new law filling unused seats can be a slight hindrance, but your seats were unlawfully filled when you were incarcerated and unable to appoint someone to govern your seats in your absence." Lucius swiftly explains.

"Want to bet Dumbledore proposed the law because I was in Azkaban?" Sirius snorts, although he isn't amused.

Lucius seems to share his opinion. "It is perhaps not difficult to believe that out of the twelve seats eight seats have been assigned to members of Dumbledore's Order. The other four are simply random citizens to make it look good on paper."

"That wily bastard," Sirius grinds out. "Who did he give my seats to?"

"Moody, Diggle, Doge, and the Prewett woman," Lucius lists the names. "The rest of the seats were steadily filled during the years of your imprisonment and then given to new members of the Order; Shacklebolt and your cousin's girl included. Again, Dumbledore had your permission to do so."
"Nothing for Weasley? That's surprising."

"Is it truly a surprise? Dumbledore clearly trusted Molly Prewett to keep the man under her thumb and it was wiser to give her a seat instead of Arthur Weasley. I believe the wizard has no idea his wife has a seat in the Wizengamot while he does not. Dumbledore surely meant to control the ten votes through his loyal followers."

The goblin clears his throat. "Now, the matter of the Black lordship. The lordship is yours by blood right, also due to you being the surviving son of the late Lord Black. There is a stipulation that states that the lordship can only be inherited by a male member of the family and first and foremost, the title will be inherited by the eldest son of the previous Lord Black. There is a proviso that states that a disowned member of the Black Family cannot inherit the lordship, but Gringotts records and the records obtained from the Ministry state that even though you were struck off the family tree, you were not officially disinherited and thus are still a rightful member of the family and eligible to take the lordship."

Sirius feels his stomach roll a bit because he is once again reminded of the day his mother had blasted him off the family tree with such hatred and rage that the spell had physically hurt Sirius. They had hated each other for too many years for anything good to ever happen so in a way, it had been a relief to be rid of the whole lot of them. At one point, Sirius had even considered taking a new name. James had been eager to see him change his name to Sirius Potter, just so they could be like real brothers. James' family was his as well, even though they weren't exactly related in such a close way. He had not cared then and doesn't care now. He isn't going to let the past ruin his chances at a better future.

Sirius hardly notices the wooden box placed before him but looks up when the goblin speaks, "These are the lordship rings."

There is a signet ring with the family crest and another, more beautiful ring that is meant to flaunt his title and status. The ring meant for the heir is smaller in size and doesn't have that certain flashiness to it. Sirius himself has never worn the heir ring because he had never been a candidate to ever inherit anything Black related, but now he is getting the works. Harry should probably wear the heir ring since he's the Black heir.

"A drop of your blood will activate the protective charms put on the ring."

Sirius nicks his thumb with the small knife handed to him by the goblin and adds a drop of his blood into the protective charms used on the ring. As he slides it on his finger, the magic activates and recognises the wearer as a Black by blood and by name. It feels surreal to be the type of wizard he had always considered way too stuck-up and snobby—a Lord with prominence. Then again, he feels worthy now; worthy to be Harry's godfather and future spouse to Lucius, although that is still a dream of his. At the moment.
As much as Sirius wants to walk down Diagon Alley with his arm around his lover, he can't do it just yet. After all, the Order is still trailing after him like a jilted admirer, the Dark side has yet to fully secure their victory and Lucius will most definitely hex his bollocks off should he even try to attach his arm anywhere on his person.

After the goblin's meticulous nitpicking and questioning, Sirius feels like setting the bank on fire, but instead of throwing a fit, he decides to go shopping. He needs to look like Lord Black and act like Lord Black—and at the moment, he isn't anything remotely like that. He needs a haircut, a change of wardrobe and maybe a drink by the end of it.

Lucius had agreed to accompany him but the blond wizard is not interested in being fondled and snogged by Sirius in full view of other people and two gutless Order flunkies still following them around. A few people stare as Sirius walks by, wearing a slightly maniacal grin and whistling. Some look apprehensive, some even flee back into the shops. Some wizards greet him with a respectful bow, obviously spotting the Black crest adorning his ring. Some witches acknowledge him with salacious smiles, also eyeing the ring on his finger as a wonderful prize to collect. In the eyes of the female public, Sirius Black is a bachelor waiting to be snatched up and tied down. Sirius ignores every single one of them, only caring about the giddy feeling swimming around in his head and the lightness in his heart.

The two wizards enter Madam Malkin's and Sirius is hit with a strange feeling—he had been inside the shop just weeks before his arrest, before James and Lily's demise. He had been so young back then and now he is jaded.

"Welcome to Madam Malkin's. I will be with you in a moment, dear," a pleasant voice calls out from behind the thick curtain. A moment later, Madam Malkin herself appears and instead of turning on her heel and running back, she offers a courteous smile and seems to size Sirius up for a good minute or more. Her eyes are still as keen as ever and notice the signet ring carrying the Black Family crest—and she is still as sharp-minded as she had been twenty years ago. "Welcome, Lord Black."

Sirius remembers that the witch had always been kind to him and James in the past, even though they had almost set a robe on fire and tried to set off various pranks inside her shop.

"Well, dear," Madam Malkin goes on with a curious expression, "Are you going to stand there all day or do you want to be fitted for a new robe? I remember you, Sirius Black and you were never one for peace and quiet. Rowdy as a drunk barmaid—you and that Potter lad."

Sirius swallows any sort of awkwardness he feels when standing face to face with the witch and clears his throat, "I'm still rowdy and obnoxious, terribly irritating according to some, but at the moment completely sober."

Malkin spots Lucius Malfoy by the display case filled with gloves and scarves and glances back and
forth between the two wizards she had never imagined seeing in her shop at the same time.

"Oi, Luce," Sirius barks over his shoulder and smirks when the blond shoots a burning look his way. "Just testing it out. No need to look so murderous. Gives you wrinkles."

Madam Malkin isn't shocked; she doesn't feel the need to gawk at the two as if she has not seen such things before in her life. She is even less bothered by Black's rakish smile aimed at her. She is totally immune to it, even though she can recall feeling a certain fluttering of wings in her chest some twenty years ago when she had seen the young Black in her shop with James Potter, rousing trouble while looking perfectly innocent. Now it is a sort of motherly affection blooming somewhere inside. After all, she knows that the man had been sent to Azkaban for a crime he had not committed. Madam Malkin has never truly believed the horrible stories and rumours circling the wizarding world.

A while later, Madam Malkin has her orders and can barely hide her smile when she is told to send everything to Malfoy Manor. There is no need to explain why, for she had caught many of Black's affectionate looks aimed at Lord Malfoy. While Malkin values Lucius Malfoy and considers him a loyal and generous patron, she can't really picture the man as anything but detached and ideally poised. But if Sirius Black sees something in him that is worthy of true fondness—well, who is she to argue?

She gets to work as soon as the two wizards exit the shop, chuckling to herself as she tries to visualise the combination one more time.

Sirius inhales a lungful of air as they step out. At times, he still has trouble believing the fact that he is a free man and that Azkaban is now in the past. It feels good; he feels sane and almost composed—or sane and composed enough for a Black, that is.

However, the peaceful atmosphere is interrupted. They had spent close to an hour in the robe shop and during that time, the Daily Prophet had found its way into every home across Britain, into the hands of every eager subscriber who had it delivered by owl, into every display window of the Daily Prophet office. Even now people are reading it on the street or have it rolled up under their arm. Some even have more than one copy. There is nothing curious about that but the headline gracing the front page is unique. By the look of it, the Malfoy divorce is indeed a shocking revelation; a thirst-quenching scandal ready for liftoff and everyone wants a piece of it.

Sirius sees the flash before it even goes off, the eager reporter snapping a picture of Lucius Malfoy, the freshly divorced wizard, in the company of Sirius Black, the ex-convict-turned-Lord Black. It is yet another scandal to write about. In an instant, there is a swarm of reporters—the odious Rita Skeeter leading the army of jackals. They bombard Lucius with questions and try to get a comment or even a word out of the man, but it doesn't work. Sirius is ready to say a few words; mostly curses to blow a few holes into the salivating journalists.

"Come on, Malfoy. Give us something!" one reporter yells.

Another shouts, "Was it a mutual decision?"

"Did your ex-wife violate the adultery clause—" comes from Skeeter, the witch's eyes glistening with
some sort of sick hunger. "Or did she file for divorce herself because she discovered your infidelity —"

Sirius doesn't even see Lucius brandish his wand and only sees it being pressed under the blustering chit's chin. The tone in which he speaks in is enough to make everyone take a step or three back, "You dare insult her honour with your foul mouth?"

"Can you give a statement then?" someone shouts from the back.

"Here's a statement for you," Sirius snaps, stepping out into the clutter of impatient reporters. He smiles when several of them stumble backwards. "This is none of your fucking business, so everyone can just bugger off. The former Lady Malfoy is once again Miss Black and therefore under the protection of Lord Black, who just happens to be standing before you. I do not take kindly to attacks against members of my family and will take legal action against each and every one you for slander, verbal battering and anything else I can think up. If anyone here so much as thinks about publishing any sort of shite—you'll wish for a lawsuit instead of what I have in mind right now."

Rita, having weaselled away, tries to haggle some sort of exclusive story out of it, but her efforts are washed down the drain when Sirius hollers over the buzzing crowd, "Oh, in case you didn't know—the lovely Rita here is an Animagus; that's how she has been getting all the best stories while the rest of you lot sit with your thumbs up your backsides, wondering just how she does it. Have fun with that little secret."

No one really cares about Malfoy and Black after that. Rita Skeeter running away from an angry mob in her ridiculously high heels and a tight skirt is the last thing they see before Disapparating.

*****

Harry and a very reluctant Dark Lord stand in the parlour of Malfoy Manor, a dutiful elf already greeting the visitors and telling them to go through to the sitting room while lunch is being prepared. Tom's face remains sour when they enter the room and he notices a gaggle of teenagers, namely Draco and his Slytherin friends—Pansy, Theo and Blaise. Neville and Luna are also present, the wizard holding a potted plant that Luna is admiring at every angle. The young snakes are the first ones to notice the Dark Lord scowling in the doorway and they all seemed to solidify as if Tom has petrified them with his gaze. Draco stands up with squared shoulders, resembling a cat that arches its back to seem more intimidating, even though there is no way Tom would feel anything but amused by the young Malfoy's posturing. Granted, Draco is still pretty pissed at the man for what he had done. Luna and Neville are both a bit uneasy, and yet the Slytherins are far more terrified than the rest and still haven't moved a single muscle.

Harry comes in after Tom and sees the roomful of statues. "You have such a terrible effect on people, Tom. No wonder you haven't any friends."

Without saying a word, Tom turns on his heel and leaves, unfreezing the room as he goes.

"Sulking really is a recurring theme for you, isn't it?" Harry calls out after his husband with a grin.

"I think you might actually be insane, Harry," Neville comments.

"Harry clearly wears the trousers in that relationship," Pansy suggests. "Only Harry can get away with disrespecting the Dark Lord and embarrassing him in front the children of his followers."
"He is forced to tolerate my cheek for the moment because that's the only way for him to get back into my good graces and by that, I mean back into my bed. Or me back into his bed...I haven't really thought about the details."

Theo doesn't know whether to laugh or feel awkward. He truly hopes that no one has told the green-eyed wizard that he had fancied the Dark Lord at one point. He tries to change the subject by asking about lunch, but Pansy's loud voice smothers his question. She says, "So, Harry—is it true that your godfather took over the Black Lordship?"

Harry shrugs. "All I know is that he had an appointment with his vault manager Grognuk, but he was acknowledged as the rightful Head of the Black Family from the moment he was exonerated and the Ministry released all his assets."

"Well, my mother was told by one of the ladies that frequents the Pampered Witch resort that her daughter's archery instructor saw Sirius Black wearing the Lordship ring. Not only that—he was seen with Draco's father. I assure you that by tomorrow morning, all of my mother's friends will be spreading that juicy piece of tittle-tattle around in our circles."

"The divorce was front page news," Draco says, annoyed that everyone knows about their private affairs. "I am happy for them but the Prophet had no right to publish it."

"You know how things work in the wizarding world, Draco," Luna points out. "Nothing stays private with people like Skeeter prying around."

"One of these days, she'll get what's coming her way. For years, Skeeter has dragged respectable wizards and witches through the mud. My mother, while no angel, didn't deserve to be labelled as the Black Widow by Skeeter."

Pansy snorts. "I think the nickname is apt, considering the facts."

"All right, she did not deserve to be labelled in public. Whatever happened to open secrets that everyone acknowledges but no one speaks about? Do you think I had an easy time growing up, with everyone pointing fingers and pitying me for having a mother like her? No one cares that she is actually a good mother."

"Lighten up, Blaise. I didn't mean it how it sounded. You're all right, even though your mum is a bit of a hag."

"Pans," Neville warns, "ever heard of the saying 'stop while you're ahead'?"

"Hotbottom, are you shushing me?" Pansy flashes him a sharp smile.

Draco and Theo both observe Pansy with raised brows as if they are trying to figure out what is wrong with the girl. Then they are all called into the dining room by an elf. Blaise, Theo and Harry walk ahead of the others, the three talking about the latest Hogwarts gossip. Draco takes Luna's arm and they walk into the dining room together. No one notices Neville taking Pansy's hand, their fingers laced together.

The young ones settle behind the table. Then Narcissa arrives, followed by Tom who seems less morose. Sirius saunters in, greeting everyone with a cheerful smile and a moment later, Lucius appears. After a five-minute wait, Severus finally decides to show up, a spicy tang of herbs accompanying him.

"So, Siri," Harry chats up the Animagus, "I was told about some new jewellery you've acquired."
"You mean this old thing." Sirius laughs, wiggling his fingers, "I guess this means I have to behave myself."

"This reminds me, "Narcissa speaks up. "Would it be possible for me to select a personal vault from one of the family vaults? I do not have a personal vault seeing as I have used the Malfoy family vaults ever since my father auctioned me off to the highest bidder. I would be very happy to have my own vault now."

"You don't have to ask, Cissy," Sirius replies, "just pick one and I'll take care of everything else."

"Wonderful." the witch smiles. "I trust you can talk it over with Lucius and have my divorce settlement transferred to my new vault."

"You're really making the most of this divorce, Mother."

"It is a once in a lifetime event, Draco. One could say that it is a historical event; of course, I'm going to capitalise on it."

Lucius tells the woman with a wry smile, "It is truly heart-warming to know how much you care for me, Cissy."

The witch chuckles and lifts her goblet in a silent toast. She then turns to the Dark Lord who is unusually silent. Her expression is somewhat frosty as she says, "My Lord, how did the rest of your holidays pass? They were uneventful, I believe?"

Tom's face is that of sucking on a particularly sour lemon drop and Harry is ready to intervene, but Tom surprises him by saying, "There is no need for your cutting remarks, Narcissa. I am aware of my transgressions. It was an unfortunate episode, one that I regret and will try to never repeat. As I have already settled the matter with Black, I will offer an apology to your family as well. I acted without thought and it was tactless of me."

There is a silence around the table that is drawing a lot of attention on the Dark Lord's admission of guilt. It is like shining a huge lamp into the man's face, exposing his discomfort. The rest of the luncheon is a bit stiff and no one really wants to chat about trivial things after hearing the Dark Lord's tongue-tied apology. But it is not over yet, for Tom has more to say. When he clears his throat, the clinking of silverware stops. He says, "Mister Longbottom, Miss Lovegood, I hope you will accept my apology as well."

Luna doesn't have a malicious bone in her body and smiles. "Of course."

Neville hesitates for a moment before he nods. "I accept it."

After a beat of silence, the Dark Lord turns to Sirius and says, "Congratulation, Black, you may not be useless after all."

Harry places his fork down with an awful clank and grumbles, "Stuff just comes out of your mouth, doesn't it? You have no verbal control whatsoever!"

"He's actually right, you know," Sirius tries to mollify Harry, "I have authority now. Seats in the Wizengamot and a way to get rid of Shacklebolt. So in that sense, I'm now a hell of a lot useful than I was before."

Harry backs off but still pierces Tom with a dirty look.

"Remind me, Black," Tom ignores Harry's burning eyes on him and goes on, "how many seats does
"Twelve," Sirius replies, "and those seats are currently filled with Dumbledore's hand-selected arseholes."

"How is that possible?" Narcissa seems positively outraged. Of course, she had tried to claim those seats in the past but had been unsuccessful.

Lucius explains, "He had Sirius' permission to hand them out as if they were his to give. During his time as Chief Warlock, Dumbledore had a law passed that allowed vacant seats to be filled with randomly chosen wizards and witches."

"Much like Muggles with their jury duty," Severus points out. "If I recall correctly, there was once a decree that allowed family members to claim vacant seats."

Lucius gives a nod and picks up the thread of the explanation again, "Eight seats were assigned to various Order members and by doing that, Dumbledore secured their votes in order to pass favourable motions. Together with the rest of his sympathisers and Fudge's inane politics, Dumbledore's fraction had the majority."

"The Wizengamot has how many seats in total—fifty-something, right? So how come Dumbledore's fraction had the bulk of votes?" Pansy asks.

"I thought it was just a wizarding court," Harry comments.

"It is the high court of law, but most of the legislation and laws must be also approved by the Wizengamot. It also acts as a legislative body with veto power over regulations and laws proposed by the Minister for Magic or other Ministry busybodies," the Dark Lord clarifies. "Wizengamot has fifty-two seats and half of those seats belong to pure-blooded families. It is the way things have been since the formation of the institution. The other twenty-six seats are filled with new members after a six-year period. If my memory serves me right, the Blacks have the most seats. Malfoys have five, the Parkinson family has two and the Lestrange family has a seat as well. The other six seats belong to Longbottom, Potter, Greengrass, Brown, Crouch and Nott."

"How come Sirius has so many seats?" Harry is curious.

"Seven seats belong wholly to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, but the rest of the five seats belonged to various Blacks who married into other pure-blood families. Those seats were part of a marriage contract or maybe given as dowry. The use of those seats was temporarily given to the family one married into, but that did not make those seats their property. Sirius controls the Rosier, Yaxley, Crabbe, Flint and MacMillan seat," informs Lucius.

"So by that logic, the Potter seat is now Tom's?" Harry questions with a slight frown.

Tom considers the idea but says with a level tone, "Only if you give me permission to be in charge of it."

Harry smirks. "That seems fair. It's not like I'm going to use it; I hate politics."

"I still don't understand," Pansy grumbles, "how Dumbledore had the majority."

Blaise speaks up, "Well, the Dark families only had ten votes in total and perhaps another ten or so out of the randomised seats, but it simply was not enough to go against Dumbledore's fraction, who had a lot of followers among the pure-blood families, such as Crouch, Brown, Potter and Longbottom. He had eight additional seats to use in order to gain the majority of votes. It would have
been hard to pass any constructive laws or anything to do with our cause even without Dumbledore having the Black seats in his grasp. The light families still outrank us, a lot of the seats are filled with Muggle-borns who don't have the faintest idea what is going on and Dumbledore still has a great deal of influence among the families who supported him. The man might be dead, but he still has fans."

"Blaise is right," Neville admits. "Take my grandmother for example. She controls the Longbottom seat and she always supported motions that Dumbledore put forward. She wanted Dumbledore to be the next Minister. Her mind is totally warped by Dumbledore's drivel."

"The Longbottoms have a Lordship, right?" Pansy questions, "So you'll take over and granny can go back to her needlepoint."

"Legally, I will inherit, but I have a feeling my grandmother will try to fight it. She doesn't think much of me." Neville explains.

"I remember Augusta," Sirius mutters with a grimace, "she's always been a harpy and thought that the shite coming out of Dumbledore's mouth was pure gold."

There is a silent agreement among the ones who know Augusta Longbottom. Seeing that the younger generation is done with eating, almost everyone excusing themselves from the table, Tom clears his throat and says, "I would like to speak with you in private, Lucius."

"Very well," the blond offers a curt reply, although he is not looking forward to any sort of private conversation with the man. Sirius is shooting expectant looks between the two of them as if trying to encourage it.

Tom is first to leave, certain that Lucius will follow. Sirius doesn't get up and shares a look with Harry, the latter smirking. The wizards take themselves into a nearby sitting room where Tom eagerly eyes the mantelpiece in order to spare himself from the awkward conversation, but Harry's warning rings in his ears. Lucius isn't saying anything either, simply standing in the middle of the room.

Taking a deep breath, Tom turns and laces his fingers together behind his back. He hedges, "I think we both know why we must have this conversation."

"I imagine your hand was forced by your spouse."

Tom's glare intensifies. "Your dalliances with Black have besmirched your mind if you think you can get away with insubordination, Lucius."

"Merely stating the obvious." Lucius takes a seat as he goes on saying, "If we must have this conversation then allow me to be blunt, my Lord. I have served you and your cause for more than twenty years and I have dedicated quite a lot of time and funds to your agenda. I have given you my loyalty, support and even my son to be marked—all I have asked in return is the wellbeing of my family. However, my loyalty to you will never outweigh the loyalty I have for my family and that is something you once accepted."

"That proviso only holds in regards to your wife and son."

"Then I am changing the terms of our agreement," Lucius proposes with a raised brow, "by including Sirius into that proviso of protection."

The Dark Lord crosses his arms over his chest and scoffs, "You would risk my favour for him?"
Lucius seems contemplative for a moment before stating, "I think I would be able to live without the Dark Mark on my arm."

Tom's face is almost slack with disbelief and fury, but he can't even articulate his anger over the matter, for it is making him question a number of things. Lucius would never leave his side for a meaningless affair. Black did spout a rant about the seriousness of their liaison, so perhaps there is indeed some truth to it.

"You cannot expect me to believe that you are serious about the mongrel? I have known you for too many years to accept this temporary madness as the truth, Lucius. I cannot and will not turn a blind eye to this type of behaviour, especially in the name of an insignificant sexual escapade."

"Frankly, it is none of your business."

"You forget yourself, Lucius!"

There is a knock on the door and Luna pokes her head inside, saying, "Sorry for interrupting, but perhaps I can suggest using a silencing charm? There are more than a few unnecessary pairs of ears in the corridor."

"A silencing charm will not be needed, for this conversation is finished," Lucius coldly states.

"It is finished when I say it is," Tom harps on, "and we haven't even started, Lucius. So send the girl away and sit down."

However, Luna has other ideas and closes the door behind her. She walks around the room, her voice wondering, "Imagine if Lucius were to curse Harry in front of your eyes and you can't do anything about it. Would that not be the situation reversed? Harry would be writhing on the floor in terrible pain and you can only see it happen but not stop it."

"What nonsense are you spewing?" Tom barks out.

"Just trying to imagine Harry in Sirius' place. You would not even know if Harry was still alive or barely so. What sort of feelings would that inflict upon you, knowing that you are powerless to stop it," Luna explains in her own strange manner. "I think you don't understand that sometimes we do foolish things in a moment of despair and uncertainty."

"How dare you imply that I would simply allow Harry to be cursed!"

Luna smiles. "Then why do you assume that Lucius would allow it? You can defend the one you love, but Lucius can't? You would deny him what you won't let anyone deny you?"

Tom looks away, his emotions boiling.

"Luna, perhaps it would be best if you—" Lucius is trying to send the girl away without any harm done to her, but Luna cuts him off with a smile and a shake of her head.

She walks over to the startled Dark Lord and points a finger at the man's heart. "You cannot command the hearts of men. Not even your own."

Tom sputters, but can't finish his thought before Luna smirks and goes to sit on the sofa. She is a dainty girl, wide-eyed and outwardly childlike. She even believes imaginary creatures and talks about beasts who do not really exist. She is, in reality, an unbalanced witch with absurd ideas. She is no one to reproach the Dark Lord in such a manner. "Who are you to speak—"
The door opens again and Draco comes in; he sees Luna and takes her hand, pulling her out with him before the Dark Lord can wield his wand and send a hex at the two.

"Any other meddlesome family members who wish to barge in on a private conversation?" Tom bellows with an irritated glare, trying to flush out nosy eavesdroppers. When no one comes in, he glowers. "Perhaps now we can settle the matter."

"What is there to settle? You relentlessly cursed Sirius until I couldn't be sure if he would survive," Lucius snaps at the man, his eyes glowing brightly with fury. He starts pacing the room like a feral cat in a cage. "I disobeyed you because the thought of losing him took over all of my senses and I was afraid that I might spend the rest of my life alone because you were about to take away my chance of real love. So pardon me for trying to stop you from taking away my bloody happy end, Tom!"

Ruffled and swept up in his frenetic feelings, Lucius Disapparates before the Dark Lord can pick up his jaw from the floor. He has never seen Lucius quite so out of sorts, wild-eyed even, and it unnerves him. It is unlike anything the Dark Lord has witnessed before and in his shock, he has even allowed Lucius to get away with calling him by his plebeian Muggle name. It is outrageous and uncalled for, but Tom is not able to do anything but stare.

He stands alone, the words sinking in. A part of him can't believe that Lucius actually wants a life with Black, but he also knows that Lucius has never had a romantic relationship with anyone, his marriage to Narcissa not counting as one. Lovers, yes—but no one to start a relationship with; no one who would stay for longer than a night or two. It is baffling, perhaps even unbelievable, but it is beginning to dawn on Tom that Lucius has truly fallen in love with Sirius Black.

All this time, he has considered it to be a casual affair—a sexual fling in both length and seriousness, but he hadn't thought about the possibility of a real relationship blossoming between such different individuals. But if that is indeed the case, Tom might even cautiously grasp the emotions behind the act of defiance. He would kill without hesitation should anyone hurt Harry; maybe even kill over an unwanted tickling charm. So he can't really fault Lucius for wanting to do the same, can he? It would be unbecoming of him.

Harry and Sirius had tried to tell him, hadn't they? And yet he had not listened, thinking his own observations above all else. He knows Lucius but had not considered that the wizard is free to change. He is not expected to be the same wizard he had been in his youth; the wizard Tom had known and tutored for many years. Tom himself had changed as well, no longer seeing sentiment as a burden, so perhaps he is unjust in thinking that his most loyal followers would remain unchanged in a changing world.

Caught up in his thoughts, Tom doesn't notice a presence in the room with him, until Harry clears his throat. He is frowning—or rather glowering—and says, "For a second there I actually thought you'd be able to say that you're sorry, but it appears that you can't even do that without pissing off a number of people."

"Don't start, Harry," Tom grunts, rubbing a hand over his face.

"I bloody well will start if I want to," Harry argues. "What in Merlin's name did you say to Lucius for him to leave his own house without a word to anyone?"

Tom sighs and thinks about ordering an elf to fetch him a drink but banishes the thought soon after. He says, "It does not matter what I said, but rather what I did not say. I made a mistake when I did not wish to believe the gravity of Lucius' feelings for your godfather, but I see that now. However, I do believe that my error has just cost me the support and resources of a valuable member of our
organisation."

Harry settles down a bit and asks, "You really think Lucius would just turn his back on you? That's a bit far-fetched, don't you think? Besides, he's your friend."

Tom replies with a brisk tone, "Do not delude yourself."

"Oh, all right," Harry begins, "it's not like he knows you or anything. He's only been by your side for two decades. And it's not like you treat him any different than the other Death Eaters, right? And you certainly don't care for his opinions and ideas. Or you know, it's not like you couldn't do this without him. I guess it would be totally fine, Tom, since you don't care."

The Dark Lord clenches his jaw and refuses to speak, although Harry's words are affecting him.

"We're going home," Harry states with no room for arguments, "since you are currently not the most popular wizard in this house. You can continue your brooding elsewhere. I already said my goodbyes and apologies, so straight to the Floo with you." Harry lets out a frustrated breath. "Honestly, Tom—I can't take you anywhere."

Tom is too wound-up to dispute Harry's orders and allows himself to be led towards the fireplace in the parlour. As they are whisked away, Tom briefly wonders if the wards around Malfoy Manor will still allow him entrance should he return at a later time.

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Sirius has a fiery temper—everyone knows that and they know not to test it. The Dark Lord simply does not care for it and Sirius doesn't blame the wizard. They are now on pretty good terms with each other or rather understand where the other stands. So in truth, Sirius has no reason to feel the desire to throttle the Dark Lord—but he does feel a strong desire right now.

None of the elves can tell Sirius where Lucius is. Despite being bound to the Malfoy family, the elves can only locate their Master through their magic if they are not very far from said Master. Because the elves can't pinpoint Lucius' location, Sirius knows that he's not in the manor or on the grounds at all. Of course, there is nothing peculiar about it but the Dark Lord and Harry had left ten fucking hours ago and Sirius is getting restless. Narcissa is worried as well. She is not a woman who frets without cause so that only increases the wizard's anxiety. Draco has no ideas to offer and Snape merely shrugs at Sirius' concern. Luna proposes to consult with the Nargles and Sirius considers it a better idea than Snape's prissy scowl.

All of the elves that don't have a task at hand are out looking, searching Diagon Alley and popping into places that Lucius might have gone in a huff. Grudgingly, Sirius suggests that Narcissa Floo over to Harry's and ask the Dark Lord, but even he has not seen the blond since their row. Harry wants to help but knows that he can't go looking for the man. Draco Floo-calls all of his friends and finds out exactly diddly-squat.

It's close to four in the morning when Sirius explodes and blasts a chair apart. Narcissa's attempts to soothe her cousin are unproductive. They have not seen Lucius since lunch—yesterday's lunch.

"He couldn't have just vanished into thin air!" Sirius yells, hands thrown up in the air. He walks back and forth, wearing the polish on the floorboards thin with his neurotic pacing. "I can't just sit here with my pants down like some idiot."
Narcissa agrees completely but points out, "I understand, Sirius, but please consider what you are up against. You have nowhere to start, for you haven't a starting point. The house-elves were unable to find him. We tried a locator charm, but again we found nothing."

"He's been missing for," Sirius checks the time, "fourteen bloody hours! I'm sure he's not sitting in a pub somewhere, giggling into his pint because we're going mad with worry. He was pissed at Tom, but he wouldn't just disappear for a lark."

By now both Harry and Tom have arrived through the Floo and the wizards find Sirius and Narcissa in the drawing room—looking equally concerned or in Black's case, dejected like a kicked puppy. Tom does not waste time and says, "I called the Inner Circle through their Mark and they have started their search. I don't think Lucius is willingly staying away."

"Can't you call him through the Mark?" Sirius asks.

"I did call him through his Mark—in fact, I am still calling him—but he does not answer the call. I believe he is unable to Apparate. That can be due to a number of things, namely wards that prevent it or bound magic, but I suspect a strong Anti-Apparation Ward."

"You think it's the Order, don't you?" Harry states, taking a seat next to Narcissa. He takes her shaking hand and squeezes it to reassure her.

Tom's nods. "Yes, it might be the Order. Lucius was in a disrupted state of mind when he left Malfoy Manor and it is entirely possible that he was taken."

"Fucking great! You drove him out of his own home, left him in a vulnerable state of mind and now he's missing or possibly kidnapped by a bunch of righteous arseholes. Well done, just well done!"

"Siri, harping at Tom won't change anything," Harry chides. "Lucius is probably in trouble and pointing fingers isn't going to help him. So...do we have any constructive ideas?"

After a beat of silence, Narcissa perks up and says, "I recall a locator spell that was invented by a Black some four hundred years ago."

"We tried several locator spells already and nothing worked," Sirius points out.

"Yes, we tried common locator spells, but this one is not necessarily used to find a specific person. An ancestor tweaked the spell to locate the greatest desire of one's heart. Who says it cannot be used to find a person rather than objects or valuable artefacts? And as I recall, wards and charms cannot contest it because it requires a blood sacrifice. Blood magic is stronger than any blocking spell."

Tom's expression turns thoughtful and he notes, "The idea has worth. If the aim of this spell is to locate something one truly desires and values beyond measure, then perhaps Black will be able to use it to find Lucius."

He turns to Sirius and comments, "If you truly love Lucius, you might be able to channel your emotions into the spell."

Sirius snaps without thinking, "Of course I love him, you berk!"

"Sirius, please. Calm yourself." Narcissa scowls. She stands and states. "I shall procure the book in which the spell is explained in detail."

She wastes little time and hurries out of the drawing room, passing Draco and Luna on her way to the Floo. The young couple joins the others and Draco asks, "Any news?"

The grim faces provide an answer to the blond's question. Luna tries to comfort Draco by wrapping
her arms around him and nuzzling his neck. Harry tries to think up a way to comfort his godfather, but he knows that Sirius is too agitated to accept any sort of assurance. He seems like a man possessed—eyes wildly burning, body taut with tension, a slight growl rumbling in his chest every now and then as he breathes heavily. He is ready to pounce like a captured beast, claw and bite his way through whatever is keeping him away from Lucius.

They wait—and wait some more—before Narcissa comes back, a thick tome clutched against her chest almost an hour later. She quickly hands it to the Dark Lord, considering him to be the most capable, and goes to Sirius. Her slender hands grip her cousin's shoulders and she gives him a stern command. "You are no good to Lucius in this deplorable state. Get a hold of yourself right this instant!"

"I can't lose him, Cissy," Sirius gripes miserably.

"You will not," the woman affirms, "but you have to control your anger and focus on finding him. This will never work if you are not in command of your emotions."

Meanwhile, Tom has found the spell and is in the process of studying the restrictions of it. He says, "Indeed, this spells requires a payment in blood. After the payment has been made, the spell can be cast. However, it involves a magical chain."

"What's that?" Harry asks.

"It means that a number of people have to donate a portion of magic into the spell and maintain a continuous magical connection with each other, thus making a magical chain that supports the spell," Draco explains, earning a few curious looks. "I am familiar with these things, you know."

"Okay, so we make this chain and Sirius can then cast the locator spell, right?"

Tom nods. "Yes, that is the gist of it. However, there is a limitation to this spell. Considering what I know of the Black family, it is a rather strange stipulation. In order for the spell to be successful, the caster must have pure intentions. The object one is trying to locate must truly belong to the one casting the spell—and it is particularly odd because, essentially, such spell is used to acquire something that does not necessarily belong to the one trying to find it. It's very ironic."

"All right," Harry questions with a glare. "So can the spell be used or not? Stop being such a bloody know-it-all, Tom."

"It really depends on your godfather. Let's call it a test of true love."

"Enough yapping, let's do the fucking spell already!" Sirius exclaims and starts to leave. "We'll use the sitting room in the east wing. Lucius won't miss it if we blow it up by accident."

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The uninteresting sitting room is quickly emptied out and Draco attempts to cast a few wards around it in order to protect it from damage, but he soon gives up and goes to help his mother. The magical chain requires no less than four but no more than six magical individuals. Narcissa, Draco and Luna volunteer. Harry does the same but Tom's not really okay with his husband's decision and says, "Harry, this is a dangerous magical practice."
"So?" the young man questions as if he doesn't understand Tom's insinuation. "Are you suggesting that I sit this one out? If so then you don't know me at all, Tom."

"I am merely saying that a magical chain is not without risks."

"Yeah, duly noted," Harry gives a clipped reply. "I'm still going to do it. If you want to sit here and do nothing, you're a sodding arsehole. If you don't care enough to give a fucking scrap of your magic to—"

Harry is roughly cut off by Tom's flaring temper. "Of course I care! I will do anything in my power to make this spell work and then I will bring down a fucking shit-storm on the Order and carve them up until there's not even a stain of them left to scrub away."

Harry bites his lower lip. "Err... okay. That's pretty hot by the way."

Tom takes a step back and runs a hand through his hair, messing up the dark tresses. He manages a deep—a really deep—breath and says, "I think the five of us can sustain the magic long enough for Black to do his part." Then he walks away to discuss everything through with Narcissa. Sirius comes in and throws his robe on the back of a chair. He rolls up his sleeves and sits down in the middle of the room, with the spell book open in front of him.

Harry remarks that he's a lot calmer now than he was before. He's preparing himself both mentally and physically for the spell casting. He has a knife with him to draw the blood needed for the spell. The blood needs to soak into the parchment containing the spell. Past caring for such matters, Sirius rips the necessary page out of the tome and kicks the book across the room, ignoring Narcissa's displease grunt.

Narcissa and Luna join hands and Draco takes Luna's free hand. Harry clasps Draco's hand and waits for Tom to take his. But the Dark Lord frowns and says, "I do not wish to sound rude, but I think it would be best to make the chain with those who have done it before. The chain should be sustained by trained magic users."

"I understand," Luna smiles. "You need wizards and witches who have more experience. Draco, Harry and I have never done this before, so we should be replaced."

Tom gives a nod. "You are entirely correct, Miss Lovegood. I do not doubt your magical abilities or level of power, but I fear that wandlessly channelling magic into the chain will be too taxing for you. I shall call Severus and Bellatrix to assist Narcissa and me."

"That sounds sensible," Harry agrees.

The Dark Lord raises a brow. "I'm surprised to hear you agreeing with me on this."

"I'm agreeing with you because you explained why you need Severus and Bellatrix to make the chain instead of us."

"We are wasting time," Narcissa urges.

Tom gives a curt nod and starts to summon the two through their Mark. A crack of Apparation echoes in the hallway. Bellatrix walks in; in all her dark and deranged glory. "My Lord, we have not found a thing nor heard a single whisper."

Severus arrives a moment later. "Anything?" he asks.

"There is a locator spell we want to try but the spell needs a magical chain to sustain it," Tom says as
Neither Bella or Severus dally and take their places around the sitting wizard. Sirius is quiet, but there is a storm gathering force inside of him. Tom asks the younger wizards and witch to leave the room and they do without protest.

"Black, this spell will recognise if your greatest desire in life is something other than what you claim it to be. So be very sure that your greatest desire isn't finding some forgotten bone in the backyard."

Sirius wants to retort but snaps his mouth shut. He can't afford to get riled up by the Dark Lord's words. So he just gives a nod to signal that he gets it.

A magical chain is a strenuous activity, but the wizards and witches gathered around the room are more than up for it and Tom says, "Start the spell, Black. We will build upon it and feed it until you are finished."

Sirius doesn't need to be told twice and begins the chant. The words bleed into each other, each line filling with magic as he recites them. The spell is not very long, about a dozen words and just three lines of texts, but it is rich with dark magic. As the words start glowing, Sirius slashes his palm and lets the blood drip into the parchment that hungrily swallows it up, leaving the page seemingly clean. It becomes clear why a chain has to be used alongside with the original spell, for Sirius feels exhausted already even though he has not been casting for long. The chain grows thicker with magic, audibly crackling with it, but they hold it steady and let it build some more.

The location of the desired object is supposed to appear at the bottom of the parchment where there is a blank spot for it, but saying the magical words is not enough and Sirius moves on to the next important part of the spell—his heart's desire. There is no doubt in his mind that Lucius means everything to him. When he had first considered the idea of getting into bed with the wizard, he had thought of it as something fun to try. Lucius had tempted him. However, now he is completely certain that he needs Lucius with every atom of his being. He needs his cutting remarks and conceited sneers like he needs air to survive. He is willing to endure a number of Lucius' bad personality quirks for a lifetime just to have the wizard by his side right now.

The spell feeds on his yearning and the emotions pouring into the magic, giving it intention. It flows through Sirius, filling up even the tiniest of blood vessels, and it searches for confirmation that the wizard's intent is to find his way to the thing he most craves in this life. It's a need for peace of mind and serenity, a desire for companionship and affection, a longing for a place of his own, a family of his own making—in the centre of it, Sirius sees Lucius. This is the only pure part of him.

As the magic reaches its peak, snapping like a whip in the air, Sirius chants the final part of the spell and feels a tug in his chest. Like a hot brand around his heart, pulsing with a prickly energy. It is painful, choking, excruciating. Perhaps it is the final part of the spell that needs to confirm the caster's intent or maybe it is the spell failing—Sirius can't tell because he simply doesn't know. Then the magical chain breaks apart, the surge from the spell being released knocking them all on their backside and leaving the room stifling with the residue of their collective magic.

The backlash renders all of them momentarily confounded and immobile. Tom is the first to recover from the magical blast. The chain is no longer in place and another one will take too long to set up, not to mention drain them excessively. Sirius is still sitting on the floor, the tendrils of the spell creeping around and piercing his heart like wires. It is a necessary pain one must suffer in order to complete the spell and Sirius is willing to pay any price to get Lucius back.

When the pain disappears and the spell comes to an end, Sirius grabs the parchment and curses. In the blank spot, written in the blood Sirius had sacrificed, is the name of Britain's prominent magical
"Fucking idiots! They took him to Hogwarts."

"Does it not give a more accurate location?" Severus asks.

"No, it just says *Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.*" Sirius sighs and attempts to get on his feet but sways. Spots dance before his eyes and he tries to rub them away.

Narcissa wraps her arm around Sirius and helps him stay upright. "You need to rest a bit. The spell has weakened you."

"I'm fine, Cissy. I don't need to rest, I need to curse those stupid fuckers into a pile of ash," Sirius protests.

"No one is doing anything right now," Tom speaks up. "I will gather my Death Eaters, then we will devise a proper plan instead of storming the castle without one. Lucius is no weakling; he will manage on his own a little longer."

"Fuck that, Tommy! I'm going—" Sirius starts to say but he isn't able to finish his rant.

Narcissa pockets her wand and guides the unconscious Animagus on the sofa. She says, "We have some time to create a plan until the sleeping charm wears off."

"We will head to Riddle Manor," Tom states and sweeps out of the room. He informs the young ones of the news as he walks past them. Luna and Draco follow the Dark Lord in the Floo, but Harry goes in to check on Sirius.

He finds him out cold on the sofa. Severus and Bellatrix have already left for Riddle Manor, but Narcissa is keeping an eye on Sirius. She has the book tucked under her arm, the ripped out sheet folded between the pages.

"Is he all right?" Harry questions, a bit alarmed to see Sirius knocked out.

"A light sleeping charm, that is all," she explains. "He wanted to run straight into trouble, but the Dark Lord thinks we cannot attempt anything without a suitable plan of action. The spell left him in a weakened state and a bit of sleep will do him good."

Harry understands. "You will Apparate with him to Riddle Manor?"

"In a moment," she confirms.

"I can't believe the Order was able to capture Lucius so easily," Harry muses and rubs his neck.

Narcissa doesn't find it odd at all, given the circumstances, and tells the wizard, "Lucius never lets his guard down but almost losing Sirius to the Dark Lord's ire—it affected him in an unfamiliar manner. I believe that the confrontation with the Dark Lord left him troubled and I can see the Order taking advantage of it. Sirius did mention some Order members following them around in Diagon Alley in the morning."

"All they needed was a chance and they took it," Harry sums up and mutters. "Stupid bastards."

"Soon, they shall be stupid *dead* bastards." Narcissa smiles.
Lucius wakes up in a room that is cover in complete darkness. As if that isn't enough, the room smells rancid. If it even is a room at all. It's abnormally cold and soggy—it feels as if he's in a cave or maybe in the sewers. The thought alone makes the wizard sick; mostly because he's wearing rather expensive clothing and he'll have to acquire new ones just to get rid of the smell. There isn't much to go on because there are no windows or any sources of light.

The wizard feels an unpleasant ache all over his body. He remembers falling to his knees, everything exploding in pain without warning and the distinct feeling of a Portkey activating and sucking him into the whirlpool of it. It does not take a genius to know that someone had hexed him and taken him hostage. It is undoubtedly the work of Order members.

Lucius had Apparated to Diagon Alley. His little chat with the Dark Lord had forced him to flee his own home and he had left without thinking about the location. Diagon Alley had been his first thought. He had aimlessly walked down the main street, simply looking at display windows while silently seething—and trying to not panic. He had been attacked just outside the passage to Knockturn Alley.

It is a disgrace; Lucius fully blames himself for being an easy target. He had been so preoccupied with fuming and sorting out his pathetic anxiety that he had not paid attention to his surroundings. It is no secret that the Order has been following around those they consider evil Death Eaters and a couple of them have been shadowing Sirius whenever he shows himself in public. Lucius had completely overlooked the danger of vigilante Order members. Now, he's in a stinking dungeon being held captive by a league of dim-witted fanatics in a set of ruined robes.

A flash of light almost blinds him for a moment and a Stunner hits him right in the chest. When he opens his eyes again, he's in another room that is illuminated with torches and surrounded by a clutter of stuff. He's tied to a chair, hands fixed together behind his back with a piece of rope. Alastor Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt stand before him with wands pointed at him. Andromeda's girl is standing in the back with some baby-faced Auror and the Weasley bint.

"I think I don't have to explain to you what is happening right now," Shacklebolt says with smug self-satisfaction shining in his face.

"Is this the annual 'kiss Dumbledore's arse' congregation—in that case, I feel like I have been invited to the wrong party."

Moody makes a sudden jerk forward but Shacklebolt catches him. "Not yet, Mad-Eye. We have time for that later." Then he turns to Lucius. "You've been around Sirius. It shows. He's a reckless fool, you know. He'll get his share when the time comes."

Lucius keeps a blank expression on his face, adding a touch of arrogance just to piss Mad-Eye off even more. The man is sloppy when he is angry.

Shacklebolt orders, "You're going to tell me where You-Know-Who is hiding and then you're going to tell me about his plans."

"Is that so?" Lucius questions with a slight smirk. "I'm afraid I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about."

Shacklebolt strikes the wizard across the face without hesitation and grabs a fistful of Lucius' hair.
He barks like a mad dog, "Don't play games with me, Malfoy! You will never leave this place alive if you keep it up. Now tell me what I want to know."

The roots of his hair sting with pain as Shacklebolt keeps a firm grasp of the strands. There is a salty taste of copper in his mouth and the skin on his cheek feels inflamed. Lucius spits in Shacklebolt's face, giving him his answer. Shacklebolt wipes his cheek clean and gives an unhinged smile. "Let's not pretend. We all know that you are a sordid Death Eater; one of his best, his closest advisor."

Lucius doesn't give him an answer, a defiant gleam in his eyes. Shacklebolt doesn't like it and hums. "This might hurt a little." He mutters a curse and uses it to dislodge the blond wizard's right shoulder. He adds after that, "I'm going to break every bone in your body until you start talking. Nothing above the neck of course—I need you to be able to tell me You-Know-Who's secrets. But I think you won't need the rest of them to have a chat with me. You'll sing like a pretty bird, won't you? After I break your wings and leave you in a cage to suffer."

Lucius doesn't scream like Kingsley wants him to as he continues to curse him. The Dark Lord has cursed Lucius enough times over the years; the pain of a bone shattering is nothing exciting for Lucius Malfoy.

Mad-Eye pushes past Shacklebolt and says, "Perhaps this devious scum needs a bit more incentive?"

The Cruciatius feels like a light tickle compared to the Dark Lord's and Mad-Eye himself realises it after a few moments. But maybe it is good manners to at least wince a little?

"You have to do better than that if you really want to play with me, Moody." Lucius gives the man an amused look.

"Corrupted piece of shite! You deserve to burn, you wicked Dark Lord loving fiend."

Lucius lets out a small laugh. "You flatter me."

Moody rages and hits Lucius with a cutting curse, enjoying the sight of blood seeping through the fabric of his shirt. The stinging pain isn't pleasurable, but neither is letting the pair of idiots see his discomfort. Moody's cutting hexes keep coming, six or seven in total.

Shacklebolt shouts out, his wand suddenly under Lucius' chin. "Enough! Tell me where You-Know-Who is?"

The pain is insufferable and Lucius is feeling lightheaded. The blood oozing from the cuts on his shoulder, chest and stomach is no light trickle. All Lucius wants to do is sleep, maybe have a cup of tea, but he isn't going to give them the satisfaction of seeing him collapse under pressure. He swallows and looks down, which makes the Order member lean in. Shacklebolt is almost too eager to hear what Lucius has to say. The blond wizard whispers with a smile, "Haven't you heard? He's everywhere these days."

Shacklebolt breaks his arm after that, enjoying the pained expression on his prisoner's face.
The Inner Circle is gathered in Riddle Manor, awaiting orders from the Dark Lord. However, Tom has no orders to give. He's having a proper meltdown in private. He has never really experienced guilt before—leaving out everything regarding Harry—but he feels responsible for this. He had been too ruthless with Lucius; he realises it now. Black is clearly frantic with worry and Tom considers it more than just concern for a casual lover. No, he can see that Sirius Black truly loves Lucius with his entire being and he now understands that Lucius feels the same for Black. It is curious and surprising, but mostly it is amusing. Two such different wizards—well, it is going to be a rather bumpy ride.

Harry walks into his study, face turning from concerned to downright anxious as he takes in Tom's rather hysterical expression. "Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not all right," Tom exclaims without really paying attention to the fact that it's Harry and that there is no need to sound so rude. He rubs his face. "I don't know what to do."

"I have an idea but knowing what a possessive wanker you can be, I'm not sure if you'd approve of this idea."

"Tell me your idea," Tom says, gesturing Harry to sit down.

"You can get into Hogwarts, right? So, we use the Chamber of Secrets to get into the castle. Then I find the Order and you know that they'll just die of happiness when they see me. While I entertain our favourite wankers, you and Sirius go find Lucius. It will work."

"It is incredibly dangerous. Nearly stupid. It is not even a plan, Harry."

Harry snorts. "Yeah, I know. But that makes it perfect. Shacklebolt and the mad dog Moody are probably expecting you to show up all mean and foaming at the mouth because they have one of your Death Eaters. Or maybe they think you won't bother at all. The point is that if I show up, we'll completely shock them and they won't even think about the rest."

"I will allow it on one condition," Tom says. "Severus will not leave your side. You will give him your Invisibility Cloak and it will be his job to make sure you are unharmed."

Harry looks ready to protest but gives a suffering nod. "Fine. Severus is going to be so pissed when he finds out about the Cloak. He still hasn't figured out how I got around school without getting caught."

"It is a small price to pay, Harry."

"Yeah, all right," Harry says. "It's up to you to get everything else done."

"Ideally, I would like to keep your godfather away from Hogwarts. He is too wild and he'll cause
more trouble. He's a liability in his current state."

Harry gives the man a pointed look. "There is no way you will get Sirius to sit this one out. He wants to wipe the floor with Mad-Eye and Shacklebolt. You know that he's going crazy right now. Those Order idiots better not have touched a hair on Lucius' head because Sirius will literally rip their throats out if he's hurt."

"The idea itself is not bad," Tom smirks. "I will discuss this with Black."

"Fine by me," Harry says with a smile. He lets out a puff of air and turns to leave. "I'll tell Severus."

"Do not leave without me, Harry," the Dark Lord warns. "If you run into this like a foolish Gryffindor, I will spank your arse raw in front of everyone."

"As if Severus is going to let me run off on my own."

Tom glares. "I mean it—you will not leave without me."

"Yeah, I heard you the first time, babe."

Harry walks out of the room, chuckling at Tom's spluttering.

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Almost an hour later, they manage to get everything planned out and their forces gathered and then dispersed. It's is close to seven in the morning and Lucius has been missing for about twenty or so hours.

Sirius is awake and angry, stomping around Riddle Manor like an irate ghoul. Severus, Narcissa, Draco and Bellatrix are standing in a semi-circle, quietly talking and waiting for the Dark Lord. Harry comes into the parlour with Bill Weasley trailing after him. He looks groggy and seems to have dressed in a hurry.

Tom walks out of his study and his eyes fall on the gathered people in her parlour. "Our forces are already surrounding the castle as we speak, but they will not be doing anything other than keeping their eyes on Hogwarts. We will be Apparating into the Chamber of Secrets as it is the only part of the castle that does not have wards around it. Well, it does have wards, but those wards will allow me entrance." He clears his throat and goes on, "However, that is not important right now. When we are inside the castle, Harry will make contact with the Order, while Severus supervise. The rest of us will go in two groups—one that will search the castle for Lucius and the other group will deal with any pesky Order members."

Bellatrix waves her hand in the air. "My Lord, I wish to hunt down the weak Order rats."

"Please don't leave any parts of them intact, Cousin," Sirius tells the witch. "Go wild."

"Oh, it is going to be so bloody and wonderful."

"Mad-Eye is mine," Sirius cautions his cousin with a pointed look. "Got that? You kill him and we'll have words later."

Bellatrix tucks a few errant strands back into the bird's nest on top of her head and rolls her eyes,
"I'm not stupid, mutt. Mad-Eye's head is yours. It's not very proper of me to deprive you of your fun, Lord Black."

"Are you two done?" Tom asks, his brow quirked in an annoyed manner. "If so, I'd like to go on."

"What's there to talk about?" Sirius barks. "Narcissa and I will search the castle for Lucius. I'm familiar with every nook and cranny of that castle, all the hidden passages and trapdoors and ways to get out of the castle without discovery. Narcissa has basic healing skills and she can help in case Lucius is injured. It's the most logical choice. Everyone else can just decapitate Order members. Bella can set the whole bloody place on fire for all I care."

"Sirius is right," Draco speaks up. "Finding my father is not a task for more than one or two of us. We need most of our forces dealing with the Order. We round them up and it will be the end of them."

Sirius points at Draco and says, "The kid is making sense. Let's just go. I can't sit here and do nothing. Mad-Eye and Shacklebolt are not some goody-goody pacifist types trying to defeat evil with flower-power—they're ruthless, vicious and willing to torture to get what they want. Living in some fantasy land, the Order still thinks that there is a war for them to win and a Dark Lord to triumph over, so you can bet your arse they're torturing Lucius for information right about now. While we're here making plans and nitpicking over details, Lucius is not having a very good time with those delusional psychos."

"I'm sorry but can someone please tell me what the hell is going on?"

Everyone turns to Bill. Some are surprised to see him, some are confused. Harry sees their faces and says, "I think we might need Bill. His parents might be involved and I promised him a chance to save them. If he can't get them to drop this ridiculous attempt to save the world from the big bad Voldemort—well, that's too bad, but I owe him a chance at least."

"Yes, yes." Tom sighs. "His your responsibility, Harry."

"What the fuck!" Bill gripes and looks at Harry. "Explain!"

"The Order kidnapped Lucius and we're getting him back. And we're going to kill every one of those idiots. Get your parents to safety and I'll consider them threats no more. That's what is happening."

"If there are no more questions—" Tom looks around and sees that no one has anything to add. "I will take you to the Chamber in pairs. Black and Narcissa, you will go first but you will wait for the rest of us."

Narcissa nods but Sirius is about to protest. Harry stops him and says, "You won't be able to get out of the Chamber. You need a Parselmouth for that."

"We'll spread out once everyone is present." Tom motions the two Blacks to step forward and holds out his hands. Narcissa wastes little time and grabs the Dark Lord's hand, but Sirius looks at it as if it's a nasty creature with sharp teeth. Tom rolls his eyes and snatches Sirius' arm into a tight grip. They Disapparate without a sound. After a moment, Tom comes back and takes Bellatrix and Severus, and then picks up Harry and Bill, the latter taking the arm with the same expression as Sirius.

The Chamber is dark and wet but thankfully, sans giant killer snake. The Dark Lord commands Severus with Harry. He tells the older wizard, "If you lose sight of my husband, I will deprive you of
yours. It is your duty to keep him safe."

Severus swallows and nods.

"Weasley," Tom turns to the redhead. "You are on your own. I don't care if you get your parents out or not. If they get in my way, I will drain them of every drop of their blood."

"You did bring your wand, right?" Harry asks over his shoulder, smirking at Bill who looks a little green in the face.

"Can we please get the fuck out of this creepy gutter," Sirius groans out. He and Narcissa are eager to leave.

Harry nods and takes out his cloak from the rucksack over his shoulder. He holds it out for Severus and says, "If you lose it, I will set your potion lab on fire."

"I knew it," Severus mutters. "There was no way you sneaking around was anything natural."

"Yeah, whatever. Just put it on and stay quiet under it. If you drip all over your feet, I am so letting you face-plant."

Severus wants to say a number of things, some not so friendly and others downright crude, but he stays silent. The Dark Lord is glaring at him. Harry is already walking towards the entrance, blowing a kiss over his shoulder.

Tom feels a headache coming on.

Sirius and Narcissa both have their wands in hand as they follow Harry and Severus. Harry raises a brow at Severus who then mutters something under his breath and throws the Invisibility Cloak over his shoulders.

"You should wear it all the time." Sirius snorts. "It suits you. Really brings out your best features."

"Diseased mutt," Snape grumbles but no one can see the look of pure hate on his face.

Harry says the needed words in the snake language and the huge round door starts moving, the snake slithering around it. Harry says, "There shouldn't be any students around with the Christmas hols and all, but a few unlucky sods might still be in the castle. Also, Order members might be patrolling and pretending to know what they're doing."

"Fuck—tell me you have the Map, Pup?"

Harry smirks and pulls it out of his inner pocket. "You bet your arse I did."

Sirius takes it and pulls Harry into a rough hug, kissing his head. "I'd be a dead dog without you, kid."

"Go find your man and don't forget to squash some annoying bugs on the way."

Sirius gives the wizard a nod and takes Narcissa's hand. They pass through a lot of dark tunnels and after a little spell-work, the two Blacks find themselves on the upper level. The corridors are empty, a few torches lighting the way. Sirius unfolds the map and hums.

Narcissa peers over his shoulder and asks, "What is this map for?"

"It's the Marauder's Map," Sirius explains. "My friends and I made it when we were in school. It
shows you the entire castle and where everyone is."

"Impressive." Narcissa states and points at the map. "Oh, look—Bella and Draco are heading
towards the Gryffindor Tower."

"A bit predictable, but I guess Bellatrix can do stealth when she has to."
Narcissa smirks. "She has hidden talents."

"Let's go," Sirius suggests. "I don't see Luce on the Map yet, but certain rooms don't show up on it."

"This is a school. They won't have him somewhere out on the open or too obvious. A few children
might still be here, along with the teachers who may be neutral. I think we should go into the
Slytherin tunnels."

"Slytherin has their own tunnels?"
Narcissa nods. "Yes, it is a set of tunnels that all lead to a dungeon. The legend says that those
tunnels were added without the other founding members knowing about it. And only Slytherin
students can enter."

"Yeah, all right, but the Order has no Slytherin members."
Narcissa's face falls a bit. "Oh, I did not consider it."

They walk into a hidden alcove and Sirius sighs. "Maybe we're going about it the wrong way. We're
assuming that the Order is smart, but what if they just have Lucius in the most obvious place."

"The map shows everyone inside the castle and on the grounds, correct?"

"Yes, but as I said, there are a few places that don't show up on it. James found the Room of
Requirement in our fourth-year and when we tried to include it on the map later, it would not show
up because it's unplottable."

"If they have him in the Room of Requirement, then he would not show up on the map," Narcissa
surmises. She eyes the parchment and her eyes widen. "Look, it's Andromeda's girl, isn't it?
Nymphadora Tonks. We ought to follow her."

"Bloody Tonks," Sirius mutters. "So much for family loyalty."

"Andromeda never taught her any."

"She's moving to the seventh floor." Sirius curses and promptly folds the map and sticks it into his
pocket. "She disappeared. The room we're looking for is on the seventh floor in the left corridor.
They must be using it as a fucking torture dungeon. The room does provide whatever you need and I
know exactly what Mad-Eye can think up."

Narcissa curses under her breath and asks, "How will we get into the room?"

"The door will appear when you walk past it three times while thinking about what you need. Once
the door appears, we have to be ready for everything."

"The map is useless," the witch growls and crosses her arms, "We have no idea how many Order
members are hiding inside."

Sirius pulls out the folded parchment again and scans it. "Harry is in the Great Hall with Snape.
Once he draws the Order out, we slip in. Knowing Harry, he'll send his Patronus to deliver a message to Shacklebolt. We have to get to the seventh floor and wait for our chance."

"All right, it sounds better than simply charging in and blasting our way through them."

Sirius laughs. "That's how a Gryffindor would act but this calls for a more Slytherin tactic. We're sneaking around like dirty snakes."

Narcissa frowns and responds with a haughty sniff. Sirius tucks the map away and the two move towards the staircase. The moving stairs make it hard for them, but Sirius knows a few secret passageways and pulls Narcissa into a hidden tunnel behind a portrait of a heavy-looking man sitting in a barrel. The passage takes them upwards and as they stop in front of a dead-end, Sirius pushes the stone wall. It creaks and crumbles a bit of dust on them, but they step out of the passage and Sirius says, "There is a hidden alcove just near the corridor."

The alcove gives them a perfect view of the corridor that hides the Come and Go Room. Narcissa points in the air and says, "You were right. It is a Patronus."

Sirius feels an odd sort of tightness in his throat. He watches the majestic stag glide in the air, prancing right into the wall. It is curious that a Patronus can slip into the unplottable room without much effort. Sirius is busy reminiscing and Narcissa has to pull him back into the alcove as a door appears out of nowhere and a gaggle of people dash out. Shacklebolt, Mad-Eye and Tonks, followed by Molly Weasley and some unknown faces.

*New recruits.* Sirius thinks with a disgusted smirk. Bloody idiots. Molly is always willing to tag along and Tonks really is no surprise. He can't decide which one of them he wants to kill first. On one hand, he doesn't want Molly's blood on his hands—or on his teeth. Bill is a good mate and he'd hate to cause his friend such grief. On the other hand, he really, *really* can't stand Molly Weasley and if she has hurt Lucius in any way—well, Bill will have to get over it eventually.

"Come on, let's go." Sirius inclines his head and motions Narcissa to follow him. He steps out of the alcove and walks into the corridor. It is easy to think about what he wants. He knows that Lucius is there and he wants to get to him. The door appears as expected and Sirius keeps his wand steady. Narcissa gives Sirius a nod and brings her wand into position, a curse sitting on the tip of her tongue.

The Come and Go Room looks as Sirius remembers it from his last visit. James had fooled around with the old brooms and Remus had found a number of interesting books and knickknacks. He shakes his head to clear it from memories.

A young man is patrolling the back of the room, looking nervous and casting a Tempus every other second. Narcissa smirks and whispers, "Shall I take care of it?"

Sirius shrugs. "He seems like a regular lily-livered Order twat so it shouldn't be hard. Go for it."

Narcissa knocks the young wizard over with a hex and then curses him with boils. As the nasty boils start covering his face and hands, some popping with acid puss, the wizard screams and stammers, "I'm just a look-out guy, I swear. I didn't touch him. It was Mad-Eye and Shacklebolt and that Weasely woman. They did it. I didn't even want to join the Order, but my brother told me. Don't kill me, please!"

"Oh, I'm not going to *kill* you," Narcissa says with a calm expression. She smiles. "I'm going to make you feel so much pain that you'll do it yourself."

"How many of you are there?" Sirius barks.
The man stammers and gasps, "Just me, I swear. I was supposed to keep an eye on him until the others get back. Potter—they said that Potter's here. That's all I know."

"If you're lying to me, I'm coming straight back and then I will you choke the life out of you with your own entrails."

The young man shivers and shakes with fear but Sirius leaves him to Narcissa. He runs to the back, finding a large empty space and a chair in the middle of it. Frustrated and desperate, Sirius kicks it. There is blood on the floor and Sirius feels a cold feeling enclose his insides. He doesn't even consider changing into his Animagus form and simply sniffing Lucius out.

Narcissa joins him and immediately shakes him. "Sirius, you need to stay focused. Panicking will not help." She sees the blood as well and goes on, "Give me your wand. You must change into your dog form and scent Lucius. You will find him quicker like that."

Sirius nods and hands his wand to the woman. He takes the Animagus form after steadying himself. The black dog shakes his bulk, body and fur rippling as he starts shuffling around. He circles Narcissa a few times and then moves towards the puddle of blood on the floor. Sniffing it like mad, the dog's ears perk a little and a fierce growl rips free from its muzzle. Teeth bared, Padfoot shows feral anger as he stalks into the back of the room. Narcissa follows.

Padfoot can smell every little thing but most importantly, his superior sense of smell picks up Lucius' scent and he barks, alerting Narcissa that he's on to something. The witch finds herself in a labyrinth of corners and old furniture and high ceilings that seem endless. In the back of the cluttered fixtures, a makeshift cell stands out. It's dark inside and the entrance is barred with a thick, bolted door. Narcissa peers in through the small gap that is secured with iron bars and gasps. Padfoot is scratching at the door, sniffing and whining. He howls in distress.

"He's inside." Narcissa says and swallows, "I—Sirius, you must help me. I can't unlock it."

As Narcissa slams her hand against the door, Sirius appears behind her, half-way dressed and beyond rage. He is back in human form and looks ready to claw his way in. The witch quickly gives Sirius his wand back. The wizard blasts the door a few times, but he can't get the lock off.

"Wait," Narcissa stops him, laying her hand on Sirius' arm. "This room provides what is needed, right?"

"All we need is a key," Sirius answers and thinks about it. He imagines the shape of it, the weight of it against his palm, how much he needs it. He closes his hand and lets out a relieved breath as he feels it in his palm. The rusty, oddly-shaped key fits perfectly into the keyhole and Sirius wastes little time. As he turns the key and hears the click, he pushes the door in with all his strength. The sight that greets him is heart-breaking and makes him vibrate with fury.

Narcissa pushes past him and kneels in the darkness, her fingers touching, looking for a pulse like a Muggle healer would. She cannot allow her tears to fall as she tries to find any sign of life. Lucius in on the stone floor, blood-soaked and bruised. His long blond hair is matted with the crimson liquid, patches of it dried already. There is a cut on his cheek, a contusion above his brow and a trickle of blood running from his ear. Darkening bruises litter his neck and Narcissa can see some marking his collarbone where the shirt has been ripped to shreds. She starts casting diagnostic spells with a shaking hand.

Sirius is frozen; he can't move or speak. Fear is paralysing him, flooding him with weakness and anger that is so sharp and heady that he can't even rein it in.
"Sirius, please—I need you to help me." Narcissa snaps, her voice rising and turning shrill with panic. "He's barely alive. Broken bones, bruises, cuts, blood loss, punctured lung. He has a high fever, probably from being in his cold, damp place. Sirius—he's going to die if we don't get him out of here. Please help me."

Startled awake, as if someone has smacked him across the face, Sirius stumbles forward, quickly kneeling next to his lover. He cries openly. He can't even begin to explain how much seeing Lucius in such a state hurts him.

"He has lost so much blood—" Narcissa gripes, her wand furiously working over the blond's broken, battered body.

"Can I move him? We'll take him home, Cissy."

"I can't heal the fractured bones or the blood loss, but I can for the time being seal the minor wounds that are still bleeding." Narcissa isn't a Healer; she just some training in healing spells. "I can't cast a feather-light charm on him because any added spell work might aggravate his injuries."

Sirius nods and says, "I'll carry him. You are in charge of watching our backs." He tucks his wand away and attempts to gather Lucius in his arms and that pulls a pained moan from the blond. "I'm sorry, Luce—but I have to move you."

He lifts Lucius into his arms bridal style and gently presses his forehead against the blond's. Sirius gathers himself, inhaling a shuddering gulp of air. Lucius is limp, completely unresponsive and shivering. His skin is terribly cold but also damp. Fortunately, he's not heavy at all and Sirius needs to settle his emotions before he can move.

"I'll go ahead and make sure we're alone."

He doesn't reply to the woman's words and concentrates on the wizard in his arms. Despite the bruises and cuts, the rest of the blond's face isn't harmed. Knowing why the Order had taken the man, Sirius figures that they didn't want to damage his face too much because they needed him to be able to talk and spill all of the Dark's secrets. Fucking idiots, the lot of them. He's going to tear them into tiny chunks when he gets the chance.

They reach the seventh-floor corridor, the Come and Go Room allowing them to leave. Narcissa is visibly trembling. As a rule, the witch is a strong, capable woman who can deal with a lot of things, but seeing her best friend—the brother of her heart—in such a horrible state has left Narcissa Black shaken to her core. She's trying to control her fear, her anger, her magic even. Without hesitation, she fires a spell at an approaching figure, but the wizard ducks and comes out with his hands up. It's Bill Weasley.

"It's me," Bill manages to get out. He is panting heavily but does spot Sirius behind the witch. "They're all in the Great Hall. I can't go in there because then they will know that something is up."

Sirius doesn't care and says, "Look, we have to get the fuck out of here. You do what you have to do."

Bill steps closer and only now sees the wizard in Sirius' arms, tucked close and impossibly small. The redhead's stomach does a strange flip and he stammers, "Fuck. Is he—"

"He will be if I don't get him out of here," Sirius barks, the edges of his tone prickly. He walks past Bill and only stops to say, "If your Mum laid even one bloody finger on him—I will kill her, do you understand? You won't be able to hide her from me."
Bill recoils; his emotions between fighting Sirius and agreeing with him. Bill is not an idiot; he knows that his mother is responsible for some of the damage and he won't be able to protect her. He wants to stop Sirius but he isn't an idealistic boy anymore. He says, "I'll help you get out of the castle. They have a few sentries lurking around."

"I am quite capable of taking care of them," Narcissa sniffs.

"Yeah, I don't doubt that, but maybe I feel safer with you than I do on my own," Bill comments and it is partly true. Safety in numbers and all that.

The witch chooses not to respond in any other way than by moving past Bill. Sirius follows. The redhead decides to stay behind Sirius and keep an eye on the man's back. They go in silence, steps hurried and vigilant. Apparation is out of the question because even though the wards are weakening, Hogwarts is protected by a strong Anti-Apparation ward. They can't get back into the Chamber of Secrets because no one in their group speaks the language of snakes and the chamber only allows Apparation when one is of Slytherin descent. They don't have a portkey either and the fireplaces must be closely monitored.

Then an idea pops into Sirius' mind. "Cissy, can you call for a house-elf from Malfoy Manor?"

"I am no longer a Malfoy by name but they should obey me still," she confirms and calls for one.

As house-elves are bound to a family, they should always sense their master's call. Hogwarts allows elves to pop in and pop out just as easily. After a moment, three elves appear, all of them wearing a dark blue uniform with the Malfoy crest stitched on it.

Narcissa sighs in relief and immediately tells the elves, "You must help us take Master Lucius to the manor. Can you Apparate with him?"

One of the elves nods. "Yes, Mistress Cissy. We can take him with us."

"Go with them," Sirius orders the witch. "Get every Healer in the country, in the world—I don't care. You make sure he stays alive for me, Cousin. I have some things I want to settle first."

Thankfully, the witch doesn't argue. She understands perfectly. The elves gather around and in a blink of an eye, they transport both Narcissa and the unconscious wizard away. Bill stares and swallows. He doesn't like Malfoy, but he also doesn't want him to die. Sirius won't be able to handle the loss and it would mean certain death for Molly. Bill has no doubt left in his mind that Sirius Black will slaughter everyone responsible and burn the castle to the ground in order to flush out every last one in hiding.

"Let's go," Sirius tells him, flexing his fingers around his wand. There is only one thing on his mind and that's tearing Mad-Eye's chest open and ripping out his beating heart. Shacklebolt will die slowly, with every bone in his body broken. Sirius has nothing planned for Molly yet, but that can easily change should he find out the extent of her involvement.

Bill follows weakly, afraid to find out just what exactly his mother has done.

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Harry and a disguised Severus walk around the castle. The corridors are empty since it's the holidays
and in the middle of the night. They see no one and that's a good thing because Harry wants to
surprise the Order.

Severus, hidden but still grumbling, doesn't like his mission one bit but it's logical. In case Harry ends
up in a pickle, he is the most capable choice when it comes to defending the young wizard. Bellatrix
might just release Fiendfyre on them and burn the bloody place down like Sirius suggested and the
Lestrange brothers are guarding the outer limits of the castle and grounds. The Dark Lord himself has
other plans, ones that involve wrecking the castle's defences and flooding Hogwarts with his forces
before morning. Severus doesn't even want to think about the state Narcissa must be in, for he knows
that the witch is deeply fond of her former husband. They are more than just friends—Narcissa sees
Lucius as her family and no one ever messes with her family. Blacks are notoriously vindictive and
hostile when it comes to protecting what they consider theirs.

Which leads Snape to Sirius Black. Not only is the wizard a Black—a malicious, aggressive, vicious
Black in both name and blood—but he is also the lover of the man the Order has most likely hurt.
Severus doesn't much care for Black, hates him really, but he does have to admit that the wizard truly
loves Lucius. The spell that had been used to find him in the first place has now made it clear
enough. Lucius really is the man's heart's greatest desire. That does change the game a bit in Severus'
mind because no one in the Order has prepared themselves for what is to come.

They reach the Great Hall and Harry says, "Let's get ourselves settled in."

"How will you lure the Order in here?" Severus' voice inquires from under the cloak.

"With this nifty old thing," Harry replies with a grin and casts the Patronus charm. The stag leaps out
and struts around Harry for a moment. Then Harry gives it a message and watches the silvery stag
prance out of the room and towards the staircase. He tells Severus, "They'll come running soon
enough."

"And when they get here? What then?"

"Would you just relax." Harry sighs and goes on, "I'm going to have a chat with them. When I know
for certain that Lucius is alive and out of harm's way, Tom will make a party of it."

"You're all insane," Severus mutters.

"Yeah, but it's pretty fun." Harry hums. "And you're just as mad as the rest of us or you wouldn't be
here right now."

They don't have to wait long. Harry is sprawled on the high chair that is usually reserved for the head
of the school and he's eying the Christmas decorations. Severus had pushed the long tables against
the walls and created a huge space in the middle of the hall. Now the man is sitting next to Harry, in
the spot he used to sit in during meals. He doesn't miss it all that much, especially the idiotic children,
but he does miss the ancient castle just a little bit. He used to see it as a safe place during the term
because he had a violent, abusive dick of a father at home.

Harry is drumming his fingers against the armrest as the Order gallops in, Shacklebolt and Mad-Eye
at the head of the group. Molly pushes her way out of the middle and her face is just too brilliant—
it's shock and a happy gleam all wrapped up into a ball of 'how-dare-you-disappear-on-us' expression
that is aimed at the green-eyed wizard.

Shacklebolt is the one who practically runs up front and barks at Harry. "You have a lot of nerve,
Potter! Where the devil have you been hiding? We've been searching for you!"

"I was away on a little holiday," Harry explains, leaning against the backrest. "Did you miss me that much, Shacks?

"What is wrong with you, boy? How dare you run away like a coward when you need to end this war."

Harry grins. "I hate to be the bringer of bad news, but this war you're trying to win... well, it's pretty much over."

"So what's the plan?" Shacklebolt demands as Mad-Eye, Molly and Tonks all gather near.

The utterly stupid question has Harry grinning even wider. "Plan? Oh, there's no plan. You're all going to die."

The baffled faces really do drive Harry over the edge and he starts laughing. Kingsley launches himself at Harry but the green-eyed wizard is quicker and ducks. He points a wand at the wizard and chides, "Now that wasn't very nice."

"You've gone mad, boy!"

"How dare you hide as we're fighting? How dare you abandon your duty?" Molly screeches like some obsessive Muggle preacher who tries to bring down the wrath of the lord on the young wizard. "You—you good for nothing coward! Just like your lazy, gutless godfather."

"Let me get this straight," Harry clears his throat after Molly's rant. He points his wand at each of them as he goes on, "You want me to fight for you. Kill the Dark Lord for you because you lot are incapable of doing it yourself. Because some crystal ball told you that this kid will be so super and just defeat this extremely powerful wizard. Are you all really so stupid that you believe that or did Dumbledore programme you to think that because he needed good little soldiers to further his own selfish agenda?"

Someone from the back shouts, "Only his followers call him the Dark Lord. His gone Dark. Harry Potter has gone Dark!"

Harry throws the man a bored look and questions, "What was your first clue? Perhaps when I said that you're all going to die. Seriously, are you all idiots? Does getting into the Order require a vast amount of stupidity?"

Mad-Eye Moody splutters at the young man. "Potter, you're going to defeat You-Know-Who. You are the only one who can kill him and I don't give a rat's arse about what you want. You will kill him."

"Nah," Harry shrugs with an indifferent expression, "I don't think I feel up to it."

Shacklebolt turns to his comrades and states in his gruff tone. "The boy has gone insane. He is of no use to us in this state. We should—"

"Oi, I resent that," Harry remarks.

Molly Weasley doesn't care about what the men are talking about and starts pleading, "Where's my son, what have they done to my Ronnie?"

"You do remember that you have more children than ickle Ronniekins? For example, the twins are
doing great. In case you wanted to know." Harry chuckles. "But I guess you didn't, so pardon me."

The witch shrieks, "What have they done to my baby boy?"

Harry manages a shrug. "I'm not quite sure, but last I saw him, he was looking rather blue in the face. You know, I keep forgetting about dear Ron. I do hope someone has been feeding him."

Molly is in tears, aghast and simply blubbering. Tonks is trying to comfort her while giving Harry horrified looks.

"This must be a trap," someone scream in a panic, but young Aurors are like that. *Panicky.*

"You really are a thick-headed lot," Harry tells them with a frown. "No, I just walked in here because I really like your company. Of course, it's a bloody *trap.* Voldemort and his fucking army have this place surrounded. You ought to select brighter members, Kingsley."

"What have you done?" Molly screams, looking around wildly. They all have wands but have not used them; they are probably still in a state of shock.

Harry smirks, "Well, you really should not have taken Lucius. I mean—you really, really should not have done that. The thing is—if you fuck with my family, I'm going to assume that you have a death wish and I really don't have a problem with helping you out on that front."

Shacklebolt and Moody both look at Harry as if they are seeing him for the first time. Perhaps they are, but Harry doesn't care either way. He sees the wands aimed at him but doesn't fear them. Severus is on it and flicks his wand under the cloak, both of the hostile wands landing in Harry's hand because he has the foresight to catch them in the air. He doesn't want to blow Snape's cover just yet.

They are afraid, dreadfully so, and they should be. Bellatrix's laughter echoes in the distance and she's getting closer. She's like a storm that approaches. The castle seems to shake with it, but that's most likely Tom trying to dismantle the last of the wards.

Minerva, dressed in her nightgown, comes running into the hall and baulks as she spots Harry sitting in her seat and the Order members scattered around the hall like headless birds. The windows tremble with the force of the crumbling wards and McGonagall almost certainly knows what that means. Hogwarts is unprotected.

Bella comes prowling in like a pissed off panther or maybe she's an amused one. One can never tell with the witch. Her smile is twisted and maniacal, but it is all very controlled considering Bella's level of self-discipline. The Order, all seven of them, congregate in the middle of the hall. Those who still have wands point them at Bellatrix. When both Rabastan and Rodolphus join her, followed by Dolohov and Yaxley, Harry smirks and says, "I think there is a bit of a security problem, Headmistress. You really should lock your doors."

The fact that Death Eaters are able to get in means that the protective barriers around the castle itself have been dismantled. Minerva feels as if she should have stayed in bed. The Order members are starting to panic. The younger ones and the really old one start running, hoping to find a way out. The Anti-Apparation ward is still in place so they can't exactly leave. One is contemplating jumping out of the window. Bellatrix manages to separate the weak ones from the herd and Dolohov does the same with the two women.

Severus casts the cloak aside and stands.

"Oh, yeah—Sev's here too." Harry smiles. "Aren't you all happy to see him?"
Tonks shouts, backing away from Dolohov, "We should have locked you up, Potter. You've no sense left."

Whatever Harry has to say is cut short as Draco comes into the Hall from the side door that teachers use with two wizard's bound and gagged. "Found these two trying to sneak away through a secret passageway."

"If it isn't my favourite backstabber," Harry hums out. "Dead Thomas, welcome."

Dead Thomas is a devoted Order member; young and perfectly ignorant, the teen is an eligible candidate for Shacklebolt's group of fools. The other captured wizard is some kid Harry doesn't remember, but he's probably an idealistic Gryffindor as well.

Draco slams the two against the wall and Bellatrix ushers the young Auror and one older wizard towards the two captured wizards. She's not gentle and shoves them both on the floor, ropes shooting out of her wand as she ties them up. Shacklebolt, Moody, Tonks and Molly are the ones who are kept in the middle of the room, wandless and terrified.

Harry perks up as the doors to the Great Hall are slammed open. Sirius is magnificent in his anger and controlled madness. He is scary like Bellatrix but he's sane in his thirst for blood. Severus edges closer in case there is some fun to be had.

"I bloody knew it," Shacklebolt has the nerve to grunt at the wizard. "I never trusted you, Black. You've always been a traitorous toe-rag. Dumbledore warned me about you."

"Guess what—" Sirius says with a snort. "I don't give a shit about that." He loosens his shoulders and circles the group huddled together. "Now which one of you gets to die first, eh? Oi, Snape —I need you to mind-rape these bastards."

"With pleasure." Severus never agrees with Black but this is a special event. He wants to know which of them played a role in harming his friend. He turns to Sirius. "How bad is it?" Sirius doesn't answer right away. He looks perfectly wrecked and Snape understands. Something ugly curls in his gut as he turns his gaze on the Order members and considers their sins. "I'll leave their minds intact or they won't get to enjoy what follows."

Legilimency is a subtle art. Snape is an artist. But at the moment, he doesn't care to be subtle or careful or even make it painless. He violently rips into Shacklebolt's mind and rifles through it, tearing at the edges and pushing and pulling without consideration. Like ripping out pages from a book. Then he does it again and again, until the four minds are laid out in shambles before him; for him to pick apart and tamper with. The urge to vomit is strong. He sees every little thing that they had done—every kick, strike, slap, hex, curse, cut, bruise, slur and slash inflicted upon Lucius—and he wishes he could leave all of them brain-damaged. It is no surprise that Shacklebolt and Moody had caused the brunt of the injuries, but it is a bit surprising to find the same level of violence in Molly Weasley's mind. Tonks, however, had not participated but she had not stopped it either, so she deserves to suffer as well.

Snape takes a step back and nods towards the younger witch. "I would leave that one alive. The others...it is my sincere desire that you leave no part of them in one piece."

Sirius gives Snape an appreciative nod and motions Draco to come and take Tonks away. She gets to live but she won't escape punishment. As Tonks gets hauled away to sit with the rest of the captives, Sirius smirks. It is cruel and cold. He gives Bellatrix a nod and the witch skips closer like a deranged child, grabbing a fistful of Molly's hair. "You and I will have a nice time; just us girls. Whatever shall we do, hmm?"
That is the scene Tom walks into. The Dark Lord is magically spent, having tinkered with the wards and the castle's magic. He walks right past everyone and goes to sit next to Harry. The younger one says, "That's rude, Tom. You should introduce yourself."

"I am a rude person." Tom sneers and orders. "We will take all them to the dungeons. At the moment, Hogwarts will be left to those who can appreciate it a bit more—namely Severus and the teachers who are either our friends or neutral."

Sirius isn't having it and walks up to the wizard. "You can shove your little plan up your posh arse. I'm not leaving until those three are dead."

"Black, I understand your anger—" Tom tries to say, but Sirius doesn't let him finish.

"You understand nothing! You did not see the state Lucius was in when we found him, you did not kneel in his blood, trying to find any sign of life. I'm not even sure if he's still alive, Tom! I left him alone; I left him so I could kill those fucking bastards and you're denying me my right. You know that it is my right."

The Dark Lord doesn't shrink back as a norm, but the intensity of open pain in Black's face is stupefying. Harry's face is blank but so very sad; Tom hates it and he hates the Order and every stupid, insignificant parasite who has ever dared to harm one of Tom's own. He just loathes the lot of them.

Mad-Eye shouts across the hall, having heard Sirius' furious rant. "I should have killed him. Oh, I wanted to but the prissy bitch wouldn't talk; didn't want to tell us anything. So I made him scream instead. You should have been there, Black—he screamed so beautifully. I bet he's dead right about now; all that pure blood drained. If he's not, I hope you don't have anything against scars because I left him with plenty. Got what he deserved, I reckon."

The Hall is silent like a tomb, aside from the low snarls that seem to tremble in the air. Not one wizard or witch in the Great Hall can make sense of what is happening—that is until a huge black dog barrels across the hall and tears into Mad-Eye. The beast's whole body slams into the man, knocking the wizard on the floor. Padfoot's teeth sink into Moody's neck like hot knives into butter and he slashes the wizard's throat wide open. Blood splashes against the dog's snout and drips from his long teeth, but Mad-Eye is still gurgling, blood pouring out of his mouth and neck. He tries to yank the dog away but he is no match for Padfoot. Human or dog, Sirius still hears the man's taunts, still remembers Lucius, broken and fading, and he wants to eat this man's heart.

Shacklebolt and Molly both watch in horror but Bella, who has Molly under control, watches with glee. No one is stepping in because they all know that Moody deserves his end. They all enjoy seeing him choking and thrashing like a man possessed.

Padfoot is by no means done and starts yanking bits and pieces of Moody's flesh. Mad-Eye is twitching, but no longer making any noise—he's done for and he knows it. They all know it. The dog, however, ignores that notion and keeps ripping and tearing and hacking the man. When he wrenches the wizard's arm off, everyone knows that the wizard is truly dead. The gory spectacle doesn't seem to end with Moody's death. Sirius isn't satisfied yet.

Harry gives a sharp whistle and the dog perks up, looking at Harry with a wet and red muzzle. "I think he's quite dead, Pads."

"Well, I can't say that I didn't enjoy it." Tom jerks out of his confounded state and motions Dolohov and the other Death Eaters to take the prisoners into the dungeons under Riddle Manor. "I don't want them to get too comfortable, so make sure our honoured guests receive a special welcome. Perhaps
some customary manacles to enliven their stay."

Bill, who had edged into the hall during Sirius' rant, just watches with wide eyes as the dog dismembers Mad-Eye. Bill doesn't mind the man's death but rather the gore. Then again, Moody had practically asked for it by taunting Sirius like that.

Rabastan takes Shacklebolt, Rodolphus grabs Tonks and Bellatrix pulls Molly with her. Bill stays hidden and the witch doesn't see her son. Both Ron and Molly have completely devastated Bill and broken his heart. This isn't his family anymore. The only good thing about the entire situation is that Arthur is not in the castle and most likely knows nothing about it. At least he hopes that his father had nothing to do with the kidnapping and torture.

As the Great Hall empties out, the prisoners getting carted out, Severus turns to Tom, "What shall I do with McGonagall?"

Tom glances across the hall and finds the witch sitting at one of the tables, looking faint and shaking. She's clutching the lapels of her robe, wrapping it tightly around herself.

The Dark Lord instructs, "Lock her in her room for the time being. Gather the teachers you trust and speak with them about the situation. Those who resist will share McGonagall's fate. Make sure the children remaining in the castle stay inside and I suppose you ought to make sure they stay unharmed. We will take our leave."

"I'll take care of Siri," Harry says and gets up. He smiles at Tom. "I told you he'll rip out their throats." Then the young man slowly advances the dog who is pretty much entertaining himself with Mad-Eyes remains and asks, "You're not actually eating that piece of shit, are you?" The dog lets the piece of Moody's arm fall from his mouth and seems to shake his head and sniff in disgust. "Come on, let's get you home. Lucius needs you right now. You don't want to let him down, do you?"

Padfoot barks, stepping over Mad-Eye's mangled corpse. Or what's left of it anyway. Harry quips. "We'll leave that for Severus to clean up."

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When Sirius sprints up the stairs, he doesn't care about anything other than finding Lucius. He rushes straight into the bedroom and finds it empty. Frantic, the wizard goes back downstairs and slams into someone as he runs around like a lunatic.

It's Luna, eyes big and wet. She steadies herself and grabs Sirius by the arms. "Sirius, calm yourself. They had to take Lucius to St. Mungo's."

"What?" Sirius barks, confused and angry.

"The Healers Cissy summoned all agreed that St. Mungo's would be the only way to save Lucius. He's in a private ward right now. I will take you there."

Sirius nods numbly and says, "Let's go."

When they finally reach the magical hospital, Sirius is feeling his sanity slipping away. People stare
as he runs by them but he really doesn't give a damn about the looks and whispers. Narcissa meets him in the bleak corridor. Her eyes look all cried out, puffy and wet, and her hands are shaking so bad that she's clutching the handkerchief with almost white knuckles. She throws her arms around Sirius and hugs him tight.

Sirius feels completely hollow and he doesn't even realise that the wetness on his cheeks is not Narcissa's doing.

The witch pulls away and sniffs. "The Healers had to induce a healing sleep and they are keeping him in a comatose state for as long as possible. His heart stopped, Sirius. It stopped beating and I thought—I was so afraid. The fever is worse than I thought; it's dangerously high. They said something about a possible infection."

"Can I see him?"

Narcissa nods.

The sight that greets Sirius makes his knees buckle. He fears to shatter like brittle glass. He manages to walk closer to the bed and balls his fists in anger and desperation. The healing magic is like an opaque blanket of swirling colours—Sirius knows that the colour will change depending on Lucius' health. The rich golden must turn a soft, almost translucent silver colour.

He can't touch the man and Lucius doesn't hear him. The situation is unbearable. Sirius grabs a chair and sits next to the bed, just watching the wizard. Sirius knows that Lucius is not in any pain thanks to the magic working to heal his injuries, but he can't be completely sure. His emotions are almost tangible; a thick haze of hate and pain and fear. It's choking him; a chain around his neck, digging into the skin.

Sirius doesn't even notice falling asleep. When he stirs, blinking sleep from his eyes, he sees Narcissa in the room and a young wizard in Healer's robes. Immediately, Sirius thinks that something is wrong but Narcissa assures him, "Don't be alarmed, Sirius. Healer Marcus is simply here to monitor the healing spells.

The Animagus nods and asks, "When will he wake?"

The Healer stops what he is doing and turns to the man sitting by the bed. Of course, the wizard's identity is known to him. There are not many of those who don't know who Sirius Black is. Clearing his throat, Marcus says, "It is difficult to tell. Everything external will heal quickly; bruises and cuts only need a few hours to be completely healed. However, the very high fever and infection is a concern. My colleagues and I believe that Mr Malfoy will have a difficult few days ahead of him. Any type of magically caused wound will fester with the residue magic left behind from the spell and that is more dangerous and makes healing it tricky as well."

"Isn't there anything you can do, besides the healing sleep?"

"The healing sleep is simply a way to keep the patient comfortable; it does not necessarily provide a solution. The magic works slowly but it does work. We have given Mr Malfoy all the necessary potions but it is up to him to fight the fever. We cannot heal him if his body doesn't fight the infection concurrently with the potions and the magical remedies we are providing."

Sirius nods in understanding even though he doesn't want to hear it. Magic is a powerful remedy in itself, but a will to live is stronger. When he had been in Azkaban, all he had was his will; to survive the dank cell and reach beyond the cold sea. To get back to little Harry and clear his name. Days had turned into months and months into years—and he had survived all of it out of sheer stubbornness.
Narcissa sighs. "I have already informed the Dark Lord of Lucius' condition."

Sirius looks pointedly at the Healer, but the young wizard rolls up his sleeve and proudly displays the Dark Lord's brand on his inner arm. "You needn't worry, Mr Black. This is a private ward with the Dark Lord's most loyal healers," says Marcus. "The monitoring spells will alert me should there be any change in Mr Malfoy's condition."

As the man leaves, Sirius feels more comfortable showing his distress and slants back in the chair, shoulders sagging. "I hope they haven't already killed Shacklebolt and that ginger bitch."

"Harry told me about Mad-Eye Moody," Narcissa says with a slight smile. "A bit tasteless in style but effectual."

"That bastard earned his death. I should have stripped off his flesh and then left him to rot. He should be in neatly labelled jars in Snape's brewing room."

Narcissa muses. "Moody was a paranoid old goat who loathed his betters, but Shacklebolt and the Weasley woman are zealous fanatics, carrying out Dumbledore's life work. I believe Bella and Dolohov are keeping them wide awake."

"I'd rather not have Molly's blood on my hands because Bill is a friend of mine, but I don't really give a shit about who gets to punish her. Dromeda's girl, however, is my business because she's a Black by blood whether she likes it or not."

"It would be best to remove her from the family," Narcissa suggests.

"Yeah, probably." Sirius sighs. "I don't want to think about anyone other than Lucius right now."

"I should return and keep an eye on things," the witch says, "especially Draco. He was awfully upset when I left."

"Let the kid vent, Cissy," Sirius offers a knowing smile. "Better yet, let him take it out on Shacklebolt. I bet that twat enjoyed every moment of it when he was cursing Lucius, so it is only fair that he gets to enjoy some torture himself."

"There is a very long line of eager torturers waiting for a chance to inflict the most painful of spells." Narcissa smirks and says, "Look after him, Cousin."

"Don't worry, I'm not leaving until he's awake and tells me to clear off."

*****

The dungeons under Riddle Manor are no luxury compartments. They are stone and metal, cold and disgusting, and staying down there is as much a treat as having a conjugal visit with a Dementor. Shacklebolt and Molly are in separate cells. Tonks is sitting in a smaller cell across from them.

In order to not spoil the surprise, Harry had Ron removed and placed in a different dungeon. A cosy little dungeon under the east wing. The elves have not cleaned it out from the last visitors. Someone's severed arm is still hanging from a shackle on the wall.

Molly can't keep quiet and for now, it is punishment enough to be in the same dungeon as a
hysterical Molly Weasley who can't seem to stop howling like an air raid siren.

Bellatrix and the Lestrange brothers had deposited them in the magical cells and left without a single curse uttered. It's dark and stifling, but the atmosphere is perfect to have the three Order members on that sizzling edge of terror. When shadowy figures descend on them, eerie black figures coming down the staircase, Molly screams even louder.

The visitors are Draco and Bellatrix. The witch is a deranged child, quick and cruel, but Draco is vibrant and cold. There is a sliver of pure hate in his eyes; a mask of detachment making his sharp features seem harsher.

"Which one of you twisted fucks uttered the first curse, drew the first punch, the first drop of blood?" Draco questions, stalking closer to the barred cells. "Which one of you dared to touch my father with your filthy hands?"

Bellatrix leans closer to her nephew and hums into his ear, pointing at Kingsley, "Why don't you start with that one? He looks terribly righteous to me."

"You know, I think these walls need a bit of colour. What sort of dungeon doesn't have blood dripping from the walls?"

"It will look so pretty; dark and rich and corrupt. Like a splash of rubies." Bellatrix muses and wraps her fingers around the iron bar in front of Molly's prisoner cell. She slides her hands down, sitting on the stone floor, and presses her cheek against it. "I think I'll play with you first. You look delightfully sensitive, my dear."

"Get away from me, you abomination!" Molly screams as Bellatrix sticks her hand inside and tries to grab at the wailing witch. Bella is an animal attempting to catch her favourite toy. A cat that swipes its paw, attempting to sink its needle-like claws into a terrified mouse. Molly is terrified but bold. "Filthy, polluted dark witch. You should all hang for it. You all deserve it."

"That just gave me an idea," Draco says and flicks his wand. The curse wraps around Shacklebolt's neck like an invisible noose, lifting him up in the air. He chokes and kicks his feet out, but the magical rope doesn't let up. "How's it hanging?"

"You're such a little shit, Draco."

The blond looks over his shoulder and finds Harry standing in the back, his arms crossed over his chest. He's smiling.

"What? Too lame for your non-existent sense of humour?"

"You saw your chance and went for it," Harry says with a snort. "At least your torture techniques have some comic relief." Harry pushes away from the wall to take a closer look. He glances over to Molly's cell and asks, "Bella, what are you doing?"

The witch hums, her wand dragging a looping pattern in the air. "Runic magic."

"She's trying to carve the pain rune into her skin. She'll either die from the immense pain or not."

"Bella, dear," Harry tells the witch. "You can't actually kill her. Not until Sirius forfeits his right to make her suffer for hurting Lucius."

"I know," the witch sighs. "I'll just hurt her a little."
"Oh, okay. Knock yourself out." Harry shrugs. He turns to Draco. "Same goes for you, Dray."

"Want to bet that Sirius doesn't even realise that he has invoked an old pure-blood practice that essentially gives him the privilege of ending their miserable lives? Legally, I might add."

Harry nods. "I think he spoke with his heart and didn't actually consider the words. You did see what happened to that one-eyed prick, right? Siri went berserk."

"Yeah, well—as Father's lover, he gets to snap the necks of all those who played any part in harming my father. As his heir, I might be granted some leeway, but it's Black's party."

"You are free to entertain our guests as long as Sirius decides what to do." Harry turns to leave. He doesn't give a shit about Molly or Shacklebolt and Tonks is practically a stranger in Harry's eyes. He doesn't give a toss about her. Bellatrix has Molly screaming in agony and Shacklebolt is shaking like a ragdoll as Draco slams him against the wall and picks him up again with a magical rope around his neck. Harry decides to see what his husband is up to.

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Even though he feels tired to the bone, Sirius doesn't want to sleep anymore. He fears to dream of Lucius being ripped from his life, and he fears to wake up to that terrible reality. Many hours have passed and everything has remained the same.

He watches the flowing ripples of magic surrounding the blond wizard. He thinks of the cold sea that surrounds Azkaban. He thinks about all those dreadful nights spent in solitude, thoughts of death providing the only comfort. If Lucius dies, Sirius will be thrust right back into that prison cell that had tormented and tainted him for years. He can't even imagine losing the wizard but he fears it. It grips him, swathes him in its lifeless, bleak embrace and tries to find a way into his heart.

He leaves the room when the Healer comes to check on Lucius. Sirius finds Luna and Draco sitting in the cushy waiting area. They both look tired.

"You look like shit," Draco comments, staring at Sirius. "And you're covered in blood."

Sirius looks down. The front of his shirt is littered with red smudges. Only then does he realise that it's Lucius' blood. It's a jarring thought.

"Why don't you go home, Sirius?" Luna suggests. "We will stay here with Lucius until you come back."

Sirius nods. He's too drained to argue and ultimately, he knows that Draco and Luna will let him know if there is any change. Luna enters the room without Draco. The young Malfoy, having been left alone with Sirius, says, "I didn't have a chance to thank you before."

"Thank me for what, kid?" Sirius frowns.

Draco's gaze is filled with unspoken gratitude. "For saving my father's life."

Sirius doesn't like the praise and shakes his head. "I didn't do it on my own. We all played a part in this rescue mission. Maybe if I had been quicker, Lucius would not be in such terrible state."
"This is not your fault," Draco tells him. He runs a hand through his hair, showing a hint of frustration. "It makes me angry as hell. They did this to my father out of pure cruelty. I would love nothing more than see those bastards drained of every drop of their blood, but they can rot in the Dark Lord's dungeons for a while longer. I had my share of retribution."

"Good for you," Sirius says. He looks at Draco and feels a certain pride. The young wizard is partly a Black and that makes him Sirius' family, but Draco is practically his stepson as well and there is a sort of satisfaction that overwhelms Sirius.

"Come back when you're rested," Draco tells the man with a shadow of a smile. "You are no good to him in this abysmal state."

"Let me know if something changes." Sirius turns to leave, grateful for a chance to take a shower and wash off the nasty smell of Mad-Eye's blood.

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After a thorough shower and a quick rest, Sirius had dressed in clean clothes and left for Riddle Manor. The prisoners are all kept there after all.

The Death Eaters consider it wise to steer clear of Black for the time being. The Lestrange brothers, Yaxley and Dolohov spot Black stalking around their Lord's manor and they all think it best to keep away.

Harry sees Sirius in the parlour. He notes the haunted look of a desperate man. The wizard looks lost and cloaked in furling anger. For a moment, Harry doesn't even know what to say. But he doesn't have to say anything at all because Sirius is there, wrapping his arms around him. All that rage rushes out of him. Harry guides Sirius to sit down.

"It's like being back in fucking Azkaban." Sirius buries his head in his hands.

Harry has never been particularly good at comforting but he does try to assure his godfather. "Lucius is too stubborn to die. He's too self-absorbed to deprive the world of all that perfect male splendour."

Sirius huffs a surprised laugh. "Yeah. Too vain to die."

"Don't worry, Siri. It will be all right." Harry smiles. "Want to beat up Kingsley? It might make you feel a bit better."

Sirius considers it for a moment but says, "Kingsley will see me when I'm good and ready. I want to savour beating the shit out of him."

"That's totally fine. We'll keep them alive for a while." Harry nods. He points out with a slight grin, "You sort of took away all of Tom's fun when you claimed the right to take revenge. He was pretty pissed."

Sirius frowns. "Does it look like I care about his fun right now? Oh, there will be a reckoning, don't think otherwise, but all I care about right now is Lucius. Kindly tell Tommy to go fuck himself." Harry watches Sirius get up and doesn't stop him. Sirius says, "You know where to find me, Pup."

Harry gives a nod.
"I have given Cissy permission to teach Tonks a bit about family loyalty. She's still a Black by blood and I'd rather not have her as anything mine. Cissy will be here soon."

"You can do that? Hey, can you maybe give Bellatrix the go-ahead to take care of Molly? She's moping around; like a kid who was told that Christmas just got cancelled. Maybe you can let her torture her a little?"

Sirius thinks about it and says, "How about I give you my permission to deal with Molly's punishment?"

"Yeah, that's all Bill needs right now—another reason to hate my guts." Harry shakes his head. "It has to be Bellatrix because Bill already hates her and she doesn't care."

"You're clever; so think of something," Sirius says although he isn't sure what could be done about Molly Weasley. "Tell her that she can torture her a bit...and by that, I mean that most of Molly's blood has to stay inside her body. Then figure out what to do about Bill. I can't think of anything other than Lucius right now."

"You know, Tom really is upset. He doesn't show it because he's a super scary Dark Lord, but he does care about Lucius in his own demented way; like a father would care for his son. He spent years teaching Lucius, guiding him and mentoring him like one would with their own child. He regrets pushing Lucius over the brink. I know my husband, Siri—and I'm telling you that he's feeling guilty right about now."

Sirius sighs, considering Harry's words. "He should regret it. He definitely played a part in all this. But he'll have a chance to make it right with Lucius. And I won't interfere; it's a matter that stays between them and doesn't need me poking my nose in it."

"I will likely poke my nose in it, but just to make sure Tom doesn't mess it up again by being an insensitive git."

"We're even more fucked up as a family than as individuals,” Sirius points out.

Harry gives Sirius a pointed smile. "But it's our fucked up family."
Sirius enters the private ward and sees both Draco and Luna in the corridor. They look distressed. A Healer Sirius has never seen before comes out of the room and another goes in. They both look worried.

"What's going on?" Sirius sidles next to Draco. The young Malfoy is startled to see Sirius and a look of anguish flits across his face.

Draco curses under his breath and runs his fingers through his hair. "I'm sorry. I completely forgot. It's Father—the Healers are with him right now."

Sirius doesn't listen to the rest of it and pushes past Draco. The Healers, three of them to be exact, all look uneasy when Sirius Black barges inside, a wildness about him. Healer Marcus tries to get him to leave but Sirius tells him to shove off and shut up.

"Really, I must ask you to leave the room, Mister Black. The patient—"

"The patient is the man I love and I'm staying right where I am."

The Healers shrink back in apprehension, but Marcus remains stoic. He relents somewhat and says, "All right, but I don't want you interfering with anything. Mister Malfoy isn't reacting to our treatment and the healing magic seems to do very little. At this point, the injuries have been healed, but the infection has greatly weakened him."

"Cut the shit," Sirius demands with anger. "What does that mean exactly?"

"It means that Mr Malfoy might not pull through. As far as we can tell, he is unconsciousness, but it is not a natural state. It is not the same as the Muggle condition they call a coma but somewhat similar. He is unresponsive and his life signs are weak. The extensive magical attacks on Mr Malfoy have left him almost completely drained." The Healer turns back to his colleagues to motion them to vacate the room.

After a moment, Healer Marcus says, "There isn't anything else any Healer can do, Mr Black. If he makes it through the night, he might have a chance. But I must be honest with you—there is a very real chance that he may not wake."

Sirius feels his lungs burn with unvoiced screams. He doesn't much care for proper protocol and settles on the bed as the Healer slips out of the room. The healing magic has all but disappeared and he can touch the wizard. His skin is cold and a few shades paler than usual.

There are no visible scars on his skin, but Sirius spots a few faint marks where bruises used to be. The cuts and deeper wounds have all been healed expertly and Sirius is grateful for small miracles because he doesn't know if he will be able to live with the whining once Lucius realises that he will be slightly less perfect. If he lives, that is.

Tears prickle behind Sirius' eyes but he can't let them fall. He growls out in fear, in desperation, in
anger even. "Don't you dare die on me, you pompous arsehole. You know, it's so like a Malfoy to make everything about them. And you accuse me of being an attention seeker—hah!"

He can't stop himself. Something already fragile is ready to break inside him; he feels shattered. He can't do anything. He's powerless against it. But this can't be fate; it simply can't end like this. He deserves some consideration after living through twelve years of hell; alone, crawling on the edge of madness, clawing through a thick mass of wretchedness in its purest form. He fucking deserves some happiness. He's willing to cross realms to get it; just a fraction of peace and joy. Just a moment. It will feel like a lifetime.

"I spent years in that shitter they call a prison and all I wanted was to survive." Sirius presses his hands over his face, a deep breath escaping him. "For Harry's sake at least. He was my only light in that hole."

A desperate laugh leaves him, the end of it a bit choked. He says, "But then you just had to parade your delicious arse about and I fell in like a bloody randy fool—you just had to muck it all up by making me love you. By Merlin! I love you so much that I can't even draw breath. And you can't even fucking fight for your life? That's selfish and inexcusable, you rotten git!"

Sirius receives no answer and the silence is unbearable. He slides off the bed and kneels before it. Taking the blond's cold hand, Sirius presses it against his cheek. "Please don't leave me. I know I'm a reckless idiot and I don't always think things through and I probably drink too much and I annoy you...but you are mine, Lucius, and I am not giving you up."

There is knock on the door. Draco comes in, his face almost white. "The Healer told me about the situation. Should I inform Mother?"

"He's not fucking dying, you hear me? He's not." Sirius stands, wiping his eyes.

"You may possess some endless Gryffindor optimism, but we are Slytherins. Nothing good ever comes from having too much hope. I have to let Mother know. She will never forgive us if she isn't here when—"

Draco finds himself pressed against the door, a furious wizard pinning him there. Sirius curls his fingers around the collar of Draco's shirt and snarls. "Listen well, kid—I'm not letting him die. I will personally cross the threshold to the land of the dead and pull that pretentious arsehole back by his hair if I must. I don't fucking care what sort of stupid Slytherin logic you live by—he's not going to die!"

Draco is afraid; he cannot look away from the blazing eyes of a man who had spent years surrounded by Dementors and survived. Sirius is beyond hope or self-control; he rages like an animal. Purely instinctive.

Sirius steps back, releasing Draco. He looks regretful for a brief moment but does not apologise. Instead, he goes back to the bed and sits down on the edge of it. He doesn't notice it when Draco hurries out of the room, shaking with emotion.

With the healing spells gone, Sirius feels more at ease as he brandishes his wand and enlarges the bed with a quick spell. He just needs to be as close as possible. He places soft kisses against the side of the blond’s pallid face. There is a melody he remembers, one that Lily had hummed under her breath to her son. Sirius still remembers the softness of it, the emotion. He tries to recall it now. Something about sunshine and grey skies. It feels stupid but he'd rather do that than cry. Maybe something stupidly Muggle will be enough to coax Lucius back to life just so he could hex Sirius for it.
Hours pass and no one dares to enter. Narcissa does look inside and she sees her cousin cradling the other wizard, petting his hair as he hums a tune under his breath. She closes the door again. The Healers are all sure that magic is not inexhaustible when it comes to coaxing someone back from death. Even Severus feels useless because he cannot brew a remedy. Draco presses his face against Luna's neck and lets his tears fall. They are all like ghosts, drifting in and drifting out; silent, mournful spectres.

It is well past midnight when Sirius starts to feel restless again—the cruel and agonising hours having done their part. He has hope, but even hope cannot sustain a man for long. He has slept some; he sees that someone has left him a cup of tea, but Sirius isn't hungry. There is a flicker of fear that sparks inside when he feels how cold Lucius is. For a gripping moment, Sirius lets himself think the worst, but he won't let it consume him. He will stay for as long as he can; he has to.

Feeling incredibly bold or perhaps uncaring to the point of indifferent, Sirius removes his jacket, shirt, and trousers. He slips under the covers and presses close. The cold skin startles him but he gets closer and wraps his arms around Lucius to share his own heat. He doesn't care what the Healers will think or what anyone else will think of him—his only motive is to save the wizard from certain death.

"You're freezing my bollocks off, you know. It's like trying to cuddle a block of ice; gives a whole new meaning to blue balls." Sirius jokes, the laughter in his voice muted. He runs his fingers down Lucius' chest and sighs. "It is still beating. Let's keep it like that, Luce. If it stops, so will mine."

The silence is worse than anything. Another hour ticks by, filled with slow, poisoning dread. It is enough to infect the optimism Sirius still clings to. But he has to fight. He has to keep his head above the dark water. If he slips under, he'll never resurface.

"You should have seen what I did to Mad-Eye. I've killed while in my dog from before, but only small animals; rabbits and a few birds here and there. Never killed a human before. Moody tasted like shit though; couldn't wash that fucking taste from my mouth for a good hour. He deserved it, but I think I was too quick about it, maybe even too nice. I should have made it last longer, should have savoured it a bit more. With my temper, it was bound to be speedy and messy." Sirius shifts under the blanket and sighs. "You would have loved it."

He's afraid to close his eyes. He fears that when he opens them again, Lucius will no longer be there. He can't fall asleep and wake up in a world where the wizard he wants to grow old with is dead. But sleep is a powerful spell in itself and Sirius loses the battle. It feels like falling but never reaching the ground. He is suspended in the midst of his fears. He wakes up a thousand times and Lucius is never there.

When he does open his eyes, a soft hand touches his shoulder. It's Narcissa, and she looks all cried out. In a moment of panic, Sirius twists around and lets out a shuddering breath when his eyes take in the form of his lover—still impossibly pale and frail-looking, but there. Alive.

"It is nearing morning." The witch looks solemn. "I could not leave without saying goodbye. I know you think me foolish or might even curse my lack of faith, but I must be prepared. It is my way, Sirius." The man nods; he cannot deny the witch. "I would not be able to bear it should I go home and return to an empty room. I love him dearly; as a brother, a protector, a friend."

Wordlessly, Sirius slips out of bed and pulls his robe over his shoulders. He has to give his cousin some privacy. Narcissa slides her delicate hand down the wizard's cheek and whispers something that Sirius cannot hear. When Narcissa gathers herself and stands, she takes Sirius' hand and gives it a squeeze. "Do not let him go. If he has no strength left to fight, you will fight for him. Swear to me, Sirius."
Sirius nods and says, "I give you my word."

Narcissa departs quietly and leaves Sirius alone with the weight of his promise.

"Maybe I should take you home," Sirius muses, but he doesn't think he has the energy to Apparate. He slips back under the covers and buries his face in the pillow. His nose touches the skin on the blond's neck. He is no longer as cold as before. "I am not leaving. Either we go together or we won't go at all. Doesn't matter what you want, seeing as you are such an insensitive and egotistical arse, so it's my call. Got it? I'm telling you that you're not going anywhere, not for another hundred years at least. I have big plans for us."

Another hour goes by, then another, and then the sun blasts the room with its full force. The night is over and Sirius fears the stillness more than breaking. He is going to break, maybe in private or perhaps in the middle of a waiting room filled with people, but he will eventually. He has never considered mornings to be cruel, but this one tastes of loss.

Choosing to ignore the hollow ache in his chest, Sirius eyes the dull white ceiling. "You really are a bastard. Self-absorbed, inconsiderate, pushy fucking git—but you are mine. You don't get to piss off to the great beyond and leave me here to mourn for your prissy arse. That won't fly with me." The wizard feels angry all of a sudden and bursts out, "You don't even know, do you? You don't know how utterly in love I am with you. And if you die—well, then I'll know that you don't love me nearly as much. You'll just be off the hook and poor Sirius will just have to wonder for the rest of his damn miserable life whether you actually loved me at all."

Then, in the silence, the most beautiful sound jolts Sirius out of his gloom. "I love the racket you make in the mornings, Siri."

Sirius manages to stay on the bed and not fall on his arse as he turns around. The sight of intense moonstone eyes has never been more stunning. He lets out a trembling breath, tears stinging in his eyes, and growls, "Don't ever scare me like that again, Luce."

Lucius closes his eyes and makes a small noise as he moves and Sirius immediately panics. "Hey, don't close your eyes. Look at me, you gorgeous bastard. Let me see you."

"Where am I?" Lucius closes his eyes, nestling closer to Sirius.

"St. Mungo's private ward," Sirius says, words wavering with emotion. "Fuck, I thought I was going to lose you. The Healer wasn't hopeful. Narcissa already said her goodbyes. I—you have no idea how much I missed you." Sirius has a moment of clarity and blurts out, "I should get the Healer. I'm going to rub his nose in it, that prick. Where the hell are my clothes?"

Lucius speaks in a whisper. "No, don't go. Stay with me."

"All right, I won't move an inch." Sirius forgets everything for a moment. Fuck the rest of the world. He wraps his arms around the blond and hopes that Lucius won't notice the shaking. "You're warming up."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Yeah, considering you almost gave my bollocks frostbite. How are you feeling?"

Lucius can't honestly say. He's comfortable but feels tired. He feels pain but nothing actually hurts as such. There is definitely some faintness. "I feel tender all over."

"Well, you did look like hammered shit when we found you. I'm not even exaggerating. For a
moment, I couldn't even tell if you were alive."

"My brave and handsome saviour," Lucius drawls, nuzzling closer to Sirius and trailing his fingers
down the man's chest. "They took me into a dark, dingy room and I lost consciousness soon after. I
was in a wet puddle; then I realised it was my blood."

"Don't worry about those fuckers. They're all in the dungeons. Well, Shacklebolt and that Weasley
woman are down there and my cousin's girl. I took care of Mad-Eye."

"Did you make it hurt?"

Sirius snorts. "I made it hurt like a son-of-a-bitch. I ripped his throat out, then I ripped his arm off. I
almost ate bits of him but Harry pointed out how disgusting that bastard must taste and advised me to
spit him out." The awkward silence makes Sirius add, "I should probably mention that I was a dog at
the time."

"Cannibalism is perhaps a touch too unappealing."

Huffing a laugh, Sirius gently moves on top of Lucius. He teases the blond's lips and captures them
in a slow kiss. It feels unbelievably good. "Gods, I could kiss you for hours."

"I think I was dreaming," Lucius says, "of you."

"Good, because I'm the only man you are allowed to dream of."

"Is that so?" Lucius offers a lazy smile. He's still a bit out of it, floating in a dreamlike state.

Sirius silences him with another kiss, but this time the wizard takes his sweet time and savours every
touch and caress. He feels like he can relax after a hundred years of terror. Minutes tick by, maybe
hours—Sirius doesn't know or care to know. Eventually, he does have to breathe and pulls away. "I
really should get that Healer. You were in a bad way. You probably need potions and whatnot. And
I ought to let Narcissa know that she doesn't have to dig out her mourning clothes just yet."

"In a moment," Lucius closes his eyes again and sighs. He reaches out and takes hold of Sirius' hand.
The man forgets all about pulling his shirt back on and lets Lucius rest against him. "I feel safe when
you're with me."

Without thought, Sirius' fingers slide into the glossy hair. He still remembers the blood-soaked
strands and looks up to chase the images away. "I will treasure this sweetness from you, Luce. I
know it's the exhaustion talking. Or the wonderful potions the Healers have been pouring down your
throat."

Lucius doesn't retort, seeing as he's dead to the world again, but this time Sirius isn't afraid. He's tired
himself but wants to stay awake to watch over the blond. He won't let him slip away.

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The residents of Riddle Manor have had a terrible night, including Narcissa and Draco.

Harry wanders into the dining room and sits down. He feels tired from the lack of sleep and lonely
because Tom had spent the night torturing Kingsley Shacklebolt. It went on all night and when
Shacklebolt could take no more, Tom had him healed and perked up a bit. Then he did it all over again and again. He didn't let the man die from blood loss or from shock, but he had tried his hardest. Still, Tom couldn't really kill him because he actually respects Black's claim.

When the Dark Lord walks into the dining room, Harry grunts. "Why the fuck do you look so chipper? You spent the entire night in the dungeons and you look like the poster-boy for a Pepper-Up potion."

"Torturing someone is invigorating."

"I think it's just the high of it and once it's gone—well, you're going to crash and sleep for a week." Harry pours himself a cup of tea and slouches into the seat. "Have you heard anything from St. Mungo's?"

"As a matter of fact, I have received news. Seeing as your godfather is incapable of removing himself from Lucius' side, the Healer took it upon himself to notify me that Lucius is no longer in any immediate danger. He lived through the worst of it and has the utmost pleasure to spend the rest of his life with the mangy dog." Tom looks slightly disturbed. "There is no accounting for taste as they say."

"There's nothing wrong with Sirius. He's a good-looking bloke. He's funny, loyal, and he's loaded; many would call him a right catch." Harry smirks. "Thankfully, Lucius isn't interested in his vaults—at least I think he isn't."

"I assure you, Lucius cares very little for Black's vaults," Tom remarks offhandedly. He pulls out a chair and takes a seat, pulling the tray with fruits closer. He picks out a selection of fruit slices and says, "Shacklebolt is alive—unfortunately. Once Black is fully functional, although being a fool seems to be a permanent ailment, he will hopefully get rid of the vermin in my house. If I am not allowed to kill them, I do not want to play host to a group of Order members. I am not that hospitable."

Harry nods. "Molly will get the same treatment as Ron; we're going to bind her magic and bon voyage to that bitch. Sirius told me to figure it out and I have. Bella got to play with her a bit, so it's all cool."

"Hmm," Tom comments without actually agreeing. "Whatever you think is best. I would kill them all, but I know you would disapprove of my savage ways."

"Sirius will take care of Shacklebolt when he feels ready. He needs to be with Lucius right now; it's hard to live through something like that. I would go berserk if someone tried to kill you."

"My little avenger," Tom teases, taking a bite from a piece of melon. "I have seen the error of my ways, Harry. I did not see it before, but as I was so rudely reminded, I cannot deny Lucius what I have myself. If he wants that idiot, then who am I to disallow it. Other than his Lord and Master, of course."

"You don't actually own him, you know. Here's an idea—why don't you admit that you're not a huge dick and that you care about Lucius as a friend, maybe even as a father figure?"

Tom frowns. "That's entirely incorrect. While I appreciate Lucius as a very good servant, I don't see him as anything more. What a ridiculous notion. Banish the thought."

Harry smiles. "You're really cute when you're trying to deny the obvious. I mean, you do know that you don't have to lie to me, right? I know you, remember."
"Fine, yes," Tom looks down and examines his fork with faked interest. "I admit that Lucius is not a regular Death Eater in my ranks. I personally trained him; he simply cannot be ordinary."

"Okay, that was you almost admitting that you care. I don't want you to pull a muscle or something, so I'll leave it alone. For now."

Tom makes a noncommittal noise. "When do you want to bind the Weasley's woman's magic?"

Harry shrugs. "We'll see how it goes. I didn't write it down in my calendar if that's what you're asking."

"I am merely reminding you that you should not dawdle. Severus has informed me that McGonagall has agreed to step down; all she wants is to remain in the castle as a Transfiguration teacher. She seems to excel in that area and Severus thinks that she does not pose a threat. I personally think that she just wants to make sure that the number of children starting school will remain the same when they go home for the summer. She seems to think I enjoy killing the future generation when, in truth, I only ever attempted to kill you."

"Well, to be fair," Harry points out. "The Weasley girl did die. You drained her life force and left her to die. I guess I can see her point."

"That was necessary. I gained a body and half of my soul back. I will not apologise for wanting to exist. If anything, Lucius was the one who slipped my diary into the girl's cauldron."

"You did train him; makes sense that he's just as big of an arsehole as you."

"I resent that notion, dear one."

Harry hums. "Back to McGonagall though. So she's going to stay on as a teacher, but who will run the place?"

"I am thinking about giving the job to Severus, but he loathes children as much as the next sane human being. Then again, as Headmaster, he would not have to spend time in the presence of tiny horrors and clean up after them. I shall think about it."

"Poppy told me that Filius Flitwick was never Dumbledore's man. He can be reasoned with. You probably shouldn't make Severus Headmaster because that's blatant favouritism. It has to be a fairly neutral candidate. And I actually like Filius."

Tom thinks about it for a moment. "Yes, I suppose you are correct. I will have to discuss the matter with Severus."

"I should probably visit the twins, seeing as their mum is under our loving care. They don't know anything about the kidnapping." Harry drinks the rest of his tea in one gulp and gets up. The Dark Lord dislikes the idea immensely and Harry sees it in his face. Slipping his arms around Tom's neck as he walks up to the man, Harry says, "I won't get kidnapped, I promise. What happened to Lucius won't ever happened again because we have those idiots. And the ones we don't have are not going to come out of their little holes. Relax."

"I am not accustomed to feeling guilty, but I do feel that what happened to Lucius was partly my doing. I did not torture him, but my actions and my words caused him to lose his head in a time where one cannot let their guard down."

"You say sorry and move on. Lucius is alive; that's what matters. We were all careless; in thinking that the Order would not try anything so stupid, we all let out guard down. That's not your fault,"
Harry tells the man. "Don't treat Lucius like property and you'll be forgiven. Sirius is mighty protective of him, especially now, so maybe steer clear of him for a bit, yeah?"

Tom looks sour but seems to agree. He really has no desire to hash it out with Black.

*****

Dressed and thoroughly unsnarled, Sirius sits on the edge of the hospital bed. He has his fingers twisted around the blond's.

Despite the nearly dying part, Lucius seems to be getting better. He is frail and sore, but far away from death's door. The injuries have all healed, some leaving behind faint marks, but he is otherwise on the mend. That pleases everyone, but it mostly pleases Sirius. He can't stomach the idea of leaving, so he sits quietly and keeps watch.

Healer Marcus had expressed his wonder and had been happy to admit to being wrong. Apparently, people do survive such magical comas. Or maybe it's just a Malfoy thing—obstinately clinging to life out of vanity. Sirius doesn't care either way because Lucius is alive and will stay that way for a lot of years to come.

The good news is that Healer Marcus is willing to let his patient go home by the end of the day. The bad news, however, is that Lucius will definitely not be doing anything strenuous for at least a week. Also, no magic until his magical core has fully restored itself. Sirius thinks that he can work with the resting part, but try telling a Malfoy that they can't use magic. He likes his bollocks attached to his body, thank you very much.

Lucius stirs and something fierce flutters in Sirius. He cannot even describe the feelings clashing in him right now. He is both anxious and relieved, joyous but also distressed. As the blond's eyes flicker open, Sirius swallows the urge to say something utterly banal. He clears his throat. "Feeling better?"

"All I seem to want right now is to sleep."

"Both magically and physically speaking, you took one hell of a beating. I can work with exhausted. Beats you being dead." Sirius runs his palm down Lucius' leg. He can't explain his need to touch the man. It's an instinct. "Healer Marcus will allow you to come home with me if you promise to take it easy. And by easy I mean you will be bedbound for as long as I deem necessary. Is that acceptable?"

"At the moment almost everything seems acceptable when compared to spending another night in this terrible bed," Lucius hums in displeasure. "I will do my very best to adhere to your rules, Siri."

"I'll believe it when I see it." Sirius lets out a laugh. He has a plan to track down the Healer and speed up the process of getting his lover discharged from St. Mungo's.

Sirius gets to his feet, but Lucius reaches out his hand and locks his fingers around Sirius' wrist. His grip is weak but speaks loudly. Lucius doesn't want Sirius to go.

The man sits back down. "You are safe, Luce. I promise you that those bastards will pay for everything; every insult, every curse, every cut, every kick. They will answer to me."

"I was so startled by my own emotions that it slipped my mind to keep my wits about. All I could
think about was how undemanding it is to love you. Of course, there are things I loathe about you, despise even, but they do not take away from that feeling of love."

Lucius looks positively maudlin and Sirius can't help himself. "Are you finally confessing your undying love for this rakish specimen of a man?"

"I am incontestably yours."

"You know, I have never in my life heard anything more beautiful." Sirius smiles. "Actually, it is the second most wonderful thing I have heard. My favourite is when I'm buried deep inside your delicious arse and you whimper my name, all stuffed full—"

Lucius pinches the man's arm. Since they are alone, the wizard allows the comment. He does narrow his gaze. No one really wants to hear crude jokes when confessing one's love for their romantic partner, although Lucius knows perfectly well what sort of indecent noises he can make when Sirius has him begging for release.

"Now you're thinking about it, aren't you? You're thinking about my cock wringing out those filthy moans from you." Sirius leers and smirks when the blond drops his hand and looks put out. He's not angry, just inappropriately horny when he should be resting. Sirius can't really afford to think about it either because he has to get Healer Marcus and he would rather not explain why his trousers are tented. "I'll get Healer Marcus to clear you into my tender care."

As he leaves the room, mind now filled with naughty images, Sirius doesn't even notice Narcissa, Draco, and Severus. The witch calls out his name to get his attention, "Sirius, are you quite all right?"

Sirius smiles; a real, happy smile. "Yeah, never better. Do you know where I could find Healer Marcus? He thinks Lucius is safe enough to be released from St. Mungo's, but I want him to double check before kicking us out."

"So soon?" Narcissa frowns. "It seems almost surreal. Is he truly strong enough to come home with us? I constantly find myself thinking of the past hours and I can hardly believe it."

Severus doesn't want to take part in any simpering conversations and suggests, "I will go and look for Healer Marcus."

It's not that he doesn't care; he does care a great deal, but he likes to keep his emotions private. Inwardly, he is doing a jig; he just doesn't display his true feelings like some Gryffindor half-wit. Draco excuses himself as well and enters his father's room.

Narcissa watches Severus flounce off and turns to Sirius. "Severus thinks you will mock him for his display of emotions."

"I would love to mock Snivellus, but this is the one thing I can't mock him for. It annoys me to hell and back but I know what it's like to lose a friend or to fear it." Sirius truly feels infuriated that he is agreeing with Snape. Again.

Narcissa smiles and throws her arms around Sirius' neck in an also shocking display of emotions and lets out a sigh. "I feel overjoyed; decorum be damned."

Sirius embraces the witch, a rush of sentiment choking him.

Narcissa's moment of forgotten propriety passes and she smoothes down her skirt and the soft fur lapels of her robe. She is back to being a pure-blood lady of high standing. "Come, let us give Draco
some time with his father. I really must discuss the punishment I have devised for that traitorous little Auror. I have such wonderful plans."

A devious Narcissa is nothing short of dangerous; as Sirius well knows.

*****

Draco closes the door behind him with a soft click. He thinks his heart is going to give out; it is like a bird thrashing against its cage. He is no longer afraid to lose his father, but the echo of those emotions is still present.

Lucius looks entirely too annoyed to have the energy to deal with visitors. He hates the lumpy bed, the smell of potions and that distinctively sterile smell all cleaning charms leave behind. He can tell that someone has used a common cleaning charm on his hair. It feels dry as hay. He hates the stupid Order. He hates Sirius for evoking lustful thoughts in him when he is clearly in no state to even entertain such amorous ideas. And yes, he is a bit alarmed about the scarring. So he wants to look good—as if that comes as a surprise to any interested party. There isn't even one mirror in the room. Lucius can't wait to sleep in his own bed and take a long bath and check every inch of his body for any sort of disfigurement.

He is engrossed in his thoughts and doesn't even notice Draco by the door. The boy clears his throat to announce himself. "You seem to be feeling much better if that scowl is anything to go by, Father."

"I am merely listing all the things I detest about my stay in this establishment."

"Well, it was either this," Draco says with no humour as he looks around, "or the Malfoy Family crypt."

Lucius' eyes soften. He has been trained to maintain the perfect mask of blankness; no emotion shining through. He doesn't know how to show what he really feels.

By now, Draco is somewhat of an expert in reading his father's rather impassive face and he can decode the emotions. Frankly, he should write a guide on how to read a Malfoy's emotionless facial expressions like a professional. He knows what Lucius isn't saying. Malfoys don't have heart-to-hearts, they definitely don't shed tears in public and as a general rule, Malfoys don't apologise either. But Lucius is trying to apologise for almost dying—and Draco accepts it. It's not like his father asked to be kidnapped and then to be mercilessly tortured by a gang of fawning idiots who still want to make the world a better place.

"Sirius said that the Healer will likely let you come home today." Draco muses. "That's good."

"Draco—"

The teen shakes his head. "Let's not do this mawkish father-son bonding moment. We're Malfoys, not some plebs. I am thrilled that you are alive and in no danger of leaving me to deal with the businesses and estates. I am far too young to commit myself to a life of shaking hands with a bunch of slippery geezers and lining their pockets with my gold."

"In any case, that will not happen before you have taken a wife."

"Which will not happen any time soon," Draco clarifies. "Luna wants to travel to all sorts of exotic
and strange places before we make any decisions regarding the future."

Feeling as if the subject of death is no longer hanging over their heads, Lucius asks, "Dare I ask about my valiant rescue?"

Draco takes a seat in the chair, crossing his ankles. "I'm sure Sirius can fill you in much better than I can because he was there and I was capturing fleeing Order members. The short version is that once we realised that something was indeed wrong, Sirius and Mother launched a heroic rescue mission with the help of the Dark Lord and Harry. We have Hogwarts under our control and important Order members are enjoying the comforts of a dungeon."

"Yes, that is all very interesting, but how did you find me? There was an Anti-Apparation ward in place and I know a blocking spell in my sleep."

"Well, those idiots took you to Hogwarts. Obviously a stupid move, but they practically handed us the keys." Draco smirks. "Sirius was like a pining puppy and threw a fit when you didn't come home after leaving the manor. After a sufficient amount of time, the Dark Lord got involved and he had other Death Eaters out looking. He called you through your Mark."

Lucius is sincerely surprised that the Dark Lord had even bothered, what with them being on such terrible terms as of late. "I did feel something through the Mark but the spell must have blocked it."

"Anyway, we couldn't find you." Draco sighs, shifting in his seat. "Then Mother had this idea to use some obscure locator spell invented by a Black, and Sirius used it to find you. And then the cavalry arrived."

"What sort of locator spell can bypass a strong blocker spell?" Lucius cannot wait to find out.

Draco looks mildly uncomfortable. He doesn't want to get involved in his father's love-life. He tries to keep it from turning into a mush-fest. "It was a locator spell meant to find one's heart's desire. A spell to find something or someone the caster desires and wants most of all. Well, Sirius—you see, he used it to find you because, as it happens, you are his greatest desire in this world. Fancy that."

Lucius falls silent. The thought is utterly trite, ridiculous beyond belief, and it makes something impossibly lovely flutter inside the blond wizard. A part of him wants to pull the bedcovers over his head and giggle into the pillow. Another part of him wants to tear Sirius' trousers right off and sink down on his throbbing cock regardless of the less than ideal conditions. Both of these scenarios will likely happen in the near future but in private.

"I am forever grateful for the fact that I am shite at Legilimency. I do not want to know anything about your desires." Draco feels ready to leave. He can see that his father is drifting in a giddy haze. *Idiots in love*, Draco muses and stands. "I'll see you at home, Father."

Lucius nods idly. He just can't stop thinking about Sirius and what the wizard had done in order to save him. He is so occupied with the idea that when Sirius slips into the room, he doesn't even notice. Only when the wizard sits next to him and slides his lips over the blond's does Lucius see him. It is sort of hard not to notice when the same bloke slips his tongue into your mouth.

Startled by the intensity of his emotions, Lucius pulls back and looks delightfully confused for a wizard of his calibre.

"Something wrong?" Sirius looks worried, his brow furrowed.

Lucius wordlessly shakes his head.
"All right, what's happening with you?" Sirius knows the man enough to see that he is acting out of character. "Any pain I should know about? Because we will stay right here if something hurts."

"It's just something Draco said to me just now. About the locator spell you used in order to find me."

Sirius isn't a blushing man, but his cheeks do get a certain pinkish shine to them as he recalls the spell. He mutters to himself, "That little weasel." Then he clears his throat and tries not to sound like a love-sick idiot. "Yeah, it was a pretty nifty spell."

Lucius looks a bit amused and a whole lot delighted as he rests his head on Sirius' shoulder. The wizard is only happy to let his lover cuddle up, seeing as Lucius hardly ever lets himself be affectionate in public. Well, it is just the two of them but some hapless nurse may walk in and end up witnessing the tender moment.

"I figured out what I'm going to do with Shacklebolt," Sirius says. "For maximum viewing pleasure, I'm going for public execution by the goblins. He's a thief and those with sticky fingers get their heads chopped off. I'm going to torture him for a bit before I hand him over. You want in, love?"

"The pleasure is all yours."

"Healer Marcus says you are free to come home with me." Sirius lets out a happy hum. "Snape has volunteered to brew all your potions himself to minimise the need for you to stay in St. Mungo's. And something about his potions being superior to whatever swill St. Mungo's serves up. So when you feel up to it, I'll Apparate us straight to the manor."

Lucius feels incredibly tired again and offers a nod. "I want to sleep in my own bed."

"Gloriously nude between Egyptian cotton sheets." Sirius purrs, the visual giving him an urge to strip off their clothes. He has a hard time controlling himself. "I want to touch every inch of you."

"Shall we go home then?" Lucius suggests.

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Sirius settles the blond under the covers and makes sure he has all the needed potions at hand before he leaves the bedroom. Snape's custom-made pain potion will knock Lucius out for hours and the magical exhaustion will do the rest. Leaving only the bedside light on, Sirius shuts the door as softly as he can manage and walks straight to the fireplace in the vestibule. He feels comfortable with the idea of leaving Lucius alone for a little while now that they are behind the wards of Malfoy Manor. It is safe. And he had ordered all the house-elves to keep an eye out for any sort of change in Lucius' condition.

He steps out in Riddle Manor. It's fairly quiet, although it is not that late. Sirius just assumes no one is around because their side now has control over Hogwarts. And Death Eaters probably want to celebrate and unwind. It has been a gruelling time.

An elf pops into the room and conveys Harry's message to him. It's simple yet very true: Dear Sirius, have fun with Shacklebolt, lots of love from Harry."

The dungeons stink. There is no other way to describe the experience as Sirius descends the spiral staircase. There is a torch fastened to the wall, casting a soft golden hue around the stone walls, but
the dimness doesn't hide the wretched state of the cells. Then again, the dungeon cells are not supposed to be luxury suites filled with comforts.

Tonks and Molly are out cold; the younger woman is sleeping heavily after spending some time with her least favourite aunt and Molly is simply knocked out with a potion because her wailing and screaming had started to annoy the elves. Shacklebolt is propped up against the wall of his cell, one leg bent at the knee. His left eye is swollen and purple, a river of dried blood marks the front of his shirt and he's twitching.

Well, the Dark Lord isn't the cuddling type.

Sirius feels almost numb as he approaches. The only nice thought in his head is that Lucius is alive and sleeping in their bed. That is perhaps the only thing that keeps him sane at the moment.

"If it isn't the traitor himself," Kingsley croaks, spitting out a bit of blood. His breath is laboured and he wheezes. "You know, I always had my doubts about you and I was right, wasn't I? You're one of those bastards destroying our world."

Sirius smirks. "A bit of fresh air would do our world some good, don't you think? It's time to get rid of Dumbledore's stench."

"What did You-Know-Who offer you? It must have been something good for you to turn your back on what is right," Shacklebolt questions with a smirk. "Let me guess—whored out one of his best Death Eaters? I'm no fool, Black. You traded in your morals for a bit of arse."

Sirius lets out a laugh. "What morals? Never had any. You really think I hopped over to the Dark Lord's side for a bit of arse? You must be delusional already."

"Are you going to deny it? What you did to Alastor wasn't for nothing. You and Malfoy are clearly more than associates."

"Mad-Eye got what he deserved. He was a nasty piece of shit." Sirius gives a wry smile. "I didn't join the Dark Lord because of something he offered; I joined because he's right about a lot of things. I was never one of you."

Shacklebolt seems stunned. He narrows his good eye. "You've been a traitor since the beginning."

"Yeah, pretty much. Don't get me wrong, Shacks—your little club wasn't the worst sort I have been asked to join, but you certainly didn't cater to my tastes. I'm a Black and the magic in my veins feels the Dark's call. I didn't agree with my parents and their mindless pure-blood worshipping, but I respect my ancestry. What I don't respect is fuck-wits like you running around, trying to stir up shit. You had that greater good drivel shoved down your throat and you didn't even bat an eye, did you?"

"Dark wizards are all scum. You are all rotten to the core, with no honour and no heart. Each and every one of you is corrupted and tainted."

"Oh, I'm all heart." Sirius grins. "Stop quoting that dead bastard and do yourself a favour. Accept that you've lost and stop being such a sore loser."

"Killing me won't end the Light's resistance."

Sirius shrugs. "That's not my problem."

"Why are you here then?"
"I'm here for you," Sirius smirks, pointing his wand at Kingsley to emphasise his point. "You owe me. You and your crazy lot of twits took something of mine and now you're going to pay up. Moody paid his share already."

Shacklebolt drags himself on his feet and wraps his fingers around the bars. There is a snarl on his lips. "It was one of the best moments of my life. I could actually hear the bones break. Alastor was right, you know. He did scream up a symphony."

Instead of lunging forward, Sirius offers a cold smile. "Sadly, I'm not interested in you as a chew toy. You see, I've made a bargain with the goblins. You will be publicly executed for your crimes. Stealing is bad form, Shacks; and stealing from me gets you killed."

The prospect of dying through a goblin blade is enough to make any man sick to his stomach. Kingsley is no different. Goblins are vicious. A good hundred years ago, the goblins had gutted those who were caught stealing from them. He doubts that their methods have changed.

"But before your execution party can begin, I will provide you with a warm-up." Sirius smiles and has the wizard on his knees before Shacklebolt can open his mouth. The Crucius rakes through him, setting every nerve ending on fire. "You know, I probably would have let it slide. You stole some money, and in turn, I torture you a bit for it—but now I can't wait to see your head rolling on the ground."

Shacklebolt croaks. "You're insane, Black. Azkaban really screwed with your head."

"I won't even argue with you on that." Sirius huffs a laugh. His expression turns darker. "No, you're here because you dared to lay your filthy hands on Lucius. You hurt him, and that I can't allow. Your life was mine the moment you touched him."

"Is your bitch out of commission?" Shacklebolt jeers, his teeth pained red. A trickle of blood oozes from the corner of his mouth from biting his tongue. "So sorry."

There are things Sirius can forgive. Things he doesn't care about. Even things that will never hold his interest. But this is definitely a situation that calls for punishment. Shacklebolt is in for a world of hurt because no one has the right to insult Lucius. Painful spells are part of every Black's repertoire and Sirius knows just the one. The incantation slips over his lips in a furious whisper—it is a promise of pain so sweet that it will leave one gasping for any sort of relief.

Shacklebolt's mind is set on fire. The pain croons and trills as it swathes Shacklebolt's brain in its brutal embrace. Thoughts are no longer feasible, blood rushes against the sides of his skull like a wave caught in a storm. Sirius watches as Shacklebolt's eyes roll into his head, the whites of them slowly turning pink. Blood leaks out from his ears and nose and the rest of the man convulses; tremors of dying flesh. He screams and screams but it is but a whisper; an agonising breath of pain and nothingness that grips the mind. It goes on for minutes—five, ten, fifteen—until Shacklebolt's body starts quaking and thrashing. A decent-sized puddle of dark red has gathered under his head. Then Sirius remembers his deal with the goblins and cancels the curse. He can get a bit carried away when it's fun, that's all.

"This concludes today's lesson," Sirius sighs, tucking away his wand. "I'm going to get front row seats. I'm going to sit and watch, maybe even have a nice shot of Firewhiskey. The last thing you will see is me smiling and giving you a farewell salute."

Shacklebolt does hear him but answering is hard, seeing as his mouth is filled with the coppery liquid that he is coughing up from his lungs. He can't see properly because his vision is blurred from the pain. He is motionless because he can't actually feel his body; not yet at least. He will feel the pain of
"Sleep tight," Sirius smirks and starts walking towards the spiral staircase. He spots Tonks’ eyes on him, big and terrified. She had heard and seen most of it, and now has a reason to fear Sirius as well. The man doesn't pay her any attention and flicks his wrist towards the lit torch, dousing the fire and leaving the cold dungeon even colder. Her punishment will come soon enough; Narcissa takes family honour rather seriously and Auror Nymphadora Tonks knows very little about family honour.

He steps into the Floo and goes home without looking back or feeling any sort of emotion other than utter delight. As quickly as possible, Sirius stalks upstairs and enters the bedroom. It is silent but the bedside lamp is still on. Getting out of his clothes, Sirius slips into the bathroom to get rid of the dungeon smell.

Feeling clean and tired, Sirius gets under the covers and lets out a deep breath when he feels the other's body against his, warm and familiar.

Countless hours of wretched despair, violent thoughts of isolation, shivering flesh and silent breaths—it is all behind him now. He feels lighter, more balanced, calm. Nothing that reflects the lowest point of his anguish. He presses his nose against the back of Lucius' neck and places a kiss right above a small boyhood scar. He runs his hands down the blond's back, slipping them over soft skin. There is nothing sexual in his touches; it's a comfort, a way to reassure himself that the wizard is there. He cannot get close enough without mauling Lucius like a beast but he wants to touch every inch of the man.

Sirius falls asleep, having wrapped his arm firmly around Lucius. He needs to be able to feel the wizard. And he does.

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If anything can be said about the goblins then it is this—they are very fucking fast. The next morning, an owl delivers a pristine letter with a blood-red seal on it. The goblins have pressed charges against Shacklebolt, the Ministry has decided not to intervene and that's that. Shacklebolt will be executed in seven days. Very publically one might add. Executions are always impressive events, mostly because the custom has fallen into obscurity as of late. Giving out second chances and all. But that sort of benevolence is no longer on the menu. Goblins consider it an honour to chop someone's head off; it is entertaining as well as warranted when thievery is involved.

Sirius feels almost giddy inside when he reads the letter. There is a part of him that wants to march down into the dungeon and just do it himself, but a much bigger and pettier part of him wants to see it happening on a cushy seat with a nice stiff drink in his hand. He wants Lucius to be there with him, watching on as one of his attackers pays for the violent transgression.

The Animagus doesn't feel the need to leave the bed and tosses the letter on the bedside table to read again later. Lucius is curled against his side, his entire body pressed tight against Sirius. The wizard considers the silly notion of Lucius seeking warmth, but then again, he had spent torturous hours in a cold dungeon, shivering from fever and pain. Maybe it's not such a stupid thought after all. Whatever the reason, Sirius loves it and wants to keep it as such as long as he can. In truth, he wants to feel it for the rest of his life.

Life is fickle. Love is fickle. Being in love isn't always permanent. For Sirius, however, time is the
cruellest one of all. The years spent in solitude, surrounded by decay and isolation, have made it clear to him that there really is no point in dragging his feet. So much of his life has been filled with malice and brutal dullness, and that is the last thing he wishes to experience now that he is free. He doesn't care about anything other than making the most of the years he has left—and despite knowing the average lifespan of a pure-blood wizard—Sirius still fears time. He fears not having enough of it. He is not yet forty years of age but he is afraid of not having enough time to truly live. To truly love.

Sirius lets his gaze linger on his lover and he feels a burst of warmth in his chest. It's dangerously close to choking him. He's going to ask Lucius to marry him. Maybe not right in that moment, but soon. He has to get a ring first—a big glittering ring. And he has to figure out the best possible way of asking. The thought fills him with exhilaration. He thinks about what the wedding ceremony might be like and instantly decides that he doesn't care as long as he gets to shag his husband in his wedding robes. It should be a memorable moment.

Lucius shifts against Sirius and asks in a bleary tone, "What time is it?"

The Animagus doesn't know and doesn't really care. "It's morning. Don't worry about it, Luce. You are under strict orders to sleep as much as you wish."

The blond wizard has never been a big fan of early rising; in fact, he loathes it. Anything before ten is out of the question and should be made illegal. He rolls on his back but isn't quick enough to mask a slight wince as he moves.

"I'm getting you a pain-relieving potion," Sirius states and tries to get out of bed, but Lucius grabs him by the wrist and pulls him back under the covers.

"It was merely a twinge of pain. I am not likely to depart from this life because of it."

"Not funny, you stubborn git," Sirius grinds out, eyes narrowed. "You almost did die, remember?"

Lucius lets out a sigh and looks at Sirius, grey eyes brimming with emotion. "A poorly timed remark. It was nothing but muscle pain, Siri."

"Fine," Sirius breathes out," but don't be shy, Luce. If you need a potion, tell me. I'm here to take care of you and that includes my services as a nursemaid."

"Have you ever known me to be shy?" Lucius smirks, an unabashed gleam in his bright eyes. It pulls Sirius in; he can't resist it any more than he can stop the sun rising. He yanks the covers aside and smoothly settles himself between the blond's splayed legs.

The urge to slip his hand under the man's sleeping pants is overwhelming but Sirius does resist. For about ten seconds. He crawls over the slender form of his lover and smirks in an equally unholy manner. "Shameless tart, that's what you are." Sirius is aware of the limitation they face at the current moment, but he can do slow and sweet as well. Lucius yields effortlessly, allowing Sirius to plunder his mouth and grind their bodies together. After several amorous moments, Sirius lifts himself on his elbows and says, "You're still healing. We'll finish this later."

Lucius wants to disagree, desperately so, but he can understand the reasoning. He does still feel a bit aching and worn-out, despite having slept a decent amount of hours. He feels magically exhausted—strong enough to light a candle but nothing more. He offers Sirius a nod and doesn't protest as the man settles next to him.

"The goblins have set a date for Shacklebolt's execution." Sirius grins and reaches for the letter. He flicks it open and goes on, "Greedy little buggers can't wait to sharpen their blades. But I can't really
blame them; he's a thief and a dumb bastard."

Lucius has had enough dealings with the goblins and says, "There has not been a public execution in a hundred years; as expected, it will be a grand event."

"Front row seats for us, love. If you want, I can probably get them to give you the bastard's severed head." Sirius laughs. "We could pop it over the fireplace like a trophy."

The blond does not comment, but he does nestle closer to Sirius as if the memories of that dreadful night have resurfaced. Once Shacklebolt is dead, he will consider resting easy.

"Anyway," Sirius throws the letter back on the bedside table and wraps his arms around Lucius. "Forget about them. The Order is pretty much gone now that the top arseholes have been captured. The ones we haven't found yet will just slink away and forget that they ever knew Mad-Eye and Shacklebolt."

"Kidnapping an Inner Circle Death Eater is an audacious venture, and yet they managed it almost perfectly. Of course, it was a mistake to use Hogwarts as a hideout."

Sirius snorts. "Yeah, that was a stupid move. I guess they thought that the wards would keep them safe, but Tommy dismantled them like it was nothing."

Lucius remains silent for a while and Sirius considers the matter closed, but then the blond speaks again, "I did not think he would bother, to be honest."

"What?" Sirius lets out a surprised laugh. "You must be joking, Luce. Tommy was hysterical. I mean, not in an obvious manner, but I could tell that he was upset. He was furious when no one could find any trace of you."

Lucius finds it hard to believe.

"Look, he's a massive twat and I'm not very fond of him, but he would never let anyone harm those he considers his family and close friends. On a scale of Harry to Dumbledore, you probably rank somewhere after Harry, but no one can top Harry because that bastard adores my godson." Sirius tries to explain but makes face at his own words. "I really shouldn't talk about Harry and topping in the same sentence, because now I'm thinking about my godson getting buggered by the Dark Lord."

"Siri," Lucius sighs, sounding almost amused. "Kindly shut up."

"My point is that Tommy doesn't adore you but he does care."

"The Dark Lord does not care for his servants."

Sirius shrugs and comments. "Perhaps he does care about his friends. The fact is that he stormed Hogwarts to rescue your gorgeous arse from a bunch of nitwits. He didn't have to do it, but he did it anyway."

"Let's not talk about it at the moment." Lucius doesn't look very happy and shifts in Sirius' arms. The wizard doesn't let him move away and Lucius lets him have his way. He actually likes being crushed against the wizard's body. "I'd like to have breakfast in the sunroom."

"What part of absolute bed rest is too difficult for you to understand?"

"The part where you think that ordering me around will end well."
Sirius laughs and sits up in bed. He looks at the blond with amused eyes. Lucius looks plenty intimidating but it doesn't work on Sirius because he's not afraid of the wizard. It's a bit funny actually. Sirius has the perfect thing in mind for the pushy blond and says, "Fine, you can have breakfast in the sunroom. You can do whatever you want, Luce." The blond wizard shows a hint of a smug smirk; he's getting his way after all. But it disappears when Sirius goes on almost nonchalantly, "But you will be having breakfast alone for a while. In fact, you'll be sleeping alone for at least three weeks. I won't touch you at all; no kisses, no cuddles, no shagging whatsoever. I might even spend a lot of my time in Grimmauld Place."

"Whatever for?" Lucius gives the man an indignant glare.

"If you don't want to please me than I won't please you."

Lucius cannot even argue and just asks, "And forcing me to stay in this wretched bed will please you?"

"Immensely." Sirius nods. "Seeing you healthy will please me, Luce."

There is a strange bubble of emotions in the blond's chest and he feels incredibly deplorable when he considers the circumstances. Sirius isn't trying to control him. He's trying to take care of him. It's such a foreign notion for Lucius because he can't remember anyone ever doing so. Narcissa is like a sister and her care has always been a warm affection shared by siblings, so it is not the same. Sirius evokes feelings that he has never experienced.

Sirius moves closer, his expression set in a frown. "Luce, you okay?"

"Perfect." Lucius smiles, overwhelmed by his own feelings.

"I don't want to boss you around; I just want you to get your strength back. I almost lost you, Lucius. I don't want to feel like that ever again; like my heart is being cut out from my chest. Seeing you in that state, not knowing if you'll make it—it was worse than spending twelve years in Azkaban."

"I'm sorry," the blond offers, eyes shining with wetness. He doesn't even know why he's crying, but he can't stop it. He feels Sirius' arms pulling him closer, their bodies pressed together. There is nothing to fear because he's in his own home, safe behind wards and protected by others. But he remembers being in the cold darkness. The beatings and curses were nothing compared to being in pain and alone. Feeling that no one will ever come for him.

Sirius isn't surprised to see Lucius break down like that; he's only surprised that he had not done so sooner. He certainly doesn't mind holding the wizard in his arms, stroking his hands down his back like he's something delicate. Offering comfort isn't something Sirius is good at; Lily had been the compassionate one in their little group. But there is something wholly different about comforting someone he loves with all his heart. Lucius isn't openly crying, but he's silently trembling against Sirius. The man doesn't want to say anything; words are not enough to convey his feelings. He just grips Lucius tighter; reassuring the man of his safety.

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Narcissa glides into the brewing room and instantly frowns. Severus is slumped over the desk, with various cauldrons frothing and fizzling around him. The room itself looks untidy—hardly Severus' style. The man keeps his workroom spotless but now there are bottles and phials cluttering the desk.
The witch finds a stack of parchments. She flicks through the top ones and sighs. Severus must be exhausted. Narcissa counts the orders from St. Mungo's and almost twice as many orders from Madam Pomfrey. It seems that the school infirmary is in need of many basic potions. On top of the orders, Severus has been working on special pain relieving potions for Lucius, for the wizard is sensitive to one of the main ingredients used in basic pain relieving and numbing potions. So Severus has to make an altered version of the regular one because St. Mungo's cannot supply patients with it once they have been sent home. Not that the wizard minds brewing them—he cannot possibly let anyone else brew them because it is a matter of honour for him.

Looking around the brewing room again, Narcissa spots a freshly made batch of potions on the edge of the desk. Severus is a meticulous man and labels all of his brews and concoctions, but he has been working nonstop for almost fifteen hours. Potions don't make themselves and Poppy Pomfrey can scare any wizard into submission. It is understandable that Severus is in a hurry.

Snape lifts his head from the desk, a sheet of parchment stuck to his cheek. He looks just as groggy as he sounds. "What time is it?"

Narcissa smiles and walks to the wizard. She tidies him up and says, "The perfect time for breakfast, my darling. I see you have been working all night."

Snape nods and rubs his neck. "Last minute orders from St. Mungo's. Apparently, I am the only Potion Master in the country who can brew."

"And what of those orders from Hogwarts?"

"Poppy is running low. The amount of nitwits running around the school has increased, I'm afraid."

Narcissa nods. "Mister Longbottom did say many of the students prefer to settle their differences with fistfights and by brawling like common Muggles."

Severus loathes the idea of going back there. He doesn't mind teaching—if the ones he is teaching actually want to learn and behave in a manner suited for respectable members of wizarding society. Unfortunately, that is not the case. He usually has to teach bad-mannered children who love nothing more than to aggravate him and blow up his classroom. He would rather stick his head in a boiling cauldron than return to the school.

Narcissa kisses the man's furred brow and asks, "Shall I deliver the pain-relieving potions to Lucius?"

Snape gazes around the brewing room and sees a heap of parchment scattered around the desk. He is sure that he had marked down the ones ready for delivery and he had even sent an elf to St. Mungo's last night—but he cannot seem to recall much of last night. There is a rack of glass phials to his right, all categorised by the order number.

The ones for Poppy are all marked with a label that says 'Hogwarts Infirmary' and places in a wooden chest with ten compartments. Each compartment has a glass bottle inside. The ones for St. Mungo's carry a label as well, but he had made eight different potions during the night and bottled dozens more. Frankly, Severus can't remember the taste of fresh air. Although he isn't entirely sure, he tells Narcissa, "The ones on your right are for Lucius."

At least he thinks they are. Frankly, he's seeing double and he can't actually feel parts of his body. He is going to crawl into bed and lock himself in for a week.

Narcissa takes the little potion chest with six small bottles and says, "I will take these to Lucius right
away. I hope I can coax him out from under the covers for a cup of tea. Why don't you join us later, Severus?"

"First, I must finish my work, but I shall try to be quick about it."

Narcissa smiles. "Do try to make it to supper, Severus. We have much to celebrate tonight."
A small group of angry witches and wizards clutter the street across from Gringotts, most of them shouting and protesting. Of course, executing someone for stealing is barbaric and utterly exaggerated, but it is not entirely unexpected to hear such outrage from Muggle-borns and half-bloods who are leaning more towards their Muggle heritage. No one gets their head removed for stealing in the Muggle world. Goblins, however, care very little for what Muggles do.

Then again, this isn't the Muggle world. Wizards and witches of pure-blood ancestry do not see anything wrong with a little goblin justice. To be fair, the goblins have engraved a rather clear warning on the doors. In Shacklebolt's case, the execution is a matter of goblin honour. They have been fooled by a wizard and goblins get offended by less. Many years ago, the Ministry had been forced to approve the harsh goblin law, lest they had a desire to face financial ruin. The last squabble with the goblin nation close to ninety years ago had caused the goblins to close the bank for six months, resulting in economic chaos for the wizarding world. To avoid something like that happening again, the Ministry had agreed to hand Shacklebolt over to the goblins with a bow and all.

And in any case, Sirius does not let the small huddle of Muggle-born activists bother him too much as he enters the bank.

Standing in the vestibule, Sirius sees a lot of familiar faces. A lot of pure-bloods. The goblins have a special execution chamber under the bank; rarely used these days, but still fully functional. An execution is a grand event as Lucius had predicted—high officials from the goblin nation are present, rubbing shoulders with wizards from the Ministry. Sirius, as the other insulted party, gets almost special treatment. He has the best view of the chopping block, sharing a stand with the Minister and important goblins that need to be buttered up in order to maintain good relations.

Sirius, out of pettiness, had even taken it a step further and had arranged for Lucius to sit next to him. The goblins had been agreeable after the wizard had let it slip that Shacklebolt was also responsible for kidnapping the blond wizard. Now, goblins do not really care for the affairs of wizards, but they care for gold. Lucius has a lot of it. Twisted goblin logic says that Shacklebolt had almost cost them a very important client. So the goblins are happy to accommodate Sirius Black. A combined family vault is more profitable for the goblins and Black might just give them one in the future.

It has been a slow week but Lucius feels a little bit better. He still has trouble with his magic, experiencing erratic bouts of magical instability. It doesn't bother him all that much because Sirius worships the ground he walks on. However, it would be nice to Crucio the man every once in a while. He feels a hand pressing against his back and Sirius leans in, a wily smile on his face. "Quite a turnout, wouldn't you say?"

Lucius looks around and notes that almost all the important pure-blood families have gathered to witness the execution. The Parkinsons and the Greengrass family are present, as well as the elder Nott with his wife. The Bulstrodes, Flints and Madam Zabini are also in attendance. But still, most of
the gathered crowd are either Ministry officials or social climbers.

"I can spot a few Dumbledore flunkies." Sirius nods towards Augusta Longbottom and Elphias Doge; both of them are looking sour and a little constipated.

"Relics of the past," Lucius hums, uninterested in their presence. He turns to Sirius and notices a frown on the man's face. "Is everything all right with you?"

"Yeah, everything's fine," Sirius says, glower smoothing out. "Just a bit restless, I guess. Impatient to see heads roll."

Then a goblin announces that the prisoner will be brought out in a few moments and instructs everyone to enter the court chamber. As wizards and witches trickle inside like theatregoers eager to see a performance, Sirius spots Narcissa. The witch smiles as she moves past her cousin. The chamber is soon filled with people.

Sirius takes his seat and smoothes an urge to pull Lucius into a proper snog. Instead, he recalls how the goblins had dragged Kingsley out of the dungeons like a ragdoll, uncaring of the man's injuries and moans of pain. It had felt like taking out the rubbish and Sirius had even thanked the goblin guards for removing that piece of shit.

Some in the crowd gasp as Shacklebolt is steered into the chamber. He's not looking his best, that's for sure. His robes are torn and covered in blood. One of his eyes is swollen shut. But he is still defiant, still ready to rampage. He can't do anything, with his magic bound tight. He lifts his head and twists it to look around the room with his good eye. Many of the people sitting in the chamber seem familiar to him, but Shacklebolt knows that there is only one wizard responsible for his predicament. That wizard is sitting right in front of him, a smug smile on his face. Sirius doesn't even flinch when Shacklebolt struggles and attempts to launch himself at him like a feral animal.

Kingsley is pulled back by the goblin guards and forced on his knees. He keeps his good eye on Sirius and the wizard sitting next to him. Lucius Malfoy appears perfectly healed, arrogant as always, and Shacklebolt can't stand it. He knows that it was a mistake to leave the man alive. They should have snapped his neck. Mad-Eye had wanted to do it but Shacklebolt had stopped him, claiming that they could get information out of the man. Maybe the wizard would have talked had they used the correct motivation—a wand pointed at Sirius Black's heart.

A goblin starts listing Shacklebolt's crimes. He doesn't care to listen. It will not make a difference. Perhaps it had been a mistake to underestimate Sirius Black; they should have eliminated the man right after his escape from Azkaban. But they did not, choosing to believe that Sirius wasn't a threat. Just another mad Black. The truth tastes like a pile of ash on his tongue.

No one stands up to defend the wizard. The goblins are pleased to see a silent chamber, everyone staying in their seats. It is customary to let the accused say some final words but Shacklebolt just spits on the floor; a clear message for Sirius. Not that the man cares for Shacklebolt's dramatics. No, Sirius is pretty content. He just slides his hand over the blond's and leans in to whisper something to the man. Lucius smirks and they don't pay any attention to Shacklebolt.

A number of wizards and witches notice the almost affectionate display and it raises a few eyebrows from the gathered crowd. They all know that Lucius and his wife are now divorced. An event that is close to sacrilege among pure-bloods. And now it seems as though Lucius has just swapped one Black for another. Of course, there isn't anything wrong with two pure-bloods forming a relationship, but it's not just a pure-blood—it's Sirius Black, an infamous Azkaban escapee. He's not dignified or courteous, despite his blood and name. He doesn't have an ounce of pure-blood formality in him. But Sirius has claimed his seats in the Wizengamot and clearly supports pure-blood laws and customs. It
is expected of him to support dark families and the legislations proposed by them. He has even called for the execution of a sticky-fingered Auror and now sits there with a satisfied grin. People wonder about him—which side is he on; what does he have planned; who is he really?

The Black name holds power among pure-bloobs; an ideal family to align oneself with. In fact, many would not mind offering up their daughters for such alliance. Arranged marriages are not a thing of the past just yet; it is still practised within pure-blood circles. Now that Lucius is no longer married, a number of pure-bloobs have found themselves wanting to shove their pretty daughters towards Malfoy. Although, such hopes are fruitless because Sirius Black looks a tad too comfortable with Malfoy, openly staking a claim. It will be a disappointing night for a number of aspirant brides and their fathers.

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"You know, I was a bit disappointed at first, but this is so much better. Look at him; it's humiliating for him to kneel before us, with all of them watching." Sirius cannot even hide his glee as he leans closer to Lucius. The blond looks amused as well, watching Shacklebolt silently seething on the cold stone floor. Sirius slips his fingers around the other's and asks, "Are you enjoying it?"

Lucius doesn't give out any sort of glee like Sirius, but says, "I am satisfied to witness his end. If only to feel assured."

"It's all for you, love," Sirius tells the man. "I want him to die for what he did to you. I don't care about the Galleons he pinched. It was just the perfect opportunity to combine the two and rid the world of another dedicated Dumbledore lapdog."

A silence falls over the gathered people as one of the goblins ask Shacklebolt for his final words. Shacklebolt sneers and attempts to hurl spit at Sirius. It only amuses Sirius some more. As the goblins haul Shacklebolt up and push him towards the goblin with the sharp axe, Sirius edges closer to Lucius and says, "I wish Harry could see this. Shacklebolt always treated him like some dumb kid."

"What makes you think Harry isn't witnessing this?" Lucius counters with a smirk.

Sirius isn't sure if he's angry or not. "He wouldn't put himself in danger by coming here. But he's a little shit, so it wouldn't surprise me."

"Narcissa has a two-way mirror with her."

"That's pretty clever of him. His very own live broadcast." Lucius raises a brow and Sirius shakes his head with a smile as he says, "It's a Muggle thing." They both turn back to the scene before him and Sirius notes, "That blade looks razor-sharp. I bet they've been sharpening it for a week."

Then the goblin with the axe looks up to where Sirius is sitting, waiting for orders. The goblin next to Sirius gives a nod and then looks to Sirius for final confirmation. It is a wonderful moment. The wizard laces his fingers with Lucius' and gives a curt nod. The axe comes down in one swift move and Shacklebolt's limp body sags against the stone slab.

And then it's over. Sirius thanks the goblin official as they stand up to leave. Someone will dispose of the body and mop up the blood. And pick up the severed head.

People start to leave the chamber; there is nothing left to see.
Sirius sees Narcissa again, but now she is with a group of pure-blood wives. She sees Sirius as well and smiles, bowing her head a little. It is only proper to greet the Lord of one's House. All the ladies turn to eye Sirius as well and they immediately start bombarding Narcissa with all sorts of questions. The wizard turns to Lucius. "Well, that was exciting."

The blond says, "Take me home."

"I want to pop over to the joke shop for a bit. Fred and George wanted to show me a new prank they've come up with." Sirius explains.

"I have no desire to see those heathens and their childish tricks."

"Come on," Sirius laughs. "It's going to be fun. Promise. They have a new adult product line; all sorts of wicked toys. I think I even saw a cock-shaped lolly. I can buy you one if you want. Strawberry-flavoured?"

Lucius walks away without giving the man an answer. Sirius grins and saunters after the man. He wants to slip an arm around Lucius' waist but he knows that the blond would not take kindly to it and stops himself just in time. Narcissa joins them in the atrium. She looks thoroughly amused. "My wonderful boys. This was meant to be Shacklebolt's hour of glory and yet you could not even let the dying man have some attention."

"What?" Sirius looks confused.

"Wonderful and ignorant," Narcissa corrects herself with a smile. "Did you not think that people would notice the closeness between you and Lucius? Did you not consider that every fond look and every affectionate touch would garner attention from the wizards and witches gathered here today?"

"Frankly, I didn't think anyone would notice." Sirius looks almost sheepish, but not all that bothered. So what if everyone saw him? He's not going to pretend that he doesn't want to touch his lover.

Narcissa waves it off and says, "I had to endure a horde of well-wishing witches who all seem to think that I was carelessly cast aside by my wretched husband. In fact, I think they pity me. Isn't it droll?"

"Luce?" Sirius doesn't even hear what Narcissa is saying. He feels a bit worried because Lucius has not said a word. He seems stiff and cautious. Sirius is afraid that Lucius doesn't want to publically associate with him, let alone admit to anyone that they're in a relationship. It makes something painful twist inside. Narcissa notices it too and looks just as worried.

Of course, Lucius automatically hates it. He doesn't know what to do with it, how to take the turn of events. Sirius loves him—madly, irrevocably, without any sort of reservations. He knows that he loves Sirius—intensely, ceaselessly and without any sort of fear. He just doesn't want anyone else to intrude; no one has the right to know those emotions. But Sirius doesn't have that sort of limitations; he feels no need to hide emotions. They are so different and mismatched, and yet perfectly well-suited for one another. And really—he would be openly linked to a powerful and renowned wizard. Lucius has a bit of fixation with power. It would boost his own influence and authority. This isn't a deciding factor, not at all, but it does create possibilities.

"I think I will take my leave," Narcissa states and gives Sirius a compassionate smile. She knows that Lucius isn't interested in displaying his personal affairs in public, but her cousin likes to boast.

Sirius doesn't want to force Lucius and says, "We should head home. There's a lot of people in Diagon Alley and if you don't want—"
"I will accompany you to that infernal joke shop," Lucius sighs. He shouldn't care what the little people think. He's a Malfoy and he's with a Black and that's that. The public can bloody well bugger off.

"Really? I mean, if you rather we didn't appear in public—" Sirius starts, but then he snaps his mouth shut and lets out a laugh. "What the fuck am I saying? Of course, we'll go together. Because everyone who doesn't like it can shove off."

"Charming."

"I'm always charming," Sirius muses with a grin. Then he adds, "I'm definitely going to buy you some hard candy to suck on."

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Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes stands on the corner of Westside intersection. It looks slightly different than before. What matters is that the twins are back in business. And they are loving it. Financially, the boys are much better off; mostly thanks to Harry and Sirius. They have a new line of products. They even have more customers and a new type of customer—middle-aged witches trying to spice up their dust-covered sex-life.

Sirius enters the shop and moves around a group of women giggling by the front door. They look at Sirius as if he's a tasty piece of meat. Of course, Sirius doesn't mind appreciative looks. But he doesn't care about them either. No one can compete with Lucius; the whole of the fucking universe can't compete with Lucius.

The blond looks less enthusiastic as he enters the joke shop. It's full of prank products and silly things that Lucius absolutely loathes, but he can spot a lucrative business when he sees one. He is sure that the infernal twins have a knack for business. Malfoys always value a first-class business, even if it sells nonsense. If it makes a profit then it is worth his time. He looks over where Sirius is standing by the counter, speaking to someone. Then he turns around and beckons Lucius over.

The Animagus grins. "Fred and George are in the back. Do you want to come along or not?"

"As opposed to staying here like I actually care about pranks?"

"Oh, we're totally going to buy some stuff later. There really is an adult section, you know."

Lucius only sneers, but he follows the man to the back. It is cluttered with boxes. The redheaded wizards are standing around a small desk. They both look pleased to see Sirius. It turns into a big smile when they see Lucius.

"This is brilliant," Fred says and waves the two wizards over. "We need someone with a brain."

Sirius looks offended and seems ready to protest.

"I mean we need someone to look over these papers that have something to do with money," Fred elaborates."There's this new idea George and I have been bouncing back and forth but we're not sure if we can afford it."

Sirius instantly loses the frown. Lucius is brilliant with money. "Good thing we're here then. How
about you show me the new line and George can go over the financial stuff with Lucius?"

Fred pouts. "You know, I'm hurt. I'm incredibly hurt that you think that I would try to get into your luscious boyfriend's pants."

Lucius shares a perplexed look with Sirius but the wizard just grins.

He motions Fred to come with him but the redhead stays put and a look of shame washes over his expression. George shares an identical expression. The latter says, "Err...we just wanted to apologise for—"

Sirius stops them right away and says, "You have nothing to apologise for. She's your mum, but that doesn't mean you are responsible for her actions."

Fred nods, although he looks unsure. He looks up from his fidgeting hand and meets Lucius' eyes. "Still, George and I wanted to say that we're sorry that this happened. Mum's barmy and we don't want you to think that we'll try to get her off. She deserves whatever punishment you decide on."

Lucius knows perfectly well that the twins had nothing to do with it and that they are loyal to Harry—and to the Dark Lord since he is connected to Harry. "You cannot be blamed for your mother's actions."

Fred seems to relax. "Well, we just wanted to clear the air. Sirius is family to us, so that means that you are stuck with us as well."

George smiles. "We'll even give you a family discount."

This makes Sirius chortle to himself because he can't even picture Lucius buying prank products. And he's by no means someone who would need a discount. "All right, let's get to it. You wanted to show me something?"

Fred grabs something from the shelf behind him and leaves with Sirius. George motions Lucius to sit and dumps a stack of papers in front of the man. He says, "This is everything pertaining to our finances. We had a bloke who helped us with book-keeping and whatnot, but he was a git. Stole from us, he did."

Lucius flicks through the first three pages and an idea forms in his head. Already he can see that the shop brings in a substantial amount of money. "You only have one shop, correct?"

George nods. "Yeah, we haven't thought about a second store."

"You should consider it. From what I can see here, your business is profitable."

"Now that Sirius is a partner, we have more funds. But Fred and I are not terribly good with numbers, you know. We're more about inventing and developing our products. We hate dealing with finances and marketing. It's boring."

Lucius hums. "Do you have a store manager?"

"Umm...here was this one girl who stocked the shelves." George shrugs.

"You cannot run a cost-effective business without the necessary people. Your finances are a mess, you have no real idea how much profit you actually make and you only have one store." Lucius states, looking through the papers with a frown. Those two idiots don't even know how well-off they are. "Right. I shall look through these. How much dividend income do you take out? The Ministry
taxes most of the shops in Diagon Alley, but it should be an insignificant amount."

George looks at the blond like he's speaking in a foreign language. "I have no idea what you just said."

"I see," the blond says, feeling an urge to laugh. "It is worse than I thought. You and your brother have much to learn."

"So you'll help us?" George smiles, rubbing his hands together. "We're idiots, you know. We'll probably sink this business if you don't help us."

Lucius nods. He can't stand it when people have a great business but no actual business sense. It's criminal. "Come to Malfoy Manor next week and bring all your documentation."

George hollers for his brother. The redhead pokes his head into the backroom. "Where's the fire?"

"Lucius here is going to teach us how to be proper businessmen."

Fred's eyes seem to sparkle and he cheers. Then he is gone again. After a moment, Sirius walks into the back, wearing a pleased smirk. George goes looking for his brother, leaving the two alone. Sirius says, "I told you they're clever."

"Have you conducted your business here?"

"We're mostly done." Sirius slides his hand down Lucius' back and smirks. "You really ought to take a look, Luce. I'm really liking the adult section. They have an age line to prevent anyone under the legal age from snooping. There is an opaque wall hiding it from view. I mean, they're going to make a fortune with some of the stuff on sale. Whips, hand-cuffs, magical blindfolds and massage oils that make you tingle all over."

"I think I'll pass."

Sirius shrugs with a smile. "That's okay; I already got us a heap of stuff. They've even made flavoured lube—apparently, it's very popular with Muggles, so they made their own. Fucking brilliant."

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Harry sees Sirius strolling through the doorway with a massive grin. He knows his godfather and it immediately sparks Harry's interest. "Did you enjoy the execution that much?"

Sirius looks positively giddy. "Oh, it was fucking marvellous. But you should know, Pup."

Harry does know. Having given Narcissa a two-way mirror, Harry had counted on getting a front row seat. "I didn't want to miss it, you know. Shacklebolt treated me like an idiot and I hated his guts. I didn't really feel like beating the shit out of him but that doesn't mean I didn't care about his death. Of course, I had to see it for myself."

"I'm not actually here to talk about that. In fact, I'm not here to talk at all." Sirius makes vague hand gestures. Then he motions Harry to follow him.

Curious, the green-eyed teen walks after Sirius. They reach the parlour and Sirius sharply turns to
face Harry. "Luce and I got you a present. Well, more like Luce caught you a present, but I wholly approve."

In the middle of the vestibule, crumpled on the polished marble floor, is Dolores Umbridge. With a large bow wrapped around her. Sirius had tied it around the witch himself; it's big and red and bloody hilarious.

"Do you like it?" Sirius smirks, gesturing towards the gagged and bound woman kneeling before Lucius. "We were having a stroll through Knockturn when Lucius spotted her. She's so fucking pink; it's hard to miss her."

Harry is so shocked that he can't get a word out. He just stares.

"Shall I take her to the dungeons? It would be rather tedious to clean the flooring of her blood." Lucius' smirk is a little to unholy. Harry is not the only one who hates the bitch.

Harry starts laughing. He's like a little kid riding on a sugar rush. Snapping his fingers, Harry summons an elf. Pebbles pops into the parlour. "Please dump this bitch in the dungeons but keep her tied up. You can use the manacles if you like. I'll leave it up to you, Pebbles."

The elf understands and grabs the witch by the arm. As they disappear, Harry looks terribly pleased. "This is the best day of my life. First Shacklebolt, now that rotten bitch."

Lucius reaches into his robe pocket and says, "I believe you will enjoy this as well." He pulls out a ruddy-brown feather quill and explains, "She was terribly fond of this particular type of Quill, as you well know. I managed to obtain one a few months ago."

"That's the Quill she used—" Harry states, his eyes glittering with eagerness and haunting anger. "Oh, I'm definitely going to enjoy this. I don't even know how to properly convey my gratitude. Thank you."

Sirius shrugs. "She fucking deserves it. Have fun, kiddo."

Harry smiles wide, glancing between Sirius and Lucius. "Stay for lunch."

Lucius feels ill at ease. He has yet to see the Dark Lord; they have not spoken since the blond got kidnapped by a group of lunatics.

Harry seems to sense it and smiles. "Don't worry about it. Tom's...repentant."

Sirius snorts. "Seems like you just made that up."

"No, really. Tom does feel guilty. He understands now that he was too harsh with you, Lucius. The whole reason for his anger was that he simply didn't believe that you and Sirius are in a committed relationship. Now he sees that he was wrong."

Lucius gives a nod. He agrees to the lunch, but he still doesn't want to think about meeting his Lord. Thankfully, he has Sirius with him and the man has proven his tenacity when it comes to dealing with Voldemort. Lunch is already being made and Lucius has no time to escape before Harry is ushering them to the dining room. The three of them take a seat as the elves set the table and declare lunch served.

"Fred and George wanted me to deliver some new stuff," Sirius says as he reaches for the wine goblet. "And I'm ignoring the fact that they sent you a box of cherry-flavoured lube."

The Animagus grins. The grin stays even when Lucius glares a little too pointedly at him. "So what's the plan now that both Shacklebolt and Moody are dead?"

"Well," Harry starts, placing his fork down, "Tom wants to run for Minister. Obviously. He thinks it would be best to take over peacefully and through legal means. There really is no point in storming the Ministry and slaughtering the lot of them. No one even cares about Voldemort being in charge because things are actually improving."

"In what world are people happy about Voldemort gaining power?" Sirius laughs.

"This one apparently," Harry hums, mostly pleased with himself. "The upcoming elections will be announced next week and there's even going to be a Ministry ball after the elections."

"It's the Annual Spring Ball," Lucius comments. "It's in May."

"Mostly it's just snobby upper crust pure-blooms flaunting the size of their vaults and trying to breathe some life back into the dried up hags they're married to," Sirius adds with a mocking sneer. "Ask Cissy; she knows all about these boring Ministry functions."

Lucius sniffs. "Of course, you wouldn't know anything about pure-blood etiquette."

"Never cared to learn," Sirius says with a slight shrug. "You want to be my date to the ball, Luce?"

Harry watches the two men and privately smiles. Sirius is truly happy, probably for the first time in his life. But the young man sees that Lucius is not yet as comfortable with such affectionate public displays as his godfather. He says, "I'm not interested in going, but Tom said that I have to go. A unified front or something like that. So that means I'll be forced to shake hands with a lot of stuffy old men."

"Don't worry about it now. You have four months to get ready for it." Sirius shrugs. "How's your school work going?"

"Severus is a surprisingly good teacher. I mean, he pretends that taking points away is still a real thing outside Hogwarts, but he's pretty competent. He says I'm ready to take my final exams in a few months time because I'm actually ahead of everyone else in seventh year. I can do the theoretical stuff at home with some instructor from the Department of Education, but I have to do the practical parts of the exams in the Ministry."

"What are your plans for the future?" Lucius inquires.

Harry has asked that question himself, but he can't fully figure it out just yet. "Depends really. I don't want to be an Auror. In fact, I don't want to be anywhere near the Ministry. I'm not a diplomat and I'm not Slytherin enough to pursue any sort of career path that involves subtlety and being sneaky. I think I'd like to work with children."

Sirius smirks. "Cissy has been yapping about educational programmes for all the poor mistreated Muggle-borns."

"She has a point, you know. I bet there are dozens of kids out there, afraid of themselves. Little kids labelled as freaks and monsters because they can do things others cannot. That's what happened to Tom. The Dursleys hated me because they didn't understand me—not that they wanted to understand me. People who abuse their children do not deserve to have children and if they happen to be
magical children, it is our duty to remove them from an abusive and intolerant household. I would be at least forty per cent less fucked up had I been raised in a magical family."

"Well, I wanted to raise you. But some scheming bastard ripped you from my arms and made sure I was locked up nice and tight while he took you to that fucking horse-faced bint."

"Siri—you would have been an amazing father to me, I'm sure." Harry tries to comfort the man.

"Dumbledore declared himself your magical guardian, but I was your guardian from the moment Lily and James took their last breath. As you godfather, I was the only one who could claim you as my own, but Dumbledore was clever. That old fox knew that he had to get me out of the way; he knew that Azkaban was the only place strong enough to hold me."

Lucius smooths his hand down Sirius' arm to calm him. There is a storm gathering force inside the man. Memories of Azkaban drip down from some unseen place and attempt to snuff out the light. Lucius cannot even imagine the sort of agony one has to endure between the stone walls of Azkaban prison, but to be innocent and still suffer—he fears that Sirius will never truly recover.

The Animagus feels the gentle touch and pushes the memories back into that deep and hidden place he lets them dwell and fester in. He ignores the usual restrictions and twists his fingers around the blond's, bringing Lucius' hand close to his heart. He cannot even convey the affection that simmers in his chest and always sends a shock of heat down his back. He feels protected, just as he makes Lucius feel safe.

"Sorry about that," Sirius says with a slight smile. "It's like an old ache that kicks in when it rains."

"There is nothing to be sorry for, Siri. Let's just talk about something else."

This is how Tom finds them, morose-looking and silent. Harry seems to perk up as he spots his husband, but Tom knows how much Harry loves him. However, the same cannot be said about the others. Sirius Black is an interesting character—foolish and reckless and almost entirely immune to the Dark Lord's menacing aura—but he is loyal and wholly devoted to those he loves.

Harry sends Tom a rather pointed look—one might say that it is a glare—and inclines his head towards the blond wizard sitting just a few seats away from him. The gesture is subtle and almost indistinguishable but Tom understands the meaning. He must right a wrong. He must be the one who yields this time.

The moment all but slips through his fingers when Lucius makes a move to stand, prepared to excuse himself, but Tom cannot abide the silence between them. He values Lucius, perhaps beyond the notion of a Dark Lord valuing a minion. No, he understands now that Lucius means a great deal more to him than just a servant to order around. He does not wish to call him a friend but cannot call him a son. It is all very complicated and draining for the mind, but he knows for certain that Lucius Malfoy is important to him.

Sirius shares a look with both Harry and Lucius but finds that his godson's eyes are sparkling with amusement. Lucius, however, seems cautious.

Finally, Tom breaks the odd silence and clears his throat. "Lucius, may we speak in private?"

The wizard's eyes seem to teem with an emotion. It is not anger. It is uneasiness that makes the silver colour of them seem sharp. But Lucius agrees, despite feeling wary. He does not wish to encounter a different sort of beast, so he follows.

They enter the Dark Lord's study and still remain silent. The tension builds up, prods them with its
jagged edges and plucks at their cords, but it fizzles out of them both as the Dark Lord says, "My actions and words were both deplorable and erroneous. I was blinded by arrogance; I once again believed myself to know the truth while, in reality, I was merely making assumptions based on nothing more than what I wanted the truth to be. I apologise for my conduct."

Lucius wishes he could mark down the date and time because never before has the Dark Lord uttered such words. It is even completely sincere. That much Lucius can see when he looks upon the man's face. In truth, Lucius believed him to be incapable of such emotions.

"I will understand if you wish to...leave." Tom forces out, his face pinched tight. He makes vague gestures with his hands and cannot believe he is saying it. An offer to leave his Inner Circle and his cause. It actually feels like chopping off his own limb. There is a smidgen of fear in him because Lucius might actually take the offer and leave the Dark Lord to handle everything on his own. The thought itself is enough to make his head explode in a gory spectacle. He'll truly go insane if he has to make plans without Lucius.

It is truly amusing to watch the fearsome Dark Lord twitch. Lucius considers it to be a top-five moment of strange things he has witnessed in his life.

Tom goes on, his scowl darkening, "Of course, it is not my desire to lose such a capable Death Eater, but I will respect your choice. It will be hard but I—we will manage. The Dark fraction will manage."

"Are you quite finished?"

Tom baulks. He struggles to control his temper because he really doesn't like Lucius' tone, but he understands that he has possibly lost Lucius' respect and loyalty. He has to swallow it down, no matter how bitter it feels. He offers a nod.

"Well then," the blond wizard says, his tone deliberately flat. "It seems I can finally take up embroidery now that you no longer require my services as a Death Eater."

Dark Lord or not, Tom's lips part and he stares rather slack-jawed. Lucius looks completely serious but he cannot be. He simply cannot be!

"For you to think that my loyalty is some fleeting fancy—"

Tom snaps, "But that's what you said! You told me that you could live without the Dark Mark on your arm. You all but denounced me, Lucius!"

"Yes, because I was angry. Besides, I did not think you to be so gullible to actually believe it."

"Provoking me is a foolish and cheap trick, Lucius. You of all people should know what I am like in a rage."

"I do believe I saw it first-hand when you cursed Sirius." Lucius snipes, feeling his own temper rise.

Tom pinches the bridge of his nose and exhaled loudly. "Yes, I was a horrible brute and I apologise for cursing Black. A miscalculation coupled with very confusing emotions I had not encountered before in my life. I truly did not understand the nature of your relationship. I only wanted to believe what I thought I knew, but now I know that I am not infallible."

The Dark Lord moves to the cabinet and pours himself a drink. He downs it all in one go and wipes his lips. There is a strange sensation in his gut. Like he is only now realising that he is, indeed, human. He can't always get it right. It's rather sobering. "I understand that your first loyalty is to
Black. I feel the same with Harry. So I cannot berate you for doing something I am guilty of myself. Emotions are...taxing."

The two wizards stand in silence for a few moments, the discomfiture spreading like wildfire in a dry grassland.

"I have been on this path for many years—too many to count—and I was alone for so long. You were barely seventeen when your father introduced you to me and I was already descending into madness. I thought you inexperienced, too fragile to survive among hardened wizards, but you shocked me. You were the most intelligent recruit in my ranks, a true Slytherin, and I knew you were going to be valuable to me. I did not teach you because I had to; I did it because I knew that I needed you."

"A seventeen-year-old student?" Lucius raised a brow. He is, of course, extremely flattered to hear it, but he can't show it to his Lord. Decorum must be maintained.

"I saw potential and I decided to cultivate greatness. You and Bella were my best students—ruthless, precise, astute. But you were always the level-headed one out of the two of you."

Lucius remembers his first years. He had been proud and haughty and utterly liberated. Sometimes he misses those years—less compromise and tact. However, he certainly doesn't miss the Dark Lord's insane ramblings and violent temper.

"But this one time, you disobeyed me. You challenged me. And I cursed you until you were choking on your own blood. But you stayed. Through the madness and the terrible raids and my inability. You stayed with me."

"I pledged myself to you." Lucius shrugs and doesn't feel the need to get into that right now. He remembers moments of doubt. Moments of pain and lack of faith in the wizard he called Master. He remembers clashing emotions and anger and even pity, but he never made the decision to desert the Dark Lord, even though he wanted to. He had no one growing up—just a fanatical father and an indifferent mother. The Dark Lord, while cruel and controlling, had played a greater part in his education and upbringing than Abraxas and his young empty-headed wife.

"I do not wish for you to stay by my side because you are required to. I want you to stay because it is something you want, Lucius. I do not need servants and mindless minions—I need advisors, supporters, friends..."

"Do you remember what my father said when he so eagerly presented me to you like a prized pet?"

Tom will never forget it. Abraxas had been loyal and devoted and completely vile. The man had promised his son to his Master; a loyal follower to be marked. But he had ideas above a simple marking and a spot in the Dark Lord's ranks. Abraxas had wanted to gift his Master with a young wizard of seventeen years of age as if his gift was nothing more than a pretty token. As if Lucius was nothing more than a combination of his pure blood and attractive features. An object of pleasure for the Dark Lord to use.

Abraxas had always imagined that making his heir kneel before the Dark Lord would gain him some sort of respect from his Master. Whether a marking took place or not hardly mattered to him; any mark would have done in Abraxas' mind. Bruises and blood on his son's fair skin would have been just as acceptable as the Dark Lord's mark.

The man had paid for his insinuations—Tom simply could not allow Abraxas to besmirch such a lovely thing. Despite his twisted nature and the sins clinging to him, Tom had never even considered
it, even though he had always admired exquisiteness. He says, "He expressed himself rather vividly. With those greedy eyes of his gleaming."

"He told you to enjoy his heir. His dainty heir who would look fetching on his knees."

Tom laughs. "Oh, but I did enjoy you. You were arrogant and terribly proud; I could not figure out how someone like you could hide such viciousness inside. I enjoyed teaching you and mentoring you. You cursed someone...someone who kept calling you doll-face. Who was that?"

"It was Avery." Lucius will never forget that idiot's face, mostly because he had disfigured it badly enough for the man to never look Lucius in the eye again. Avery had been nothing more than a simpering fool, cowering before the Dark Lord's feet. After the incident, he had started to cower before Lucius as well, keeping his eyes firmly on his own feet whenever he happened to be in the same room.

Tom, too, remembers Avery's sudden humbleness. Or rather the stench of fear that the wizard had on him. Of course, Avery had been a fool. He never did learn one of the most basic lessons from Herbology—that sometimes the most beautiful flowers are the most poisonous. It makes Tom feel a sudden rush of emotions. Memories and flashes of sentiment. It feels weird and wonderful. Of course, he remembers! The way Lucius had made him feel all those years ago—proud and protective. He had felt proud...like a parent when he had seen the teen progress. He had always shielded Lucius from his wrath and his explosive temper before he had lost all sense and his ability to function. Now he feels like he has unlocked some of those memories from his previous life as a madman. It seems easier to embrace it. "They all underestimated you at first. Most of them are no longer alive. I underestimate you as well—when I thought you would remain the same young man I mentored and guided."

"It must be that dreadful Gryffindor charm."

"Yes, the wretched, reckless lions." Tom muses. He sighs, looking at the other wizard. "Lucius, I—you are not just a Death Eater. You must see that, you must realise—"

The blond gives a quick nod, trying not to seem sappy and pathetic.

"This heart-to-heart will be the one and only, understand? I cannot have us acting like pitiable Hufflepuffs. Harry will never let me forget it."

Lucius snorts. "Sirius will likely demand more of such behaviour should he hear of this."

"To quote that harebrained dog—are we good?"

The blond wizard offers a curt nod. He feels overwhelmed but it is not a terrible feeling. Just unexpected.

*****

Dolores is by no means an intelligent witch. Yes, she is cruel and malicious and entirely too devious for her own good, but she is not overly smart.

She has a rather solid memory though. Of course, she remembers that wretched Potter boy. She certainly doesn’t regret using a Black Quill on the young wizard. Then again, had she known about the Dark Lord's rise, she would have been more subtle. After all, the boy is an enemy of the Dark Lord. Now, Dolores is not a Death Eater; Tom would never have such a monstrosity in his ranks.
However, Dolores is most certainly a dark witch. She wouldn’t mind getting into the torturing business. Children, creatures, beasts, half-breeds—it doesn’t even matter. She hates the lot of them.

The woman struggles against the bindings but she’s tightly bound and tucked away in a cell with metal bars. She’s been like this for hours; maybe even an entire day. It’s making her skin crawl. Screaming is pointless because the sound just bounces around the dungeon but never reaches further. And there really is no point to it because no one will come to her rescue. She recalls the smirking face of Sirius Black, but the wizard does not truly cause Dolores to flinch away in terror. Lucius Malfoy, however, makes the witch feel a jolt of fear. It’s still there, poking her spine and keeping her mind alert. Malfoy had thrown her before Potter’s feet like a cat presenting his master with a dead bird. It makes her queasy to think about the underlying meaning.

She shifts uncomfortably when someone enters the dungeons. She can hear footsteps but it is too dark to see anything but a figure moving down the stairs.

The witch lets out an indignant squawk, "I demand to see the Dark Lord! I will not be treated in such a deplorable manner."

A primitive part of her mind tells her that she should probably keep her mouth shut, but it is a tiny part compared to the rest of it that cannot overcome the audacity of those who have captured her like a common animal. She knows that Malfoy is loyal to Lord Voldemort and hopes that this is all a mistake. The witch flinches when her demand is answered with a dark and delighted chuckle. The figure certainly isn’t holding back and starts laughing in earnest.

"Did you hear what I just said? I want an audience with the Dark Lord. I have done absolutely nothing to be treated in such a manner. On what grounds have you imprisoned me? I have done nothing!" Dolores states, her voice rising to a shrill tone. "Free me at once! I demand to be released."

Harry feels almost giddy when he steps out of the shadows. "I am hurt, Dolores. Truly."

"Potter!" Dolores barks, her eyes wild. "How dare you—"

"You and I have something to settle. We had such a lovely time together. Just you and I...and that nifty little quill of yours. Don't you remember all the fun we had together? Granted, you were the one who had fun, you demented bitch. But no matter—we're going to make up for your lack of manners."

Dolores remembers the Quill. She also remembers a pack of centaurs almost mauling her to death. They had tried to *quarter* her, for Merlin's sake! "I was entirely right about you, Potter. You wretched boy! You terrible, appalling boy!"

"Here's the thing, *Dolores.*" Harry smirks. "I don't care what you think of me."

"The Dark Lord will kill you soon enough. You and your deranged godfather. You will all pay for this. I will personally request your head. You and Black and Malfoy—you'll regret this."

Harry lets the witch's rant buzz past him. He looks at the witch with a smile. "You're definitely not ready to beg yet. I'll come back when you're more...agreeable."

The wizard turns to leave but Dolores is a tenacious woman. "You will release me right this instant!"

"No, I don't think I will." Harry shrugs, his expression contemplative. "You know what? I might just keep you here until you starve to death. Or keep you alive, just barely, and we can have this stupid conversation until you're at your weakest. The possibilities are endless, you know. I'm like a kid who can't choose which Christmas present to open first. Lucky, lucky me."
"You've gone mad!"

"You really should have been nicer to me, Dolores. I mean, you just had to be a complete bitch, right? You couldn't help yourself and you just had to fuck with me. Well, this is a punishment of your own making. Enjoy."

Umbridge's yelling is like music to Harry's ears as he ascends the staircase and flicks his hand. The dungeons are once again dark. Harry only stops long enough to say, "Oh, and it's not Potter. It's Harry Riddle."

*****

With no Order to chase down, Tom feels like he can relax a little. Maybe enjoy a day of idleness and read a good book with a glass of his preferred brandy. He doesn't even feel like torturing anyone. It's a rather strange feeling.

But as soon as he actually decides to take a day off, Tom feels incredibly uncomfortable and anxious. He simply isn't built to enjoy indolence. When Harry walks into the study, a rather fetching smile on his face, Tom sits up.

"Okay, so... I have Dolores Umbridge in the dungeons. And I was wondering if you'd like to pay her a visit. She is incapable of shutting up and she keeps hollering for you because she thinks you're going to save her or something. Please come down with me and crush her hopes and dreams, love."

No book can ever compete with making lesser wizards and witches cry, so Tom agrees almost right away. "Why haven't you dealt with her yet? As I understand, she arrived yesterday."

"Because I don't want it to be over." Harry hums with a satisfied grin. "I'm going to let Bella play with her and then Sirius can have a go and I bet Fred an George want in on the fun as well. She targeted them as well. Oh, and Lucius gave me this cool new quill I want to try out."

"A vile woman." Tom grimaces. He knows perfectly well what the bitch had done to his husband. Even though he had been told about it after the incident, Tom had painted a rather large target on the witch's back. Harry had tried to suffer through Umbridge's unwanted attention without involving the Dark Lord, but later he had figured out that keeping important information from Tom was a bad idea. "I believe Severus called her a crimson abomination. He truly hates her."

"Everyone hates that bitch." Harry grins. "So, are you going to go down there and explain to her that she's completely f**ked?"

"Might as well," Tom sighs. He really has nothing better to do at the moment.

Harry smiles and runs his fingers down Tom's arm. "You do such wonderful things for me, husband."

Tom lets Harry lure him in. Sometimes he just wants to kiss the younger wizard and hold him close. Harry lets him, of course. He rather enjoys being kissed by his husband. Nuzzling the teen's neck, Tom says, "We have been invited to Malfoy Manor for supper."

"I know," Harry states, "Sirius already sent me a note. Isn't it nice to get along with people?"
Tom rarely admits to being wrong, especially when Harry starts gloating about being right, but he has to concede that resolving his issues with Lucius had made him feel more at ease. He feels invincible again; ready to crush the last of Dumbledore’s loyal dogs. He says to the younger wizard, "I would not describe it as nice. However, it is considerably less infuriating for me."

"Have some fun with the pink horror." Harry kisses Tom's cheek and adds, "But do not kill her. I know how excited you can get during a torture session. Restrain yourself, lover."

Tom's reply is a curt nod. He won't steal the moment from Harry. After all, the witch deserves to see Harry in all his glory and realise her mistake.

****

As a norm, Sirius dislikes stiff robes; anything that makes him look proper and pure-blood and puffed-up like a bloody ponce. But this is a formal event and one cannot wear Muggle clothing when the Dark Lord is coming to dinner. The wizard only allows it when those Muggle clothes are on his husband. Harry can get away with almost anything.

Sirius grabs a pair of trousers to go with the rest and walks out of the insanely massive wardrobe that is almost equal in size to the bedroom itself. In an instant, Sirius figures that something is wrong. He finds Lucius sitting on the bed, undressed and looking a bit too peaky. Now any other time, Sirius would have leered at all that luminescent perfection, but Lucius is clearly feeling unwell and Sirius pushes such thoughts back.

"Luce?" Sirius throws his trousers on the bed and settles before the man. Kneeling down, Sirius hooks his finger under the blond's chin and lifts it. "Everything all right? Do you need anything?"

Lucius shakes his head, unwinding under Sirius' touch. He feels strangely faint and there is an alarmingly queasy sensation rolling around inside. It is particularly odd because it has been bothering him since morning. The wizard doesn't recall eating or drinking anything out of the ordinary, although the last of the pain-relieving potions had tasted a tad off compared to the other five bottles Severus had brewed for him. It is the only explanation Lucius considers. "Severus must have added snakeroot to the potion."

"Well, I'll be having words with that greasy git." Sirius huffs and gets back on his feet. He runs his fingers through the blond's hair and plants a chaste kiss on his lips before he can protest about Sirius messing up the groomed tresses. "How about a relaxing bath to make you feel better? You can skip this dinner altogether if you want. Tommy can bugger off if he doesn't like it."

"I invited him and it would be terribly rude of me to neglect my guests. I do not want him to think that I am ignoring him. We've just started to mend our relationship."

"And I'm telling you that Tommy can bugger off if he doesn't like it." Sirius grins, ignoring Lucius' scowl. "I will graciously inform him of your absence should you wish to have an early night."

Lucius would very much like to burrow under the covers but he says, "No, I will attend."

"Fine, you stubborn arse." Sirius doesn't like it but he has to trust Lucius' judgement. "I'll draw you a bath anyway. We don't have to be anywhere for another hour or so."

An elf starts filling the bathtub as soon as Sirius suggests it and even places a towel on the edge of it.
Sirius feels compelled to follow the blond as he enters the bathroom in nothing but a flimsy dressing gown. Of course, he has to control himself as Lucius lets it slither on the floor and gets into the water. A look of pure bliss settles on the wizard's face. The water is hot but not scalding and the aromatic scent of rosemary and lavender rises with the steam. The water is opaque, likely from some fancy bath salt the elf had sprinkled into it.

Sirius is grateful for it because that way he will be less tempted. He doesn't mind treating Lucius with delicate hands as if the wizard might break, but controlling himself is rather hard. Right now he has to settle for innocent touches—well, maybe not so innocent.

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An hour later, Sirius enters the drawing room and spots Snape. He immediately feels an urge to stalk over. "Oi, Snape!"

Severus doesn't particularly want to be anywhere near Black, but Narcissa touches his arm and her eyes hold a clear warning. She will not have them fighting again.

"Aren't you supposed to be a Potion Master? If you're such a fucking expert at it then why the fuck did you put snakeroot in Luce's potion?"

Severus has to blink away the confusion. "I have no idea what you are blathering on about, mutt."

"The pain-relieving potions you made him—he says that the last one had snakeroot in it because he has been feeling sick to his stomach since he took it this morning." Sirius glares and goes on, "I wanted to send for a Healer but Lucius says that it will pass. The idiot doesn't even know what he's saying because he's clearly feeling like shite."

"I did not put snakeroot in his potions. I am perfectly aware of his aversion to it and that is why I made a pain-relieving potion with a substitute ingredient." Snape grits out with venom. "Unlike you, Black, I am an exceptional Potion Master and I do not make mistakes."

"Whatever," Sirius grunts, noticeably upset and frazzled. He cannot help himself and thinks about that dreadful night in St. Mungo's, sleeping next to Lucius' cold and unresponsive body. The thought of Lucius being sick again makes his blood run cold. He's not just feeling a bit under the weather; Sirius can tell that he's in pain. Seeing Lucius in pain is like taking a knife to his own insides and twisting it deep.

When Harry and Tom arrive, he walks over and greets them. In Lucius' absence, he has to step up and act like the pure-blood that he is. Harry gives his godfather a quick hug and then disappears from Tom's side. A moment later he appears again with Draco and the two settle on the sofa, talking animatedly.

The Dark Lord notices that Lucius is not there to greet him and raises a brow as if to ask. Sirius picks up on it almost right away and says, "Lucius isn't feeling well. Possible a bad reaction to a potion. He asked me to apologise to you for not attending."

"Acceptable," Tom says, feeling no need to get into it right now. He is sure that Lucius is, in fact, feeling unwell and not just trying to avoid him. Instead of questioning Black about the blond, he asks, "Tell me, Black—have you any plans to attend the next Wizengamot gathering?"
Sirius hates politics and says, "Actually, I'd rather fling myself off the Astronomy Tower."

"Perhaps after the meeting." Tom muses with a smirk. "As you know, I have decided to set up my candidacy. Scrimgeour will be announcing his departure first thing tomorrow."

"How do I fit into your plans then?"

Tom smiles a bit too widely. "You, my dear friend, will help me gain support. Lucius will introduce me tomorrow during the meeting. I will be taking over the Potter seat, seeing as Harry is my husband and does not wish to govern the seat himself. I will also govern the Lestrange seat until their name can be cleared and their sins wiped clean. At the moment, we have twenty-three seats in the Wizengamot that offer me unwavering support. However, that is not enough for me to win."

As a rule, members of the Wizengamot would want to avoid public upheaval and they will elect a new Minister to save face. Tom is counting on it.

"That gives you roughly four to five months to suck up to the rest of the Wizengamot."

"I will not give them that long. Once I take control of Harry's seat, I will announce my intentions."

Sirius laughs. "So you're just going to waltz in bright and breezy? Introduce yourself as Voldemort and slip them a voting pamphlet?"

"Dumbledore's little soldiers are dead or captured. The public no longer fears a war, for Scrimgeour has managed to defuse the tension and paint us in a better light. It will be remarkably easy to seize control of the Ministry with all our people in place. The wizarding community is not as light as you may believe. I will offer something the Ministry and the public need the most and they will not refuse."

"But why do I have to attend the Wizengamot gathering?"

Tom gives an annoyed reply. "Were you not listening, Black? I need you to openly support me when I announce my candidacy. I will be taking the Potter seat—your godson's seat—and you have to explicitly support me and make it look convincing. You have to make them think that you are my very best friend."

"All right, I get it. I can do that. We'll be best mates." Sirius nods. "Frankly, I thought you'd just slaughter the lot of them and declare yourself the king or something. Seems like a hassle to actually play nice with those geezers."

"The idea has merit," Tom says with a smile, "but I will first try diplomacy and play the political game."

*****

Dinner is understandably boring for Sirius. Mostly he just chats with Harry and Narcissa, allowing the delicious wine to flow down his throat. He doesn't truly enjoy the evening because Lucius isn't present and he is worried about the man. Sirius can't wait to go upstairs.

As the Dark Lord and Harry leave, Narcissa pulls Severus by the hand and they too disappear into their rooms. Sirius decides to ignore the obvious—that Narcissa is probably letting Snape touch her.
Draco disappears into the fireplace, having been invited to a night out with Blaise and Pansy.

The bedroom is dark when Sirius enters. Lucius is under the covers, a pillow tucked against his side. He shifts as Sirius slides in bed after a few minutes and runs his knuckles over the wizard's cheek.

"How was it?" Lucius asks, voice muffled by the pillow.

"Pretty boring. You were sorely missed," Sirius says. "Tommy wasn't as big of a prick about it as I thought he'd be and Snape claims that he didn't put snakeroot into any of your potions. I'm inclined to believe him because he looked like I had just offended all of his ancestors and his favourite house-elf all in one go."

Lucius doesn't care to think about it. He's no longer nauseous or lightheaded and he suffered through the painful stomach cramps without raising an alarm. The pain is gone now anyway so there really is no need to investigate it. Perhaps he did eat something that was off and just can't remember it or maybe it's just random indigestion.

"Are you feeling better now?" Sirius asks, his hand travelling down the blond's shoulder to his chest. He stops before going lower because he wants his touch to remain soothing.

Lucius moves closer to Sirius and lets the man pull him against his naked body. He's tired, the sudden dizzy spell and unexpected pain leaving him weary, but he wants to be close to Sirius. They haven't been fully intimate since the vicious attack; just tender touches, kisses and other altogether satisfying ways to reach the pleasurable peak. Sirius has been entirely too patient with him and Lucius wants it to stop. He wants to feel Sirius deep inside.

Sirius hums as Lucius lets his legs fall open, coaxing Sirius to settle between his spread thighs. "Are you sure, Luce? You shouldn't—"

"Siri, do shut up." Lucius doesn't let the man get another word out. "I want you to fuck me right now."

"Well, since you asked so nicely—" Sirius smirks and happily slots himself in place. His cock, thick and aching already, is pressed up against Lucius' thigh. He drifts in a sleepy haze as well, but he jolts awake when he feels nimble fingers wrapping around his cock, gliding up from the base to the sensitive tip. Lucius knows how to drive him absolutely insane. His hand twists around Sirius' jutting erection and smooths the length with just enough pressure. The wizard lets out a satisfied purr of a sound that hitches as Lucius swipes his thumb over the glistening head. "Fuck, Luce..."

The blond wants a lazy fucking and he's going to get it. It doesn't take Sirius more than a few moments to gather his senses. He wants to admire and adore every inch of Lucius; his exquisite body is docile under Sirius' hands, but only because Lucius wants it as such. Sirius works two fingers inside the other wizard and grins. Lucius' mouth falls open just a little and there is a moan on his lips ready to fall.

Sirius has always had fantasies about spreading the wizard open on a lavish bed decked out in silk and to truly be able to do it makes his lungs close up a little. He needs to worship every part of the blond wizard. He wants to adore the body he has been so willingly offered before he can move further. Lucius looks at him with darkened eyes, a sliver of awareness still present even if the rest of him is too far gone to acknowledge anything other than lust and Sirius' maddening touches.

When Sirius finally sinks inside the compliant body, compelled to go as deep as he can, Lucius tenses and whimpers. Sirius has him in a snare; he is above him, around him, within him and it is untainted bliss. The wizard moves leisurely, dragging his cock out and slipping it back in with
agonising slowness—it is infuriating and equally satisfying. Sirius creates a cocoon of warmth and acceptance; he pulls Lucius so close that they might as well be of one body. He's in the very blood that runs through Lucius' veins—a disease as well as a remedy.

They don't speak. Sirius makes almost no sound as he moves and controls every ounce of pleasure Lucius receives. The blond doesn't make any intelligent sounds—only desperate whispers and keening noises that speak of utter sublimeness.

Sirius wants to offer himself up wholly and never leave. He whispers words of devotion as if it is a spell to bind them. Nothing has ever felt more transcendent than the moment he is in, as close as he can ever be to another human being. He shudders and aches as Lucius trembles beneath him; trembles around him. He can feel every sensation as if it belongs to him. Lucius all but shatters underneath him—entirely wrecked, overwrought and incoherent as Sirius keeps striking the oversensitive spot inside without any mercy.

The whole of Sirius' body quakes as he buries himself to the hilt and a growl rips free from his chest unbidden. The headiness of the magic enfolds them; pulsing with energy like it did during their first night together. It is not the same but it is just as fertile and unyielding. The incessant force is less sharp and more inviting, but it fills them both.

Sirius doesn't want to move, partly because his entire body feels limp and heavy, but mostly because he enjoys the closeness. Lucius seems to want it as well because he almost curls around Sirius, looking for a warm spot on his chest. Pleasantly exhausted, Sirius closes his eyes and inhales the sweet scent of his lover. Lucius seems to be asleep already.

So perhaps it is quite understandable that they miss the echo of a different sort of magic—and the faint glow of it sinking into Lucius.

Chapter End Notes

A bit of a spoiler for you...that future mpreg tag? Well, the future is now. If this isn't to your liking, I'm sorry to see you go, dear reader.
The special assembly chamber one floor above the courtrooms sees a slow trickle of Wizengamot members throughout the morning. By now almost everyone knows that Minister Scrimgeour has stepped down. He had given a brief statement for the gathered reporters and assured the public that there really is no need for worrisome thoughts. He is well and hopes to leave the office in the hands of a capable and worthy wizard—of course, he doesn't use the words 'Dark Lord' or 'Voldemort' in his speech.

The whole of Wizengamot is understandably upset. Perhaps upset is a strong word for their annoyance, but they are dangerously close to panicking.

As the heavy doors close behind the last member's back, Barnaby Thornwise, the current Chief Warlock, settles into his seat and waits for the chatter to die down.

The dissonance is evident in the very design of the room. It is circular and divided in the middle—left side and right side clearly separated. The right side with its twenty-six seats is a mirror image of the left side across from it. The only difference is that the right side is occupied by mostly Light wizards and randomly selected wizards and witches while the left side is wholly dominated by pure-bloods who have inherited their seats.

Sirius sits there, utterly smug as he stretches his arms across the backrests and marks his seats. He has his seats now, even though getting them back had been a tricky venture. Many of the people sitting in his seats had not been very accommodating, trying to hold on to a bit of power. After being forced to pay a fine of eight hundred Galleons, no one truly wished to stay.

So now Sirius has his seats and his twelve votes. He is joined by Greengrass, Parkinson and Nott who all sit one row below him. But they are not as important as the man sitting next to him. Tom Riddle is not someone many remember; most are dead already and those few who still live will not say a word. He has no seat of his own; the Gaunt family lost their two seats long ago. He does, however, govern two seats—the Potter seat and the Lestrange seat. As he allows his eyes to roam around the chamber, he leans in and asks Sirius, "Should I be worried, Black? Lucius is once again absent."

Sirius grumbles. "I forced him to stay in bed. Whatever the hell was wrong with him last night seems to linger, I'm afraid. I wanted to get a Healer to check him but he insists that it will pass on its own and that I'm being too dramatic. Hah, as if!"

"Black, if there is one thing I know about Lucius it is his ability to downplay. He does not do well with any sort of weakness."

Sirius seems to agree and nods.

"It could be some sort of unknown side-effect of the recent strain to his magical core. If it does not go away on its own, perhaps it would be prudent to consult with the Healers," Tom advises, his brow developing a crease. He, too, is worried about the blond wizard because he knows how unforgiving
magic can be in certain circumstances. Any sort of magical attack can damage a wizard's magical core. Of course, he does not voice his concern. Black might start whimpering like a dog left in the rain.

The Chief Warlock starts the meeting as silence finally dawns. The first order of business is to check whether they have a quorum—which they have—and to introduce new members. Not that there are a lot of new faces. This is not Sirius' first time, so he gets to sit comfortably as the Chief Warlock gets to business.

The Potter seat, unsurprisingly, had been governed by Dumbledore. Or rather through a Dumbledore flunky. One of the many things he had stolen from Harry. So it is perhaps shocking to some when the Chief Warlock declares that the Potter seat has been claimed by Harry Potter, the last remaining male family member and current Lord Potter.

The noise level increases. Sirius and Tom see a lot of frowning faces. As far as the public is aware, Potter is either dead, captured, in a monastery, in an asylum or hiding. They don't know anything about Harry Potter, just that he has not been seen for years. Now they find out that the Potter seat has been claimed—it makes them all curious and a bit paranoid.

Thornwise has to bang his hammer to call for order. Tom stands up, deliberate and plenty menacing, and the entire room falls silent at once. He had hoped for Lucius to introduce him, making it into a bit of power play, but Black is the next best thing. In fact, having more seats, Sirius is the most influential member and Tom's best shot.

Sirius feels delighted as he announces, "My godson's representative, Lord Gaunt."

Tom had taken Lucius' advice and claimed the lordship for himself. The goblins had verified his bloodline, deeming him a legitimate heir to the title. The male line, usually named the heirs, might be gone thanks to Tom, but he is a Gaunt through his mother and the goblins could find no decree that would have stopped him from claiming the title of Lord Gaunt. Unfortunately, it is just the title and a few pretty trinkets in a forgotten vault, for the Gaunt line had squandered everything. The lordship is a formality, a name that used to come with a vast fortune and lands, but Tom hardly cares for that. He just needs the title.

The people present in the assembly either know of the Gaunt line or not. By the looks of it, most have no idea that such a family line exists.

Augusta Longbottom, however, is old enough to know better—or rather remember. She is quick to say, "Morfin Gaunt, heir to the House of Gaunt, died in Azkaban, That family ended with him."

"And yet it lives on," Tom comments, pinning the old woman with a pointed look. "The goblins in Gringotts have acknowledged my claim. Do you doubt their integrity and astuteness?"

No one wants to offend a goblin or anything goblin-related because they don't want to feel the executioner's axe against their neck.

"My bloodline is not something to be discussed, Madam Longbottom. I am here as Harry Potter's representative. He has officially authorised me to govern his seat. I also govern the Lestrange seat."

"How do we know this isn't a trick?" Augusta snipes. "The Potter boy has been missing for several years; no one has seen him and he doesn't attend Hogwarts."

Sirius notes, "No, you haven't seen him."

"I have here," the Chief Warlock says, picking up a scroll of parchment, "Mister Potter's signed
permission which states that Lord Gaunt will govern his seat and act as his legal representative until further notice. Madam Longbottom, I have verified this and it is Harry Potter's signature. Everything is in order."

Augusta scoffs. She can't prove that it isn't Potter's signature. The meeting goes on and Thornwise states the first and most urgent matter that needs to be tackled—finding a new Minister.

Almost immediately the Light side starts chattering amongst themselves and they really do look like rowdy children. Someone even says that the Minister should be a wizard like Dumbledore.

Sirius waits until the Chief Warlock silences the chamber again before he speaks up. "Do any of you even know the sort man Dumbledore was? He seemed all right, didn't he? Dedicated and steadfast, a strong leader with strong morale, right?"

Many people nod along, mentally singing praise to the man.

"He had you all fooled then if you didn't see the rotten soul inside. He manipulated and schemed, always ready to make sacrifices."

Augusta Longbottom gets on her feet, her eyes burning. "You dare insult Albus Dumbledore! A man who did more for us than anyone before him. A man who defeated Grindelwald himself. A man who fought for what is right and good, what is Light. You are no one to even speak his name with your vile tongue."

Sirius is amused more than anything. "Oh, you mean the same man who allowed an innocent wizard to be carted off to prison, fully knowing that said wizard had not done anything to deserve it? The man who willingly sent a young boy to live with his horrible Muggle relatives just so he could control the boy and guide him as he wanted to?"

Another elderly member pipes in with fury, "Dumbledore always fought for Light wizard and witches; he fought for justice and peace."

Barnaby Thornwise gives his little hammer a mighty workout as he bangs the thing against the stand. "Honoured members of the Wizengamot, we are not here to reflect on Albus Dumbledore's misgivings or deeds. Please refrain from interrupting the assembly with unnecessary comments about irrelevant matters."

"No, I will not be silenced," Augusta's craggy voice booms around the chamber. She points an accusing finger at Sirius and goes on, "That man is a criminal, a scoundrel. You, Black, are not even half the man Albus was. You and your lot, that devil-spawned Black nest of vipers you call your family, are a disgrace. Your blood may be pure but you are all filled with poison. Wretched dark wizards and witches like you and your kin are the reason a good man is no longer alive to fight against your plague."

Then she spits at the man, even though it doesn't reach him. The message, however, does.

"That almost sounded like a threat, dear Augusta." Sirius grins, leaning forward with interest. "You know, there are advantages to being—what was it?—a devil-spawned Black in a nest of vipers. Should I declare a blood feud with the Longbottom family, I will most certainly come out on top. You know that, don't you?"

Augusta pales and her hand tightens into a fist.

"The only reason for my benevolence right now is the fact that your grandson is a sensible and bright young man and I have no quarrel with the future of House Longbottom." Sirius silkily informs the
old crone. "Now, I would very much like to proceed with this assembly. I have other things to do than listen to this rubbish."

The Chief Warlock nods and tells Augusta Longbottom to sit down and control her tongue. Before he can begin listing the order of things that need to be discussed, Edwin Brown's interrupts again and asks in a rather tinny voice, "I would like to know how Sirius Black is even allowed to take part in this assembly. The man is a criminal."

"Lord Black was cleared of all charges because it was proven that Peter Pettigrew framed him for those murders. He is a respectable member of wizarding society." Barnaby gives a sort of irritated huff and says, "Furthermore, Lord Black is a member of the Wizengamot. This is not a new development, Mister Brown, but rather a correction that has finally been made. You would know that if you had taken part in the last meeting. The previous Chief Warlock, Mister Dumbledore, decided to hand out the Black Family seats as if they were his to give. He then filled them with people associated with his personal vigilante group called the Order of the Phoenix. I ask that you make your own conclusions."

There is a beehive of whispers after that, some looking at each other with confusion and others grinding their teeth together.

The meeting goes on, for about two seconds because Augusta Longbottom is like a dog with a bone —and Sirius does not appreciate the comparison. She would give any dog a bad name. "The Order of the Phoenix is an organisation that fights against dark scum—something Lord Black ought to know a lot about."

Sirius can put up with a lot of crap. He can be a very patient man when he wants to be, but the hag sitting across from him makes it damn hard. He can see that Tom is near his breaking point as well.

Sirius gives the chamber a quick look. He shares a look with the Dark Lord and says, "I call for the removal of Augusta Longbottom, seeing as she is more interested in insulting a fellow member of the Wizengamot than taking part in truly important matters. Her behaviour is most unbecoming."

"I second that motion." Tom raises his hand and smirks.

The Chief Warlock has no choice but to ask, "All in favour of removing Augusta Longbottom from his assembly, please raise your hand."

Lords Nott, Greengrass and Parkinson all raise their hands, contributing a combined four votes. Tom gives his votes—the Potter and Lestrange vote—and that adds another two. Of course, Sirius with his twelve feels incredibly smug. They have eighteen votes.

"You don't have enough votes, Black!" Longbottom gives a victorious smile.

"Actually, I do." Sirius grins. "You see, in Lord Malfoy's absence, I also preside over the seats belonging to the House of Malfoy. I believe that means another five votes, Chief Warlock? That gives us twenty-three votes against your twenty votes."

Since everything is in order, Barnaby whacks his hammer and says, "Lord Black's motion has been sustained. Madam Longbottom, you are hereby banned from today's assembly and will not be able to vote on today's motions. Have a good day, Madam."

One can see it in her eyes that she wants to scratch Black's eyes out, but she still feels like a dignified lady and chooses not to make a scene. Not that anyone cares. Most of the people sitting in the same boat as Augusta feel a sudden need to go on a long holiday. It is uncommon for the pure-bloods to
have a majority, but many of the members filling in a seat for six years do not always attend. It happens with Muggle-borns who often travel between the wizarding world and the Muggle world. Most of the people are truly seat-fillers.

The meeting goes on as soon as she leaves and Sirius feels a sudden giddy rush. All that power might go to his head one day.

Tom leans in. "Well played, Black."

"She was bloody annoying. And I will not allow that batty old crone to insult me as if I'm some kid."

"Indeed. She is most troublesome. Alas, killing her will upset Harry's friend and that, in turn, will upset Harry. I like certain parts of my body as they are."

"Harry can be very vindictive. Gets that from his mum."

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Sirius is about to leave the Ministry when he spots Bill in the Atrium. But he is not alone; in fact, Sirius is rather surprised to see his companion.

Arthur Weasley looks a bit haggard and apprehensive. Bill seems to reassure him with a hand on his shoulder but the man still looks cautious.

Now Sirius has nothing against Arthur; he's a decent bloke. But he has no idea if Arthur is yet another Dumbledore fan-boy hiding in plain sight. He may appear meek, but Sirius truly has no idea what the man supports and how deep his involvement really is. He decides to test it out, seeing as they are in public and Bill is present.

Arthur sees him approach and there is a wary sort of look in his eyes. Bill greets Sirius with a friendly smile. "This is a surprise. You're a proper wizard now?"

"Frankly, I'd rather be home. But I was bullied into attending the Wizengamot session."


Almost everyone knows of it by now because the Ministry is not immune to gossip. Sirius doesn't want to get into that and instead turns to the other man. "Arthur."

The man is definitely alert and seems a tad nervous. "Hello, Sirius...everything all right with you?"

"Depends really," Sirius says. He shares a look with Bill and says, "I don't know what Bill here has told you, but I'm pretty fucking pissed off."

"Sirius, I—" Arthur swallows hard, eyes suddenly fearful. "You must believe me. Molly, she—I had no idea that she...I would never condone such actions."

Sirius feels like the man is telling the truth but he can't be sure. "Yeah? And why should I believe you? You're telling me that you had no idea that your wife and her chums fucking tortured another human—someone I love with my entire being—until I couldn't even be sure whether he'd make it?"

"All my life, I've tried to do the right thing. Albus...I believed him. I know I was blind and foolish. I
thought I was doing the right thing by joining the Order. I thought Dumbledore had all the answers. I thought Harry was safe with his Muggle relatives. I just believed everything I was told."

Bill sighs, "Dad—"

"No, I need to tell him." Arthur shakes his head. "Sirius, I am sorry for being ignorant. For never having a mind of my own. I should have questioned Dumbledore's motives, his plans and his words. I know you find it hard to believe and I do not blame you for doing so, but I didn't know that they were planning to kidnap someone. I haven't really been involved with the Order's business for months now. It's too much. I just want to live in peace."

"So you're done with the Order, just like that?"

Arthur gives a resolute nod. "Yes. I don't want to lose any more of my children. I want to be able to breathe easy and not look over my shoulder for the rest of my life."

"That's up to Harry."

That gains Arthur's attention.

"Look, you're not a bad sort, Arthur. You got caught up in some bad shit with Dumbledore and you're married to one seriously crazy bitch, but there is no accounting for taste. If you really want to be left alone, you need to make peace with Harry. Enough Weasleys have betrayed him and he's not all that trusting of you and your lot."

The man nods, understanding what Sirius is saying. Not that Arthur minds; he has let the young wizard down many times. The boy had saved his life once and he had been a weak man undeserving of his help. "If Harry is willing, I would like to see him and apologise."

"We'll see what happens." Sirius really can't tell the man anything else. He can't decide for Harry. He says to Bill. "Your brothers are coming for lunch. You might want to come along and make sure they don't blow anything up. Cissy won't mind flaying their skinny hides if they make a mess."

"They probably like having their arses flayed."

Arthur clears his throat and says, "I must be off. Please tell Harry that he can owl me. If he doesn't want to see me, I will understand. But please, tell him that I am sorry."

Sirius will deliver the message and nothing more. Harry has to sort it out himself. They watch Arthur walk towards the Ministry fireplaces.

"He didn't have anything to do with what happened to Malfoy. He's been staying in Shell Cottage for the past month; trying to stay away from everything I reckon. He's not a bad man."

"I believe that he didn't know but can you say for certain that your father will settle down and never attempt some sort of coup?"

Bill snorts. "It's my dad we're talking about. He's a follower, not some sort of rebellion leader. He wants to tinker with his Muggle junk and end the night with a nice cup of hot tea. There is nothing to fear."

"Do you want to know what we're going to do with your mum?" Sirius asks.

"Honestly?" Bill muses with a slight wince, "I'm all for ignoring it. She's my mother but I don't want to think of this woman as the same woman who read me bedtime stories and kissed my bruises as a
"You know, my mum was a cranky, sanctimonious bitch. She hated me and I bet she wanted to leave St. Mungo's without me. Maybe leave me in Knockturn Alley for some vagrant to find. It's okay to have a disappointing mother."

"What's going to happen to her?" Bill asks the question without really wanting to know the answer. "Are you going to kill her?"

Sirius smirks. "I definitely want to kill her. Grind her up to dog chowder, bones and all. It would make my day to see her pay for hurting Lucius. But consider this—Harry sees you as a big brother. And that means that I will be made into dog chowder if I upset you. Harry is protective of those he considers family. He's vicious and he has the best set of puppy eyes I've ever seen. So it is safe to say that even though Harry loathes Molly, she'll remain mostly intact because she's your mum."

"She should be punished," Bill remarks. "I'm not a big fan of Malfoy but I'm not into the whole 'an eye for an eye' revenge. Mum tortured someone. It doesn't matter that it was someone I don't particularly like anyway. And she will never stop this ridiculous fight. She won't disappear. If anything, she'll want revenge for Ron."

"That's why Harry is binding her magic. She will live as a Squib. That way she'll be harmless in the grand scheme of things and you won't lose your mum. Who knows, maybe she'll calm down and take up gardening instead."

Bill lets out a small laugh. He knows what Molly can be like. She'll definitely harbour some type of revengeful feelings for a while, if not forever.

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Dolores cries harder as the invisible scalpel-like blade carves into her skin again. Tears, fresh and dried, blotch her face as her body is compelled to move. She holds the feathered Black Quill in her right hand and grinds her teeth together as it moves unbidden.

'I must not torture children' is carved into the back of Dolores' hand. But not only her hand. The lines are all over her body, angry red and deep. A simple modification had made the Quill a lot more fun for Harry to use.

"I don't think you're really trying," Harry notes from his comfortable seat. Dolores is hunkered on the floor by his feet, grimy and gaunt. Her hair is tousled and sticking out from under her bow. She looks quite wretched.

Dolores is ready to pass out but the young wizard will never allow it. So she just writes the lines, over and over and over again until blood dribbles into her eyes from the cuts on her forehead. Her annoyingly high voice comes out creaking and hoarse.

Harry is rather enjoying it. There is a tight knot of hate in his chest as he watches the witch with indifferent eyes. "Actions have consequences, dear Dolores. Tit for tat."

"Please...please, I cannot. No more. I beg you."

"You can't handle it? You can't take any more?" Harry leans closer, his mouth twisted into a sneer.
"A weak, pathetic bitch. You did it to me, remember? You did it to my friends. You sat there with a smile on your face and you enjoyed it. You fucking delighted in my pain."

"I'm sorry...please, Potter. No more." the witch babbles, snot running down her chin. Her face is set in a painful grimace and her eyes are red. The skin on her body is covered with gouges and lacerations. "Stop this."

"I want another hundred lines," Harry tells the witch. "I want you to write 'I will never again hurt another living thing in my life', and it better be in fucking cursive."

Sobbing openly, Dolores is forced to do it. The scratching of the quill against the parchment is the only sound in the room after Harry silences the woman's howling.

Dolores will never hurt anyone because she'll likely die soon. Harry doesn't want to kill her but Tom still wants his share and no amount of torture will satisfy the man. He takes Harry's well-being very seriously.

When Sirius walks into the room, he doesn't even notice the witch suffering before Harry's feet. He just sidesteps her and plants his backside down on the sofa. He looks pleased.

Harry smiles, turning his eyes away from Dolores and her bloody doodles. "You look smug. Whose bowl of kibble did you piss in?"

Sirius hums, rather pleased with himself. "I had Augusta Longbottom kicked out from the assembly."

"She's a self-righteous bitch so I'm guessing she deserved it."

"Well, she did call me a criminal, a devil-spawned Black, a disgrace and a plague, but I think the last remark was meant for all of us evil dark wizards running around with our evil wands and evil cackles, promoting all sorts of evilness," Sirius tells the younger one with a grin. He finds it incredibly amusing. It's considered part of Dumbledore's propaganda and Augusta has definitely ingested enough of Dumbledore's shite while trying to crawl up the man's arse. "Oh, and Tom did well. Very menacing."

Harry snorts to himself, but he is glad to hear it. "I was afraid that he would just kill everyone and declare himself the Emperor of Magic."

"No, he actually managed to keep his wand tucked away," Sirius notes and then nods towards the witch on the floor. "Having fun?"

"You know, I thought I wouldn't like it but it's actually growing on me. Torturing is Tom's bread and butter, but I'm rather enjoying myself right now. She's so charmingly thin-skinned; started crying after the first ten lines. She's the type that can dish it out but not take it. Pitiable really."

Dolores whimpered, her hand starting to cramp. She has roughly forty or so lines to go, but she's feeling lightheaded already and the pain is intolerable. The only thing she can see properly is the young wizard's satisfied smile. Black looks at her as if she is no better than a pile of steaming dung.

"Lucius did say that she's a fucking nightmare. Not very nice to look at and with a voice that would even ward off Dementors." The man grins and adds, "You should let Fred and George have a go. They have a really big box of stuff they want to test, but they're too soft to use it on people they like."

"Snape wanted to torture her a bit but he changed his mind. Said that he'd rather not see her again and that I should feed her to something that has big teeth—so literally anything that lives in the
Forbidden Forest qualifies as a meat grinder in his book." Harry asks, "Do you want her for a bit?"

Sirius shrugs. "I have better things to do than waste my time and energy on someone like her, but you have fun, Pup." The wizard gets up and moves around the woman. "I should head home and check on Lucius."

Harry frowns. "Is everything all right?"

"It's likely nothing too serious but I just worry. It has only been a week since the attack and Lucius isn't fully recovered yet. I mean, yeah, he's back to his old snooty, pompous self, but physically and magically he's still getting his strength back."

"Nothing a little loving care won't solve. Look after your man, Siri."

Sirius lets it go for a moment, remembering something else he needed to discuss with Harry. "I saw Arthur. He's regretful."

"Do you think it's genuine?" Harry asks, his face impassive.

"Honestly? Yes, I think he means it. He hasn't been involved with the Order recently; he's been staying in his cottage, away from everyone. I believe him; that he wants to be left alone by both side; that he was a fool to believe Dumbledore; that he is sorry for letting you down."

Sirius sighs. "I think he just wants some peace. And to apologise to you for being a shitty person; someone who trusted blindly and allowed a child to suffer instead of having a backbone himself."

"I don't think Arthur is a bad person," Harry says, letting his emotions show on his face, "but he is just another grown-up who didn't care enough to take action. He chose to follow Dumbledore. That makes him a weak man; a man who tags along because he doesn't have a mind of his own."

Of course, Harry doesn't really hate Arthur. He is disappointed. Arthur, a father himself, should not have trusted the word of a man known to manipulate. Arthur, who had never blamed Dumbledore for his daughter's death, had essentially abandoned another child in need. The twins had told him about the bars on his windows and about never having enough food, and yet Arthur had dismissed those claims as something untrue, as something a child would make up to get more attention. That is what Dumbledore had told Harry; it had all been a cry for attention. A child's imagination running wild. Everyone else had believed Dumbledore.

Harry doesn't have a clear idea of what he wants to say to Arthur or if he even wants to say anything at all. "I don't want to talk about this. Not right now."

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to do, Harry."

Harry gives the man a nod, thanking him for understanding.

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After the elves take Dolores away, popping out of the room with the woman's battered body, Harry feels a sense of accomplishment. He feels incredibly good. And surprisingly horny.

He finds Tom in his study, quill in hand. The man's brow is furred in concentration as he works. Harry doesn't know or announce his presence; he just rounds the desk and slides into Tom's lap,
hands slithering around the man's neck.

"Can I help you with something, dearest?" Tom asks, placing the quill on the desk. He doesn't mind his husband's interruption.

"Well, I have this problem, you see." Harry licks his lips. "Something only you can help me with, in fact."

Curious but not entirely unaware, Tom raises a brow. "Oh, a problem only I can help you with, is it?"

Harry nods, moving his hips forward a little so that he could grind his arse down on Tom's lap. "It's a hard one, Tom."

"Easily solvable, I'm sure."

"Are you, by any chance, interested in solving it for me? I suppose I can take care of it myself, but where's the fun in that...besides, you are much better at handling this type of problems."

Tom's hands cannot be stopped as they wrap around the younger wizard, greedy but gentle as they roam freely. Harry's back tenses as Tom's eager hands map his sides and come to rest on the curve of his backside. This problem needs urgent solving in Harry's opinion because it is difficult, not to mention discomforting, to walk around the house with a rather noticeable tent in front of his jeans. And his jeans are very tight. Torture doesn't usually affect him in any way; he's seen enough of it. But there is something thrilling about having all the power and control.

"Take off your clothes," Tom says, his voice no longer controlled and teasing. It has a gruffness to it that speaks of his rising arousal. It is not a suggestion or a request; it's an order.

Harry is no fool; he can see the heat in Tom's eyes, hear the lust coating his tongue as he speaks. And there really is nothing better than seeing Tom Riddle, prim and proper Dark Lord, lose himself in the overwhelming pleasures of the flesh.

As Harry gets his shirt pulled over his head and moves to undo his jeans, Tom lets out a faint growling noise, like a wild beast waiting for the rabbit to hop on its dinner plate. He is an impatient man when Harry and naked are put together. With a quick flick of Tom's wrist, Harry finds himself completely starkers. And Tom wastes no time in pushing everything off his desk.

When he has Harry sitting on the desk, legs falling open, Tom purrs like a sated jungle creature. "My, my, my—what a delightful problem." He is, of course, referring to Harry's very erect cock standing proudly from a patch of neat dark hair. Lowering himself back into his chair, Tom pulls Harry to the very edge of the desk and leaves a trail of feather-light kisses on the underside of the flushed member. Lapping at someone's cock like a hungry kitten is not something Dark Lords do—and the few who would say otherwise are properly dead by now. But Harry deserves and demands to be worshipped; Tom cannot help himself.

"Would it be completely weird if I said that torturing that pink monstrosity made me inappropriately hard?"

Tom chuckles, his lips just grazing the head of Harry's cock. "Torturing someone can give you an incredible high."

"Seeing her suffer, making her suffer...I felt power over her; it was like being filled with exquisite magic. It felt sublime," Harry says, his brow raised. "It's fucked up, isn't it?"
"Your magic reacted to it. She caused you pain. She deserves to feel pain in return. Having that sort of power over someone, being in control—it feels good."

Harry smirks. "Not as good as your mouth. Please don't tease me right now. I'm too giddy to function; I need you to fill me up."

Tom's lips close around the dark pink head of Harry's cock and he sucks him down nice and slow, hollowing his cheeks in tandem with his tongue caressing the hot length. Harry's stomach clenches each time Tom takes him deep, his thighs quiver as Tom's throat contracts around the head. But it's not what Harry wants or needs right now.

He gives Tom a slight push, waiting for him to pull off. And he does so with a rather obscene noise and a trail of spit dripping from his swollen lips. It is not often that he gives his husband such pleasure, so he quirks his head a little as if to ask why Harry won't allow him to pleasure him.

"I want you to fuck me, Tom," Harry all but whines. He enjoys everything Tom does with him but he needs more. He craves something far more satisfying from the man. Harry doesn't even let Tom undress; he just needs his cock. He allows Tom to push his trousers down a little before he wraps his fingers around the smooth, pink length and rubs the tip with his thumb. Tom does mutter a wandless lubrication charm before Harry straddles his lap and guides him inside. The tight grip of Harry's body takes some of the air out of Tom's lungs and Harry himself falls forward into Tom's waiting arms, shuddering and tensing up as if his body has been plunged into cold water.

"Is this what you want, love?" Tom nuzzles Harry's neck, his control slipping just a little as he gives an experimental thrust. "You need me to fuck you, Harry?"

Harry squirms in his lap but nods.

"I think you need to fuck yourself on my cock; just like this...until you can't hold it anymore."

The incredible tightness is still present but Harry lifts himself up, only to fall back down with a sharp hiss leaving his lips. Tom's cock presses deep, brutal and deliciously hot. He lets Harry work for his own pleasure, but it's not like he simply sits there and enjoys the ride. Tom lets Harry cling to his body, fingers twisted in his robe. He grinds up as Harry lowers himself; he moves his hands to Harry's arse, spreading his cheeks and picturing the indecent view of his cock slipping in and out.

Harry is determined. He moves with precision and conserved energy. There is a wicked gleam in his green eyes as he grinds down, knowing how sensitive his husband's cock must be by now. A moan bubbles in his throat as Tom takes over and plunges up, again and again, each time hitting the same spot. There is a sense of heaviness in Harry's limbs; he can't even keep himself upright. Tom lifts him on the desk, pushes him flat on it and drives inside with enough force to rattle Harry's teeth.

They don't speak. Harry babbles nonsense between broken moans and deprived whines. Tom, however, is fully concentrated on thrusting into the body below him; he can feel Harry trembling, overly sensitive all over. A bead of sweat rolls down Tom's neck and that is the only sign of his exertion. He is perfectly composed, in control of every ounce of pleasure Harry receives.

He keeps moving even when Harry's arse convulses around his cock. He squeezes everything out of the younger man as he keeps up pumping his hips, Harry's lovely keening and throaty moans like music to his ears. When his release crashes into him, heady and blinding, Tom slows his movements down to a lazy caress. Harry drapes his arms around his neck as he leans down. He mumbles sweet nothings as Tom regains his breath and some feeling back into his legs.

"I love you."
Tom slumps into the chair, pulling Harry snugly into his lap. "And I you, husband."

"I love you even though you're a bloody dictator," Harry adds, his eyes closed, lips mouthing lazy kisses against the wizard's neck. "I'm having a nap now. Don't you dare move."

"And you have the gall to call me a dictator."

Harry hums. "Shut up. Pillows don't usually speak. Be a proper pillow for your adoring spouse."

*****

Dolores screams—no, she howls all damn night, curled up on the cold stone floor of her prison cell. She has a blanket pulled over her shoulders, but she's cold and she aches. She bleeds like a slaughterhouse pig. There is no telling whether it's morning or night or what day it is. To her, it seems as if she has been at Potter's mercy for days now. Weeks even. Her throat is sore for yelling, face blotchy and swollen from crying and the small cuts. In fact, death seems like a very good option right about now.

She's startled awake when she hears noises. Quickly, she crawls into a corner and pulls the blanket over herself, in a childish attempt to hide. But this time they are not here for her.

Molly Weasley is in the cell next to her, drifting in and out of wakefulness. The elves keep popping into her cell with potions to calm and silence her. She's mostly asleep because she tends to make a lot of unnecessary noise. Dolores recognises her. They went to school together, although she had been a few years older and they had never even said one word to another. She knows that this is the wife of Arthur Weasley, an insignificant little busybody in the Ministry, tinkering with Muggle crap in the cafeteria and droning on and on about useless stuff.

Dolores flinches when she sees the Dark Lord. The wizard had cursed her relentlessly for hours, just flicking the Cruciatus as if it was a tickling charm instead. But Dolores had not laughed. She had shrieked. Convulsed on the dirty floor. Twisted and writhed like a sack of shuddering meat.

Then she spots Harry Potter. The Dark Lord's husband as it turns out. She is scared of him as well but tries to keep herself together at the sight of them together.

The younger wizard asks, "Are we waiting for Severus?"

"I need him to ground the spell. With the boy, it was fairly easy, for he had a rather small core and the binding did not require much effort. She, however, has a larger core and I think it would be prudent to have Severus aid me."

"In that case, I'm going to send an elf to get Siri. I bet he'll want to see it. It's not like we don't have time to gather an audience."

The Dark Lord smile. It is rather...disturbing. "By all means, my dear. Perhaps Lucius would like to attend as well. He has always loathed her."

"Probably not the best idea," Harry says, "because yesterday, he wasn't feeling so well and Sirius would never allow him to come if he's feeling ill."

"Lucius does not take orders from your dogfather, Harry."
The dark-haired teen smiles. "Sirius is a stubborn man. And I think he secretly enjoys annoying Lucius and gets pleasure from his hexes."

"I do not particularly care to know the details. I still find it incredibly odd that Lucius tolerates your godfather. Personally, I have a dislike for misbehaving dogs."

Harry looks at the man with narrowed eyes. He understands Tom's aversion, but Sirius is his godfather, a member of his family, and Tom has to respect that. "I'm going to send an elf to Malfoy Manor."

Tom looks like he wants to say something but remains silent. When Harry is gone, Tom turns to Umbridge's cell. He smirks as he finds the witch cowering in the far end of the cell, a tatty blanket around her. The witch appears perfectly pathetic. He takes a step forward and laughs as Umbridge scuttles right and left like a trapped rat.

"Please don't kill me," Dolores whispers—shivering, the pitiable thing that she is—and presses herself tightly against the stone wall. "I'll go away. I'll leave the country. I'll be good. I'll be good..."

"What does or does not happen to you is not up to me. Your wretched life belongs to my husband."

Dolores shudders, her eyes filling with big fat tears.

"I cannot free you. And frankly, I do not want to free you. You caused my husband pain; you humiliated him, tormented him, vilified him and his friends. You deserve this, Madam Umbridge. Deep down, you know you deserve to be punished."

The scream that tears free from the witch's throat is hoarse and filled with dying rage. She slams against the stone, body shaking. She claws at her face and yanks the roots of her dishevelled, grimy hair. Her sanity is slipping and Tom isn't even doing anything. Just a bit of dark magic; his favourite little torture curse. The Cruciatus does hurt quite a bit.

Harry arrived just in time to see Umbridge convulsing on the ground. "You're such a bloody sadist, Tom. Don't damage her too much. I still need her for something."

Intrigued, Tom asks, "What use can she possibly have?"

Harry grins, his arms slipping around Tom's neck. "Fred and George. A box of untested potions. Need I say more?"

Tom gets the idea. He looks over Harry's shoulder and sees shadows descending the staircase. Severus, a dark apparition, walks into the light. He is followed by Narcissa who actually enjoys the grittier side of the Dark side. While they arrive in silence, Sirius Black comes down the stairs, making a lot of noise.

"Someone should clean this fucking dump every once in a while."

Harry shrugs as he sees a shadow cross Tom's face. "What? It's dirty. I inhaled a bunch of cobwebs before."

Sirius looks like a child who has been invited to a birthday party and he wants his piece of cake.

"Okay, since we're all here," Harry says, "someone should wake the bitch."

"It would be much better to do the spell while she is unconscious. Less wailing." Severus sneers.
"I want to hear her beg." Sirius barks with annoyance.

Harry smiles and nods. "Yeah, I want to hear her beg as well. I want to hear her stupid excuses and snivelling sob story. It's not very fun to curse her without her knowing that she's getting punished."

"Severus, wake her up." Tom sighs, always willing to give Harry what he wants.

The Potion Master opens the cell and spells the witch out of it. Sprawled out before the Dark Lord's feet, Molly looks small and docile. Nothing like the fire-hurling harpy she can become within seconds. When she opens her eyes, disoriented at first, the bundle on the floor does not look very threatening. But as she regains her senses, she scrambles up and snarls. On all fours, she looks like a rabid dog. Her red curls stick out from odd angles but some of it lays flat against her head. Her face, blotched and dirty, is contorted in a hateful grimace, eyes flashing, teeth bared.

She screams. About freaks and dark bastards. Something about traitors. She aims a poisonous look at Harry and calls him a traitor, a turncoat, a stupid brat, attention seeker, runt, and on and on it goes. She spits at Sirius and unleashes similar insults. Then she smirks, unhinged, and calls Lucius a whore willing to spread his legs for mangy dogs.

Sirius surges forward but he is restrained by a pair of arms.

"Gods, I wish I could kill her." Sirius groans. He looks livid as he speaks, "Dumbledore's bloody lapdog, always ready to kiss his sanctimonious arse. Always judging, always berating others for having their own fucking mind. And then this sodding cunt has the audacity, the fucking gall to lay one bloody finger on Lucius; torture my lover, my everything as if it's nothing. Look at her! She's proud. She's fucking smug about it."

Sirius has his wand in his hand before anyone can see. Molly crumples on the floor, body thrashing. Now, Sirius isn't usually into torture. Unless it involves a bed and a very naked Lucius. But this is different. This feels right; it's retribution. Overwhelming, all-powerful, tactless, remorseless punishment. She deserves to choke on her own blood for her part in harming Sirius' family. For manipulating his godson and choosing to follow a man who ripped Sirius' life apart. Her punishment for even looking at Lucius. He lets the magic flow, his hand steady and eyes colder than ever before.

Harry lays his hand on Sirius' wrist and says, "Siri, I get it. I really do. But she's not worth it."

"Binding her magic, sending her away—that's not a punishment. Pain is her punishment. She deserves pain for the rest of her life. A never-ending memory of a pain so deep, so all-consuming that it will brand her until she's dead. She deserves to be alone, hurting for the rest of her life, knowing that she will never experience happiness again. Just pain." Sirius looks at Harry. "She owes us that much."

"Yeah, but we sort of promised Bill that we won't kill her."

Sirius cancels the spell and tucks his wand away. "I'm sure Bill will understand. He's a smart bloke." "Black, we will not alter the plan. I will bind her magic." Tom does enjoy a bit of old-fashioned revenge, but he cannot allow Harry to feel guilty for causing the eldest Weasley scion heartache. It would be better to simply neutralise the threat.

"Wizards, if I may—" Narcissa steps closer and places a supportive hand on Sirius' shoulder. "To bind her magic is to eliminate her as a magical threat. She would be no better than a Muggle. But she will live. She can easily cause trouble for us even without her magic. And Sirius is entirely correct—she has earned her pain. She hurt my best friend, the brother of my heart, and I for one cannot let her
get away with it. She also added to Harry's sufferings. Being close to Dumbledore, she must have
known of his plans to sacrifice Harry for the greater good. She knew of Harry's home life and did
nothing. I believe that death is a just punishment."

"I'm not disagreeing with you but Bill is a brother to me and I don't want to make him suffer. He has
lost two siblings already. We can't take his mother."

"You're only saying this because you don't wish to be the one who hurts Bill. You hate that bitch just
as much as I do. Her death would mean nothing to you."

"I don't want Bill and the twins to hate me, all right! I don't want to lose him. All my life, I've lost
people. My parents, you, people I considered friends...I can't lose the Weasleys I have left. Don't you
get it?" Harry pulls away from Tom and starts walking towards the staircase.

Narcissa follows and catches the young man by the arm. "Harry, I understand perfectly. But they
will not hate you. The Weasley boys are very loyal and they care about you. This woman cares
nothing for her sons. As a mother, she should have placed her children above all else, yet she
abandoned them. She chose to hurt them with her actions."

"I don't give a shit about Molly Weasley." Harry looks over at the woman on the floor, shaking
slightly. "But I can't let Sirius or any of you kill her because Fred, George and Bill can't handle
another death."

Sirius lets out a deep breath and says, "Here's an idea. You have a nasty bitch right here in the cell
next to Molly. Why don't we have her kill Molly? Everybody wins."

"You want to give Umbridge a wand?" Severus snorts.

"Oh, yeah. I'm just going to hand her one, let her out of skip out of her cage—do you really think I'm
an idiot! Of course, she's going to blast her own brains out. There's this useful little curse called the
Imperius. Look it up, Snivelly."

Severus, ready to retort, is stopped by the Dark Lord. "This is getting ridiculous."

Tom doesn't care whether the witch lives or dies. But squabbling over it like children is a tedious
business. He concentrates on calling someone; a Death Eater who won't mind taking the blame for it.
A moment passes and then someone struts down the stairs, humming a tune. Bellatrix smiles and
sashays past her sister and Harry, giving the latter a kiss on the cheek.

"You called, my Lord."

"It seems that we cannot agree on the Weasley woman's fate. Initially, I had planned to bind her
magic, but Black here wants to kill the witch. Narcissa seems to agree."

Bellatrix turns to Sirius and hums. "I can see it in your eyes, Cousin. A darkness that can only be
sated with blood. I like it."

"Well, she willingly tortured Lucius and wished for his death. Tit for tat."

Bellatrix seems to agree. She licks her lips, a voracious gleam entering her eyes.

"Harry, I know you do not want any part of this. You fear that you will lose your friends." Tom
says, holding his hand out for Harry. The younger man walks back into Tom's embrace. "But this
must be done. I do believe Narcissa is correct. The Weasley woman can still cause trouble for us
even without her magic. She is a zealot. Her anger will not let her rest. Permanently removing her
from our path would eliminate the threat altogether."

"Fine." Harry nods.

"Bella will do it," Sirius says, look at his godson. "She doesn't mind taking the blame for it. Bill already dislikes her a great deal, so it won't really matter. Your hands will stay clean, Pup. We'll take care of her. Bill can hate us for it, but at the end of the day, he knows what Molly has done and why she has to pay a dear price for it."

"Just let me know when it's done."

Bellatrix draws her wand, points it at Molly's pain-ridden form and says, "Avada Kedavra!" She stuffs her wand into the ratty nest of curls on top of her head and turns to her Lord. "Done."

"Bella doesn't fuck around," Sirius whispers to Narcissa, both of them standing next to the witch. A bit more loudly, he says, "Well, that was fun. Anyone fancy a drink?"

*****

When Sirius returns from Riddle Manor, he decides to find Lucius. An elf tells him that the wizard is in his study with guests.

Curious, the Animagus heads upstairs. He walks right in and sees two identical redheads, sitting on the floor with stacks of parchment between them. The wizards look plenty occupied. Lucius sits behind his desk, flicking through the newspaper.

Sirius clears his throat, gaining everyone's attention.

Lucius knows perfectly well what Sirius has been up to but he doesn't want to address the issue with the Weasley boys present. After all, it is about their mother. Instead of asking, the blond beckons Sirius closer.

Sirius plops down on the edge of the desk and takes Lucius' hand, pulling it to his face. Those responsible for his lover's attack have all been punished. Only Tonks remains alive, her fate yet to be determined. Narcissa had expressed an interest in taking the girl under her wing. In order to turn her into a proper Black. She is young and easily influenced, but there is still a chance that the taint of Dumbledore can be washed clean. In any case, it is up to Narcissa and Bellatrix to educate their niece.

Lucius doesn't want to outright ask, so he looks at the man with questioning eyes.

Sirius presses a kiss against the palm of his lover's hand and releases it with a sigh. "I have to have a chat with the boys."

Lucius seems to understand and looks over where the redheads are busy getting to know the business side of their shop. Now, Lucius cares nothing for Molly Weasley. He quite possibly loathes her. But Fred and George are bright young wizards and while admitting it feels awful, Lucius genuinely likes the twins. They do not share their father's annoying mildness or mother's capricious temper; in truth, they have the potential to be respectable wizards, powerful in their own right. He rather enjoys mentoring the two. Strange as that might seem.
"Oi, you two—" Sirius stands, hollering across the study. "Take a break from whatever you're doing."

Fred looks up, eyes a bit bleary. George follows his brother's lead and places the papers down.

Sirius really hates this part. He takes a seat on the settee and motions the twins to sit on the other one. "So you know how we were supposed to bind your mum's magic, yeah?"

Fred nods. "The same as Ron's punishment."

"She's dead, isn't she?" George says, voice flat.

Sirius gives a curt nod. "Harry wanted to make it easy on you by binding her magic and sending her away. He didn't want to hurt you or your brothers. But—"

"Siri, we get it." Fred stops the man. He runs a hand through his hair, sharing a look with his brother. "Mum would never have let it rest."

"Just don't hate Harry for it. I pushed for it. I wanted to punish her for what she did to Lucius and to Harry...and you, too."

"She was obsessed with Dumbledore," Fred says. "It was always Dumbledore this and Dumbledore that; it's like she didn't have children at all. Only Ron, her precious baby boy. Bill, Charlie, Percy—they all moved out of the Burrow because they couldn't take her indifference and constant praising speeches about the Leader of the Light. She used to be a good mother when we were little, but she never really liked us. Our pranks angered her, our jokes made her lash out...she never supported our dreams."

George nods along. "I guess our mum died a long time ago. We don't even know this woman."

"You don't have to pretend that it's all right." Sirius points out.

"We just need a moment, I think." Fred gives Sirius a weak smile; it's sad but the sadness in it is not fresh. It's like a festering wound. He turns to George and pulls him into a hug.

Sirius feels a sudden rush of anger, but he's angry at himself and angry at Molly for putting herself in this situation in the first place. Couldn't she just have minded her own business? Stay at home and look after her children? Follow Arthur's example and just disappear for a while? He looks at the twins; a pair of wizards no longer considered children in the eyes of society, but they are children. Children without a mother.

Fred is the first to smile. It doesn't reach his ears like it normally does but it is not one of great sorrow either. "That's over and done with. No more tears."

"I reckon we should probably pay Harry a visit. Make sure he's not feeling guilty."

"Harry's tough on the outside, but he's a big old softie on the inside. We just have to talk some sense into that git. As if we could ever hate him. We're the lucky ones, you know," George says, face turning solemn. "After what Ron did to him...betrayed by someone he trusted. And that chit Granger. They lied to him. We thought he'd never trust anyone from our family, but he's our little brother. We're the ones who should be apologising to him for our family's actions."
Fred nods. "We love Harry; he's always there for us when we need him. He supported us when we were trying to set up our business. He always believed in us. Never called us useless or identical wastes of space or delinquents."

"You are delinquents," Lucius says, walking over to sit with Sirius.

"We're the new Marauders, second-generation ruffians," George smirks.

Lucius rarely feels guilt. And it's not like he's feeling guilty now. But the young men sitting across from him are—despite being Weasleys and prone to idiotic behaviour—rather amusing and interesting. There is a part of Lucius that wants to somehow ease their muted grief. So he says, "If you feel up to it, we can go over some sites I picked out for you. I believe that opening a second shop will greatly benefit your business venture."

"A second shop? Can we really afford it?" George asks, perking up.

"With your current funds, you could open three, but I think one additional shop will be enough for now."

Fred's eyes sparkle, but it's not greed. It's all the possible mischief they can cause in the world by selling more of their products. "We have tons of new ideas."

"And Sirius can add his own Marauders prank line." George smirks."And I bet Harry has some cool ideas as well."

Lucius considers the mood to be less drab now and wandlessly summons a folder from his desk. It contains several locations that are on the market. He hands it to Fred and says, "Look through these and pick out the ones you like. There is no need to waste time on the ones that do not fit your needs."

"Anything in Hogsmeade?" George asks Fred, who is already flipping through the pages.

Fred nods. "A few places. But we could go international, bro. We have to spread the love for pranks all around."

Lucius clears his throat. "Select the ones you wish to visit. There is no rush but try to make a decision by next month."

"You'll come with us, right?" George asks, looking adorably worried for a fully fledged wizard.

Lucius could say no and consider his task accomplished but he is looking at two businessmen who have much to learn if they wish to prosper. Leaving them on their own now would ruin the fragile business sense he's trying to cultivate in them. "Of course."

"Wicked!" Fred whoops with a smile.

Sirius nudges Lucius with his knee and turns to look at the man with a grin. He's proud of Lucius for helping the Weasley boys. And even though he'd deny it vehemently, Sirius knows that Lucius isn't doing it only because he cares for a profitable business. Fred and George are very likeable wizards and they inject a sort of youthful happiness into whoever they are with. Their carefree spirit is what draws people in, but genuine fondness creates a stronger, more lasting relationship with the two.

*****
Harry, after leaving Molly's body in the cellar, locks himself in the bedroom. There is a sense of dread spinning its web deep inside him. Molly's death is just a death; there is nothing special about it. But Harry keeps his word and he had promised himself to do the right thing by Bill and the twins. Having lost a mother, Harry now feels guilty for taking someone else's. He is grateful for Narcissa's assistance. The witch is a strong woman, capable of handling anything.

Tom had allowed Harry to go without trying to stop him. Dealing with an overprotective husband might send Harry over the edge. He doesn't feel like seeing anyone, especially Sirius who had pushed for Molly's execution. Of course, Sirius' rage needed to be sated, but it is the first time that he had clashed with his godson over something. They have minor disagreements and pointless squabbles, but this feels like something more. Harry's wishes had been knocked aside for something Sirius had wanted. And Tom had allowed it. It's frustrating.

Harry hears a knock on the door. He doesn't want to see anyone and hollers. "Piss off!"

"Oi! Open up, you stupid git!"

Recognising the voice, Harry shudders. If the twins are in the manor, they are definitely looking for someone to blame. And that someone is probably Harry. He hears the two talking behind the door, their voices muffled. Regardless of their reaction, Harry decides to let them in and deal with the situation.

Both Fred and George push in, slightly crooked grin on their faces. Fred spots Harry sitting in the middle of the bed, knees drawn up to his chin. He looks like a child.

"What's this then?" George questions. "Pity party for one?"

Fred nods. "Looks that way, bro."

Harry sighs, eyes wary. "Listen. If you want to hex me—"

"Of course we want to hex you!" Fred exclaims, pointing a finger at the green-eyed wizard. "We want to hex some sense into you, little bro."

"Yeah," George hums, sharing a look with Fred. "You're probably sitting here, thinking that we don't love you anymore. That we hate you and blame you for this. That this is all your fault."

Fred goes on, "But we say—that's rubbish!"

"That's a steaming load of crap," George smirks.

Harry, confused and a bit suspicious, tries to the pick up any sort of signs that the twins are messing with him. They seem slightly offended, maybe a bit huffy, but nothing that screams anger. "Your mum's dead."

"Sirius told us what happened. And we understand." Fred points out.

"Our mum didn't die in your dungeon, Harry. She died years ago. You don't have to feel guilty for anything."

Logically, Harry knows that he didn't actually kill Molly, but he still feels responsible. "Look, you don't have to—"
Fred laughs. "Yes, we have to. Otherwise, you end up thinking that we blame you. We don't feel like that at all, little bro."

"Pull yourself together, you git." George grins. "It had to be done, you know. So stop moping about."

"Bill's going to hate me." Harry whines.

"For like a minute maybe. You know he's a sensible bloke; he understands why it had to be like this. You let Ron live. That's all he can ask from you and he knows it."

Fred agrees with his brother and says, "Bill won't hate you. Besides, it's not like you killed her. Sirius said that he pushed for it and that you didn't agree. We might have a reason to be angry with Sirius, but we're not. He's totally mad about Malfoy, so it's not all that hard to see why he demanded Mum to be killed. She was a rotten bint; even we can't sugar-coat it. So let it go."

"I can't let it go because I feel like I'm the one causing your family so much grief."

Fred sits down on the bed and flicks Harry's ear. "You are our family. Get it through your head."

"Or we might have to prank you until you do."

Fred nods. "Seriously, you have to stop this and listen. We don't hate you. We don't want you to put yourself through so much pointless worry. You're Harry Riddle, the Dark Lord's husband. That makes you like a co-Dark Lord or something. Forget about pleasing people and fretting about what others might think."

Harry huffs to himself and says, "You're too forgiving. Idiots."

"If we play our cards right, we might get adopted soon," George smirks. "Sirius already loves us, but we have to work on Lucius. He's thawing."

"You're trying to drive Bill insane or what? He hates Lucius."

"Well, we don't. People fuck up. It happens. We like him; he's helping us with our business and he doesn't think we're worthless. A lot of people laughed when we told them about our dream to open a shop that sells pranks and deals in jokes. No one believed in us; no one but you, Harry. And Lucius believes in our ability to make a lot of money."

Fred shares a grin with George. "Life is good."
Being a Dark Lord is not an easy task. It requires a certain touch, a type of flare; a combination of power, charisma and tenacity. Tom Riddle has plenty of power and he can turn on the charm when he needs to. He is also rather persistent.

Dealing with all sorts of Ministry business is tedious and shockingly uninspiring. He can't curse people or have his minions beat someone into a sticky pulp. He has to be diplomatic. He has to cajole and flatter wizards he considers to be beneath him. He has to smile. A lot. Apparently, smiling makes one more approachable. More human. Tom's face hurts from it. It also involves a lot of manoeuvring and coercion. He's not terribly good with subtle ways of making one do his bidding. He's more forceful, demanding even. He expects people to just do what he wants them to do.

Gathering support is a dull business. He shouldn't have to sell his ideas. He shouldn't have to smile and nod along to stupidity. Only, he's not the Dark Lord when he's attempting to gain support. He's Lord Gaunt. Just Thomas Gaunt. In the eyes of the wizarding world, he's a nobody. It infuriates him. He hasn't actually made any real progress for two whole weeks. He has to lay down a strong foundation before he can announce his candidacy.

"I can actually feel you seething."

Tom turns to Harry who is snuggled up against his side. He has become one of those people who take their work to bed with them. Harry had been napping but he's awake now, groggily sitting up.

"What are you working on?" Harry asks, masking a yawn.

"I must have been out of my mind when I decided to secure the Ministry through a peaceful takeover."

"You are being nice, Tom. You need more than fear to keep people in line. If they like you and see that you're bringing about changes then it will keep them happy. It keeps people from rebelling. If there is nothing to complain about then there is no reason to overthrow you. You catch more flies with honey."

Tom remains quiet, flicking through proposal after proposal.

"Why do you want to be Minister anyway?"

"Because then I will have complete control over everything. Once the Ministry is mine, I have every component I need to reform the British magical community."

Harry lets out a laugh. "You're such a control freak. Admit it—you have to be in charge all the bloody time."

"That's not true, Harry."
Plucking the papers from his hand, Harry straddles Tom's lap. "Can I fuck you?" The look of sheer alarm that flashes across Tom's face is hilarious. It makes Harry smile. "If you don't have to be in control all the time, then prove it. Let me tie you up. All naked and horny. You like silk, don't you? I'd use silk scarves to tie you up, make you spread your legs so wide. Then I'd suck your gorgeous cock, bring you to the edge of release. After I stretch you open, make you beg for it, I would bury my cock in your tight arse. Watch it sink inside."

During his later school years, Tom had enjoyed all sorts of physical pleasures. With willing witches and wizards. Before losing his sanity, that is. Even similar pleasures that Harry is referring to. But he had not enjoyed losing control. To have someone own your body in such a manner, to let someone have power over you—it is not something Tom likes. In fact, the idea of letting someone have him like that is off-putting.

Harry sees how uncomfortable it makes Tom and he pulls back. Fearing that he has crossed a line, Harry climbs off and settles on the bed. He doesn't know what to say, feeling a bit self-conscious himself.

"The idea of submitting to anyone, to let them have power over me...trapped, dominated, vulnerable, humiliated. I can't."

Harry flushes red. "I would never humiliate you or trap you! Do you think I would do that to you?"

"No, you wouldn't. Harry—it's not something I want to discuss."

"You do think I would degrade you, otherwise you wouldn't have reacted like this. You don't trust me, Tom." Harry's eyes gleam with hurt and anger. He gets off the bed and grabs his wand from the bedside table.

The wizard harks. "Of course I trust you! This is not the point."

Harry tucks his wand into the back pocket of his pyjama bottoms. "I would never make you feel trapped. People who love each other don't hurt one another. I don't feel humiliated when you fuck me. You're nothing but loving and considerate and bloody possessive—which I love by the way—and I feel safe with you."

"Harry, don't make this into something it's not."

"Then what is this about? You could have just told me that you don't like having something up your arse like a normal bloke. But you looked so horrified as if I was about to assault you—" Harry snaps his mouth shut, eyes wide. "You—"

"No, I did not think anything of the sort. And I most certainly have not been assaulted in the past. I simply don't want to lose control. Does that satisfy you, Harry? I fear losing control, of being helpless like that. I'm afraid of it."

It is enough to make Harry feel incredibly bad. Of course, Tom never talks about his fears. He likes to make it seem that he has no fears. Harry sits back on the bed, getting rid of the wand poking him in the backside. "I'm sorry. This is stupid. I overreacted. As usual."

"Let's just forget it."

"No, let's talk about it. That's kind of how a marriage works, Tom. We need to tell each other this stuff because I don't want us to fight about silly things. I wouldn't have pushed you had I known why you don't like the idea." Harry waits for a moment and says, "Tell me, please. Trust me with whatever it is that you fear."
Tom holds out his hand and Harry crawls to him, curling up under Tom's arm. "When I was younger—I think it was just before graduation—I was acquainted with a fellow Slytherin student. By that time, I already had a bit of a following among Slytherin students. I was respected even though I was poor. I was a member of the Slug Club. This Slytherin was also a member, a later addition due to him being a transfer from Durmstrang."

"Boyfriend?" Harry asks cheekily.

"No, a mistake. He was charming and from an influential family. I attempted to gain his support. He was interested in my ideas. He soon fell into my bed and I used him. There was no sentiment behind it; it was simply a physical relationship. Before graduation, he said that he would introduce me to his father and his father's associates. You have to understand that, at the time, I needed friends more politically powerful than a seventh-year student. I needed a platform. I already had many contacts in pure-blood circles. I was making a name for myself."

Harry frowns. "So what happened with your fuck buddy?"

"Must you be so crude?"

"What?" Harry smiles. "You said that you used him. It's not like you got him flowers and took him to Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop for some hanky-panky."

"He promised me that I would gain his father's support. His father was a high-ranking Ministry official, close to the Minister. A pure-blood looking to bring back the old ways, keeping us separate from Muggles. He was an ideal choice."

Harry understands what Tom is saying but asks, "So what happened?"

"He had a condition for me. I would gain the support I needed in exchange for the use of my body for one night. He wanted to take me. It was a simple trade-off; I did not see how it might affect me. At first, I did not mind. But he wasn't very gentle; I would even call him a brute. He rutted into me like a mindless beast and I felt weak, trapped like a rat in a cage. He held me down. I started to panic because I was not used to being overpowered. I told him to stop but he kept whispering filthy things into my ear. My magic lashed out and the force of it threw him off, making him fly across the room. I delved into his mind. He never intended to keep his promise. He only wanted to use me. I could not kill him under Dumbledore's nose, so I erased his memories. It was as if he never knew me at all. After that I decided to make it on my own; I did not need favours or to beg for support. I had my loyal followers."

Harry sits up. "He did assault you. If you told him to stop and he didn't listen—"

"I agreed to have sex with him in exchange for his father's political support. It was a transaction that I consented to. I didn't like what he was doing to me, but who would I have told? Dumbledore? Tell that blasted fool that I agreed to play a willing whore to a fellow student in order to gain his father as a political ally for something I was trying to keep secret? Only my pride was bruised, Harry. And I decided not to put myself in that position again. I could never trust myself not to react as I did all those years ago."

"You think you might hurt me?"

"Our magic lashes out when we feel threatened or scared. I know you would never hurt me, but I cannot change my fears. I can hurt you, Harry. I would never forgive myself should that happen."

"I understand." Harry nods. "But it is something we can work through, Tom. I don't want you to live
the rest of your life thinking that having a cock up your arse can't feel amazing. I mean, look at me—I'm very happy to put out."

Tom sinks into the pillows propping him up and sighs. "You're an insatiable minx."

"Yeah, I'm a filthy little boy. Want to spank me?"

"Perhaps some other night." Tom picks up his papers again. "I still need to look through these proposals. There is a Wizengamot assembly on Monday. I have to convince those fools that I am what the wizarding community and government needs right now."

"Tell me about your ideas that will likely work."

Tom thinks all of them will work, but he does have a selection. "I am planning to re-establish the Creature Council. Under Fudge's fumbling rule, the Ministry cut ties with various committees that govern creature laws and rights. I plan to reinstate a council within the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures that will work alongside such liaison offices. We need strong ties with goblins and Veela, as well as werewolves, vampires and other sentient beings that do not classify themselves as human. I intend to protect all magical beings from exposure and capture. There is no need to fear werewolves if we work with them and help create safe habitats for packs. Fenrir is the head of the largest pack in Britain and he keeps complaining about not having enough space for his pack. Another thing is the hunting grounds."

Harry says, "They need a really big area for that or they might eat everything in one go. I've seen Fenrir stuffing himself full. Reminded me of that fat pig Dudley."

"I plan to ensure that all magical children are on record and monitored. I will not tolerate children left to abusive Muggle caretakers. Magical children, whether they are pure-bloods or Muggle-borns, deserve a fully magical upbringing in an environment where magical talent is encouraged. I don't want anyone to suffer as you have, Harry."

"Not all Muggles are like my relatives." Harry points out. He lets out a small laugh. "You know, Narcissa is planning to rescue all the mistreated Muggle-borns from evil Muggles."

Tom's fingers twist into Harry's hair. He muses, "Severus told me about it. Narcissa is a very passionate woman. And she's rather stubborn. I think it is a Black family trait."

"I just hope she doesn't go around snatching children from their Muggle parents. Some people don't hate magic. Granger, while a massive bitch, had fairly open-minded parents. As I understand, they were proud to have a witch for a daughter."

"Clearly those Muggles understand how much superior wizards and witches are."

"You're such a snobby wanker."

Tom doesn't argue.

"You'll do fine," Harry assures the man. "Just be your dazzling self."

"My dazzling self? You make me sound like some sleazy Muggle pulling rabbits out of his hat." Tom's lips curl into a sneer.

Harry starts laughing. "Be a homicidal twat then. I don't really care either way. And how do you even know about Muggle magicians?"
"When I was a child, the matron of the orphanage I was left in organised a visit to a Muggle circus. I was only taken along because she was afraid that I would burn down the orphanage should she leave me alone."

Harry says, "The Dursleys never took me anywhere. But I saw some magic show on telly. I felt really bad for the animals. They reminded me of myself. Trapped and lonely."

"Only Muggles consider forcing animals to do tricks entertaining. I wanted to set fire to the entire circus tent. Burn them all alive."

Harry snorts. "You're such a pyro, Tom. We're so fucked up." The wizard nestles closer and throws an arm around Tom's chest. He hums. "I'm glad I married you."

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Sirius walks right into the family parlour of Riddle Manor and spotting Harry, he says, "Pup, get your arse off that sofa and slap a glamour on your face. We're going out."

Harry cranes his neck to see Sirius in the doorway. "Going out where? Fred and George already brought me loads of their stuff."

Sirius slumps next to Harry. He looks suspiciously giddy but also a bit nervous.

"Okay, what's going on with you? You look weird."

The wizard grins. It's a real happy smile. "I'm going to ask Lucius to marry me."

Harry's lips stretch into a wide beam. He turns his full attention to Sirius, tossing the textbook he had been reading on the sofa. "Really? Siri, that's wicked!"

"Yeah. I've been thinking about it for a while now. I need to get the perfect ring. There's some jewellery in the Black vaults, but it's mostly useless junk. I can't give Luce some old ring that some forgotten aunt left there. I need something fancy, something that screams Lucius."

"You need some bling, Siri," Harry suggests.

"That's why I'm taking you with me. I need a second set of eyes; so that I don't go overboard." Sirius stands. "Fix yourself up, kid. I'll be by the Floo."

Harry has not yet ventured outside without a glamour that masks his features. His face plastered all over the papers is not something he wants right now. The glamour is light—a narrower nose, bluish eyes, sharper cheekbones, ruddy brown hair. Frankly, he looks a little pointy. A bit like Draco but with darker hair. It's a useful mask that he wears whenever he wants to get a bit of air.

Sirius pushes him into the fireplace, his whole body taut with excitement. There are a few boutiques that sell expensive, one-of-a-kind jewellery; all sorts of pretty bangles, shiny necklaces and gleaming rings. Wizards get their fashionable wives pretty trinkets from those shops. Money is not an issue for Sirius so he opts for the high-end boutiques first. Harry follows Sirius inside the first shop, but the wizard hates everything on display.
"It's all so fucking gaudy. Luce would cut off my bollocks if I stick something like this on his finger. Look at it; it's bloody hideous." Sirius points to a flashy ring. It looks like every sort of gemstone has been used. It's blue, red, green and violet. And it's the size of a Snitch. The next one isn't any better. A stone the shade of amber is fixed in the middle and little pink stones are surrounding it.

"It's too girly," Harry says. "And that one looks like something a child pulled out from a cereal box." Harry points at a thick ring with a huge and clunky red stone. "That one over there looks too hippy. And that one is literally a piece of rock sanded own."

"I've seen enough," Sirius says, a bit too loudly. The shop assistant looks ready to burst into tears. The wizard motions Harry to follow him out. Harry sends the shop assistant a too-bad-so-sad smile. The next shop isn't any better. Everything is too plain, too small, too common. The third and last one is Sirius only hope if he doesn't want to go to Paris and visit the wizarding district there. But it's also not to Sirius' liking. The two wander around Diagon Alley until Harry spots Draco and Luna.

Harry points them out to Sirius. "Look at those lovebirds."

Draco sees them as well and whispers something to Luna who looks over. They quicken their steps and approach.

"Lord Black." Draco bows his head a bit. He holds the lesser title as Heir Malfoy and Sirius is not only his elder but his superior title wise. Luna does the same, only she curtsies. In a private setting, neither Draco nor Luna would bother with such official greetings, but they are in a public place. Eyes and ears are everywhere.

Sirius isn't all that interested in all that pure-blood crap. "Bah! None of that. It makes me feel like some old fart."

"Hullo, Sirius." Luna smiles.

"Fine. Let's all pretend that I'm not standing here." Harry huffs, but he doesn't mean anything by it.

Luna hums curiously and whispers, "It is a very convincing glamour, Harry."

The blond wizard leans a bit closer in order to inspect. He sneers a bit. "Out of all the possibly disguises, you pick one with atrocious hair. Why am I not surprised, Pot-Head."

"Shove off, Malfoy." Harry shoots back. "Who cares about what my hair looks like? I'm trying to blend in."

"So, what brings you to Diagon Alley?" Luna asks, her arm curled around Draco's. She looks between Harry and Sirius. She then looks at Draco, before muttering something into the wizard's ear. The mysterious exchange makes Draco smirk. Luna turns to Harry and sidles up to the wizard, linking their arms. "Harry, would you accompany me to Fortescue's?"

Harry hesitates for a moment. "I'd love to but Sirius—"

Sirius shrugs. "Have some fun, Pup. You need some fresh air every once in a while."

"Frankly, it is the perfect opportunity to find out what people are saying about the upcoming elections." Draco points out. "He is ready to announce his candidacy any day now."

Harry's eyes narrow. "They better not be talking shite about my husband."
Luna giggles and says, "Come along, Harry."

Suspicious that people might be gossiping about Tom, Harry lets Luna pull him along. He gives a quick wave to Sirius and Draco.

Sirius smiles and turns to Draco, "Okay, what's up? You're obviously scheming."

"You are standing in front of a jewellery boutique. It is painfully clear to me that you aren't just window shopping." Draco grins. "As it happens, I can provide you with some counsel. I am quite familiar with Father's tastes when it comes to flashy jewellery."

Sirius lets out a displeased huff. "Diagon Alley is a bust, I'm afraid."

"You have much to learn if you wish to marry my father. A Malfoy always has the best. Unfortunately, these shops do not offer the best. Do you think Mother buys jewellery here? It is beneath her." The blond wizard looks dead serious and says, "Do you have a Gringotts chequebook?"

"Oh, yeah. Bought loads of stuff from the Azkaban gift shop," Sirius snipes. "Where the fuck would I have used one, kid? Of course, I don't have one. I just go to Gringotts when I need money."

Draco offers the man a look that makes him resemble his father. It's that subtle eye-roll Lucius does whenever Sirius makes him question his sanity. Which, of course, happens a lot. "All right, no need to bite my head off. We'll go to Gringotts and get you one. You'll need it."

"Hang on," Sirius does not take another step forward, halting after Draco. "Why do I need that?"

Draco pinches the bridge of his nose. "Because we are going to Muggle London. To a very high-priced, high-class boutique that sells the sort of rings you are looking for."

Sirius lets out a little laugh. "If you think I'm buying Luce a ring from a Muggle, you're certifiably barmy."

"I didn't say it's a Muggle shop. I only said it's in Muggle London. It is owned by a wizard from an old line of pure-bloods originating from France. He caters to rich Muggles, but he is a wizard." Draco points towards the bank. "If you really want to make Father swoon—something I'd rather not think about—you need more than pocket money."

Sirius only nods. It's not like he wants to propose to his lover with just any old ring. He wants something striking, something as stunning as Lucius himself. A ring that claims him; something that makes all the hags drool with envy and impresses all the stuffy pure-bloods. A ring to flaunt. Gringotts is having a slow day, so Sirius gets right to it. His vault manager Grognuk motions him to one of the side rooms. After declaring his business with the goblins, Sirius is asked to wait. After fifteen minutes, the goblin comes back and hands Sirius a little black book. "This belongs to the Black family; your father used it on occasion as well. The cheque is, of course, directly linked to your vaults, Lord Black."

"Never used one before, so maybe you can talk me through it," Sirius smirks.

"Very well," says the goblin. "You write down the number of Galleons you need, sign it, add the name of the beneficiary and finish by tapping your wand on the cheque to verify your identity. It will then disappear and a teller in Gringotts will receive it and handle the transaction. You need not do anything else. It will take no more than five minutes to transfer the funds from your vault. It will take longer when dealing with a Muggle bank, but we can manage it."
It's all pretty simple and Sirius sticks the chequebook into his pocket before walking out of the bank. The next stage requires them to look more like Muggles. They can't waltz around Muggle London in robes. Draco favours black suits and makes minor changes to his own clothes, only adding a warm coat, but Sirius transfigures most of his attire. A dark blue three-piece suit with a nice woollen coat seems like a safe choice. Getting to Muggle London is easy—just through the Leaky.

The shop they are looking for is on Bond Street. During his youth—mostly the pre-Azkaban years of his life—Sirius had visited most parts of London. Just him and James, running around the city with half a brain each. Massive pub crawls, nicking stuff from marketplaces, creating chaos—they had done it all. Happier times. For both of them.

Draco looks highly displeased, sitting in the backseat of a Muggle car. It is nothing like the Knight Bus. Muggles drive their steel traps slowly, with nervous twitches and obscene remarks echoing around the vehicle. It doesn't manoeuvre like the magical bus. It jerks and halts, tossing Draco around. Sirius smirks and tells him to suck it up. They walk the rest of the way.

"I hate Muggles." Draco drones, his face and attitude entirely too snobbish for the occasion.

"You only hate them because you're a spoiled snob."

Bond Street is a shopping district, much like Diagon Alley. Muggles walking around, eying the windows. Posh Muggles to boot.

"So...how long have you been planning to ask Father?" Draco questions as they stride towards their destination, avoiding the Muggles who seem to walk with blinders on.

Sirius shrugs slightly, smiling. "Probably since I figured out that I'm in love with him. But I knew for certain after he came home from St. Mungo's."

"I didn't really like you at first, to be honest," Draco says with a sheepish look. "You have dodgy manners. You're brash and temperamental. And a Gryffindor. I thought Father was just entertaining himself, you know."

"That was the plan. A bit of fun. But love is funny like that—comes when you don't expect it. Fucks you up completely." Sirius nods. A silly smile appears on his face. "It's nice."

"I'm thinking of getting Luna a ring," Draco admits, trying to look casual as if he's commenting on the weather.

Sirius chuckles. "Don't get me wrong, she's a lovely girl. But she's a bit out there, isn't she? Her dad likely escaped from some asylum."

"I don't care what people say about her. They don't even know Luna." Draco sneers.

They step inside the boutique in silence. There is a plump little man milling about, pointing out various display cases to a young woman, who is jotting down notes in a journal.

Draco clears his throat. "Mister Rofferty?"

The man turns around, eyes going wide. He is a short man, dressed in velvet and silk, with elaborately coiffed hair and beard. "Ah, Master Malfoy. How wonderful!"

The man snaps his fingers and the door locks with a click. A charm goes up; clearly, a Muggle repelling one. The young girl looks flustered and flushes bright pink before disappearing into the back room.
"Master Draco, I did not expect you today. My Floo is always open for such esteemed clients. Why did you not use it, gentlemen?"

Sirius turns to Draco, eyes narrowed. "I don't know. Draco—why didn't we use the Floo?"

"Because I needed time to think about what sort of ring I'm getting Luna," Draco says as if it is the most natural, logical thing in the world. "Anyway, Ferdinand...this is Sirius Black."

The man gasps, but he's not shocked or scared. He's excited. "It is such a delight to meet you, Mister Black. Oh, I have heard so much about you, although I tend to spend most of my time among Muggles. Oh, but how charming, indeed!"

"Err...hello," Sirius smiles, letting the man shake his hand with vigour. The funny little man is close to gushing, so Sirius takes a step back. "I'm going to look around."

Draco smirks. "Trust me, you don't want what's on display. All the good stuff is in the back. Isn't that right, Ferdinand?"

The man nods, a gleam in his eyes, "Yes, everything on display here is for my wealthy Muggle clients. I have something special for us magical folk hidden in the back. Follow me."

The room in the back is not a dingy little broom closet. The man leads them through into the real backroom—a small but heavily warded gallery. The pieces in glass cabinets are magnificent. Ferdinand holds out his arms like a showman. "Here we are, Mister Black. Please, let your eyes feast."

Draco leans in and says, "He's weird but insanely good. A number of pure-bloods come here. Not many can afford his creations, but he really is the best."

Sirius only wants the best and he doesn't mind spending a lot of money.

"Master Draco, you mentioned a ring, correct?" Ferdinand asks and beckons the wizard to follow him.

"Something unpretentious but interesting," Draco tells the man as he walks after him. "I'm not interested in diamonds, I'm afraid."

The jeweller smiles brightly and points at a glass case. "My latest collection. Perhaps you might find something for your lovely bride."

Draco busies himself with the engagement rings and waves Sirius to get on with his business.

"Ah, and what might I show you, Mister Black? A ruby choker, emerald earrings, a beautiful sapphire bracelet, hmm?"

"I'm looking for a ring as well; an engagement ring, to be more specific. Something beautiful and luxurious." Sirius grins. "Something for a rich, exquisite and pampered pure-blood beauty."

Ferdinand ponders silently, tapping his chin with his finger, and says after a while. "Yes. I believe I understand. Come, Mister Black. For this, I feel that you must see my most striking creations. Forgive my nosiness, but is the recipient a witch or a wizard?"

"Wizard." Sirius smiles and nods towards Draco. "A bit like that one over there."

Ferdinand smirks and claps his hands a little, overly thrilled. He knows what he needs to show the
man. The man walks into another room and comes back with a box. He plops it on the counter and opens the lock on it. It is filled with two rows of exquisite rings, with three rings in each row. Sirius' eyes widen.

"Please, have a look. My most priced designs."

Sirius likes them all, but there is one that sort of pops out more. He wants to see it on Lucius' finger. "Tell me about this one." Sirius points at one in the middle.

Ferdinand seems to approve and he picks it up, holding it out for Sirius. "A 12-carat cushion-cut diamond; one of my most flawless ones, I admit. A goblin forged platinum band infused with pure silver to enhance certain protective spells, resistant to any sort of wear and tear. Highly recommended for magical folk."

"Oi, Draco!" Sirius calls out for the younger one. "I need a Malfoy seal of approval."

Surprised that Sirius has already picked something out, Draco walks over. He gets a look of the ring and almost chokes. "By Salazar, it's—"

"You think he'll hate it?" Sirius' smile wanes and doubt starts to creep in. "Something smaller, perhaps?"

Draco shakes his head, a brilliant smile on his face. "No, it's perfect." The young blond turns to the man and raises a brow. "We're not paupers, Sirius."

"I don't want him to say no, Draco." Sirius huffs.

"Trust me. Even I wouldn't say no with a ring like that up for grabs and I don't even like diamonds all that much. Or blokes."

The jeweller's eyes sparkle and he says, "Can I expect to see my wonderful creation in the papers, Mister Black; adorning someone's lovely finger, hmm?"

He takes a moment to decide, but he already knows that he wants it. Sirius can't wait to slip it on his lover's hand. "I think I'm done here, Mister Rofferty. That's my ring."

"Splendid, splendid," the man smiles and pops the ring into a smaller box. He shuffles around, placing the others away.

Sirius pulls out his shiny new chequebook and slides out the accompanying ink pen from the side. Ferdinand rattles off the price and Sirius writes it down. Draco makes a spluttering noise next to him when he sees the amount—nine hundred thousand Galleons. That is not pocket money. That is more than Draco has in his personal vault. That's an insane amount of Galleons. One could buy a manor with that kind of money. He looks at Sirius as if he's completely mental.

The cheque glows gold when Sirius taps it with his wand. Then it rolls up and disappears with a slight crackle.

"While we wait for my assistant to confirm the transfer," Ferdinand starts, turning to the younger wizard, "Master Draco, have you chosen something?"

Draco nods. It's a delicate opal ring with a halo of tiny diamonds. "I am quite fond of that one."

Sirius snorts. "That's definitely Luna."
"Ah, yes...a beautiful oval stone, bordered with small diamonds. A delicate platinum band. A very fine choice."

It's a lot cheaper than the other one, making Draco about ten thousand Galleons poorer, but Luna is a modest girl and Draco doesn't need to win her over with expensive and flashy diamonds. Not that Sirius needs diamonds to get Lucius. They're just stupidly in love and Sirius probably wouldn't mind spending every penny he has just to shower his lover with gifts. Thankfully, Luna is a lot more level-headed when it comes to gifts. She is happy to receive a fleshing-eating plant or fluffy earmuffs.

The assistant pokes her head into the room and confirms that Gringotts has transferred the money to Ferdinand's business vault. The man eagerly shakes Sirius' hand. "My most heartfelt congratulations." He whispers with a wink, "An excellent choice, Mister Black."

Sirius has a feeling he's not talking about his taste in jewellery but he doesn't mention it. Draco gets his ring paid for and they use the Floo to get to the Leaky.

"You know, Luna's birthday is coming up," Draco says as they arrive back in the Alley. "I want to give her the ring after her birthday party. Mother has been planning it for months. Anyway, I'm telling you this because I don't want to upstage you and Father, so please do not dawdle. You have less than two weeks to pop the question."

Sirius hasn't really thought about it yet. He hasn't made any plans. "All right."

"Also, I'm giving you valuable advice here, so listen carefully. Do not ask in a public place. Do not make a spectacle. Do not, under any circumstances, let Mother know before you actually ask. She cannot keep a secret to save her life."

Sirius just nods, amused that he's getting lectured by his future stepson. A while later, they meet up with Luna and Harry, who have been joined by Neville and Pansy. Sirius has things to do and leaves the younger generation alone.

Draco takes a seat, slipping his arm around Luna. Neville has Pansy curled around his arm. Harry spoons some ice-cream into his mouth and says, "It's so unfair. I want to do couply stuff with my husband."

"I'd like to be there when you tell the Dark Lord that you want to hold his hand and skip down Diagon Alley like a couple of teenagers." Pansy snickers.

"Tom's very cuddly," Harry smirks and laughs when he sees Pansy's dubious face. "What? He is! He even lets me sit on his lap when he works."

Tom lets Harry sit on his lap during meetings simply because he has to hide his erection poking a tent into his trousers. Something Harry is directly responsible for.

"I don't want to hear about your kinky sex-life, mate," says Neville.

"Let's talk about yours then," Harry smiles as Neville flushes.

Draco clears his throat and says a little louder, "Let's talk about Hogwarts instead." He turns to Pansy. "Thinking about returning, Pans?"

The girl shakes her head. "No, not really. I will take my N.E.W.Ts at home and the practical parts in the Ministry. Father set it all up for me."

"I'm doing the same," Harry says, "Severus says I'm almost ready."
"I'm doing my final exams with the rest of the seventh years," Neville mentions.

"Well, Hogwarts won't be closed forever; Tom says things will likely go back to normal soon. They can't do much about the stuff that's being taught right now, but next year, there's going to be a new curriculum, new teachers, new rules. Stuff like that."

Draco grimaces. "Hogwarts was a joke under Dumbledore's rule. We were taught nothing about the old ways and traditions. Only Light magic and useless stuff, really. Father tried to get Dumbledore sacked for years, but traditionalists and pure-blooded families were always outvoted by Muggle sympathisers."

"I was a first-year student and even I thought that it was weird how Hogwarts didn't teach anything about wizarding customs or traditions. It was always Muggle stuff. So many Muggle-borns come into this world completely ignorant and no one corrects them; that's why Granger was so annoying. She believed that she didn't have to know about wizarding traditions because she thought that Muggle ones would do. Dumbledore encouraged students who weren't pure-breds to bring Muggle ways into the magical world. Tom's going to change that. The Ministry has to take charge and ensure that the magical world thrives and starts respecting its history and traditions."

Draco agrees and says, "Muggle-borns and Muggle-raised children should be educated. They ought to start Hogwarts already knowing the basics."

"You mean like a pre-school type of thing?" Harry asks and says when Draco gives a small nod, "Magical children who live in the Muggle world could attend a pre-school and learn about the wizarding world. That way they won't start Hogwarts completely blind."

"That's a great idea, Harry," Neville points out.

"I have great ideas all the time, Nev. I'm just too preoccupied to actually make them into a reality."

Draco snorts. "Yeah, too preoccupied sucking the Dark Lord's cock, you mean."

Harry tries to look appalled but Draco is absolutely right, so he can't exactly act all that offended. "True," Harry smirks, taking a mouthful of ice-cream. He enjoys the shocked faces and asks, "So, where did you and Siri disappear to?"

Draco shrugs. "You'll see."

A frown appears between Harry's brows but he decides to not get into it right now. Draco being cagey annoys him but he doesn't let him bother him.

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Later that day, Harry is somewhat surprised to have an elf announce that he has visitors. It's Bill and his younger brother Percy. While Bill isn't an unusual visitor, Harry isn't so sure about Percy.

Bill already knows that Molly is dead. Sirius had taken it upon himself to notify the man and explain to him what had occurred. Harry is still a bit wary and it weighs on him, but Bill has a smile on his face as he and Percy enter the drawing room.

"What brings you to the Dark Lair?" Harry asks, motioning the wizards to take a seat.
"I'm here to pick up Ron. Dad's all settled in and he's ready to take charge of him now."

Harry's eyes widen and he looks a bit shamefaced. He forgot about Ron. Again. "Err...sure."

"Are you certain that you're okay with letting Ron go?" Bill questions.

"Yeah, I don't give a shit about him being on the loose. He's harmless now. I mean, Tom wanted to kill him but Ron's a little player in the grand game. If he's a player at all. He just needs to keep his head down, same as your dad."

Bill nods, relieved to hear that Ron's in no danger of losing his head. "Dad wants to live in peace. He sees that now. And as strange as this might sound, we are at peace. The Ministry is doing something right for once. People are happier. Voldemort is actually doing something right."

Harry's response is cut short when the man in question walks into the drawing room. He is wearing his best robes, but he still looks menacing. He has that dangerous aura about him that makes Harry's eyes glaze over.

"Ah, Mister Weasley." Tom's smile is a bit too predatory like he wants to gobble Bill up and spit out his bones. "Here for a social call?"

Bill's tongue seems to be stuck to the roof of his mouth and he can't get a word out. Voldemort is a scary bloke and Bill likes his body parts as they are.

"You can turn off the glare, Tom," Harry orders and stands. He can take Bill to the dungeons sooner rather than later. "Bill is here to collect his wayward brother."

"Very well. He can take the little rat."

"I wasn't asking for your permission, lover," Harry smirks, enjoying the hard look on his husband face. He turns to Bill and shares a look with Percy. He has to ask, "I don't think we've been properly introduced, have we, Percy?"

Percy is a lanky wizard, curly red hair on top of his head and freckles scattered across his nose. Harry doesn't know Percy personally; he just knows him as one of the Weasley boys. They didn't really talk in Hogwarts either.

"No, I don't believe we have. Percy Weasley." Percy offers a pleasant smile and shakes Harry's hand. Ron had always described his brother as an arrogant overachiever and boring bookworm. Not that Ron's words could ever be taken as the truth. Instead, Harry instantly likes Percy. He's polite and seems confident. "I've heard so much about you."

Harry's eyes narrow a bit. "You shouldn't pay attention to the Prophet."

Percy shakes his head. "No, I mean I've heard so much about you from Fred and George. They respect you a great deal. Nothing but gleefully adoring reviews from them."

"Oh...although I'm not sure you should really listen to those twits. They probably make most of it up anyway." Harry motions the two to follow him.

But Percy looks at the Dark Lord instead. "I'm not actually here to see Ron."

Tom looks extremely smug as he catches Harry's questioning look. "What—"

"Darling, this Weasley I managed to lure away from Dumbledore years ago. I corrupted him as soon
as I gained more power in the Ministry through my loyal spies."

"Really?" Harry looks shocked but he's mostly just shocked to learn that Weasleys can also be something other than Light. "So, Percy's one of your minions?"

Bill turns to his brother. "What the hell, Perce?"

"I am not an idiot, Bill. Lord Voldemort's reforms will benefit everyone. I was recruited the moment I started working in the Ministry; and frankly, I did not mind supporting him. Dumbledore would have ruined us completely. Mum and Dad couldn't see past the old man's arse, so I decided to forge my own path."

"And what a delightful find he was," Tom muses."Mister Weasley has been very useful to our cause."

Harry utters a laugh. "That's clever. Only you would try to corrupt a Weasley." He says, looking at Percy, "Maybe the twins, but not you. This goes to show that people are full of surprises."

He grabs Bill by the arm and starts pulling him out of the room. "Come on, let's go find Ron. He's around here somewhere."

Bill doesn't protest. He just shares a meaningful look with his brother. They will definitely have a chat about this later. The dungeons are still delightfully oppressive and an elf flicks the torches to life, escorting the two wizards to the cell. It's grimy and small, but there are heating charms in place and the air is somewhat fresh. There is even a tray of food on the floor in Ron's cell.

The redhead looks a bit on the thin side, face gaunt and dirty. He had been mostly healed after the beatings, but he's not fully recovered. Without his magic speeding up the process, he'll need some sort of therapy to fully heal. Ron shuffles closer to the bars when he hears someone approach.

He fears Harry now. Just seeing the green-eyed wizard makes something wildly thrash inside his chest. He can't speak about any of it, but he will always remember. He is afraid of Voldemort as well, but he is terrified of Harry because it only takes one word from him to ignite a blood-lust in Voldemort. Harry has all the power; Ron can see that now. He curses himself for even crossing paths with the wizard.

"Hello, Ronald." Harry seems cheerful as he approaches. "I've got a surprise for you. And no, it's not Death Eaters ready to kick the shite out of you." He motions Bill to step forwards. "Ta-da. It's you big bro here to take you off my hands for good."

Bill feels sorry for Ron. He deserves his punishment but he does look miserable and altogether wretched.

"Okay, so here are the rules. Please pay attention, Weasel." Harry hums. "You keep your head down. No joining a rebellion because then I will kill you. Find a hobby; learn to play a musical instrument, collect cards, start a weasel farm—I don't really care. Just don't get in my way again. Have a quiet, trouble-free life and I will forget your name. My husband will forget your name. Everything will be rainbows and sunshine, Ron."

Ron nods frantically. He doesn't want to see Harry ever again. He doesn't want to think about him or Voldemort. He would rather be a useless Squib than suffer through another torture session with any of the Death Eaters.

Memories of it make Ron shudder. Snape had been precise and he had used curses that had targeted the most sensitive parts of Ron's psyche. Malfoy's curses had inflicted the highest level of bodily
pain. Bellatrix had a penchant for bloody curses, while Draco had enjoyed a more mundane approach—physically beating the crap out of the redhead. Harry had ordered Ron to be left alive, but he hadn't said to make his stay comfortable.

"The same goes for your dad, Bill." Harry gives the man a look that speaks of pain. He looks nothing like the Harry Bill calls his brother. This wizard is authoritative and strong. "Tell him that I have no problem with him; I believe that he's sorry and I want to leave it at that. If he starts making trouble, things will end badly for him."

"He won't. I know my dad; he just wants a quiet life."

Harry nods. "Take him home and makes sure you tell Arthur about the rules. Explain to him why Ron was punished. He needs to know that rude actions have painful consequences."

When Bill takes a firm hold on Ron's arm, pulling him close, Harry instructs him to take him to the entrance hall. Ron whimpers and lowers his head, unable to look Harry in the eye. He had called him a whore, a cock-sucker, a Death Eater slut...and now he knows that he had made a grave mistake in disrespecting Harry.

He keeps his eyes on the floor even when they reach the hall, waiting for Harry's permission to leave. Bill steps away for a moment with Harry. There is still a lump of fear lodged in Ron's throat. Maybe Harry won't let him leave and it's all a sick game to him. A way to make him even more miserable. He doesn't look up when he hears voices. He isn't sure but he thinks that he recognises the rough, grating voice of Greyback.

"Well, look at that," the voice barks, half-amused. "If it isn't a little weasel. Bite-sized and all."

"Fenrir, stop scaring him." Harry orders, arms crosses over his chest as he walks over. "Or I'll make you clean up should he have an accident."

"He smells of fear; a pure, sharp smell that no amount of magic can hide. Delicious."

"Tom's waiting for you," Harry tells the werewolf, waving him away.

Fenrir chuckles and turns to leave but he halts and turns back to Harry. "That wolf you know, Lupin...two of my pack members found him this morning when they were out hunting. He was half-dead, shivering under a pile of leaves in the deeper part of our land."

Harry's emotions spike. He considers Remus to be a traitor, but he can't be entirely sure. He just knows that the man had trusted Dumbledore, but he had disappeared right after the man's funeral. Frankly, he doesn't know what to think. But he doesn't want him to die either; not before he gets answers. He asks the werewolf. "And he's still alive?"

Fenrir nods.

"Can you make sure that he stays like that? At least until I get to talk to him? Sirius might want to see him as well." Harry knows it's a lot to ask, but he hopes that Fenrir will be moved by his big watery eyes.

The werewolf grunts. "I suppose I can tell the others to keep away from him. He might not make it through the night. I know what pure aconite does to wolves; it's a slow poison. It looks like Lupin is suffering because of it. He's scrawny and weak, no better than a snivelling cub. The wolf part of him is like a caged dog, pitiable and puny."

"Do you have a Healer in your pack?"
"One of the elders knows healing spells and potions."

Harry sighs. "Yeah, okay. That's all I ask, Fenrir. Just make sure he stays alive for me to question. If I don't like his answers, your pack can have him. I have to talk to Tom about it, though."

"You're a wily little thing, aren't you?" Fenrir smiles, face full of teeth. He looks at Harry with crinkled eyes.

"Perhaps," Harry smiles. "Now get your arse to that meeting. My husband's mood is not exactly joyous."

Fenrir stalks away, laughing under his breath. Harry pushes thoughts of Remus Lupin out of his mind and turns to Ron. "You know, there is a lesson in all this. I hope it's a lesson you take to heart, Ronald."

Ron nods, keeping his eyes down.

"If you ever fuck with me or my family again, I will gift-wrap you and deliver you to Greyback. Trust me, he's not a nice man. He's not a man at all; you should see how he likes his meat. So raw that it's still dripping blood."

Tears gather in Ron's eyes. "I won't—I'll be good. I promise."

Bill comes from the other room, face grim. The Dark Lord's threat rings in his ear. He will lose all that he holds dear should his father or Ron try to hurt Harry again. He accepts it and understands. Harry gives Ron a little cruel wave as Bill pulls him close and they Disapparate.

"Good riddance," Harry mutters to himself and turns to leave. He has a meeting to attend. Or rather a husband to tease while he tries to conduct it.

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Sirius keeps the ring with him. He's not a particularly flashy bloke; he doesn't want to make a huge deal out of things. Except when he does. He won't propose in public. It will only put him in the doghouse for a good while. But he wants to see the look of utter shock on his lover's face as he slips that gorgeous diamond on Lucius' finger. He's going to blindside the man because he enjoys Lucius' half-hearted attempts at hexing him.

It's nearly dinnertime when Sirius comes up with the perfect plan. He organises the house-elves to prepare the two of them a light supper and has another elf set a table on the terrace leading into the finely trimmed gardens. A nice meal, good wine, fresh air and the night-time sky—that's plenty romantic and subtle enough to keep Lucius in a good mood.

The setting is just right. Sirius is pleased with it. He pats his pocket to make sure that the velvet box is still safely tucked away and takes a deep breath. Malfoy Manor is rather deserted; Narcissa is off seeing her sister, Snape is lurking around Hogwarts and Draco is out with Luna and his friends.

Sirius has a hard time finding the man of his dreams. Lucius isn't in his study, going over whatever the Dark Lord sends his way. Sirius stalks around the place and finds nothing. Finally, he finds Lucius in their bedroom. Having a bloody nap.
It's cute but also annoying because Sirius has special plans and Lucius having a snooze isn't ideal. And why is he having a nap in the first place? He isn't tucked in all warm and snug, ready for bed. Sirius considers calling it off, but he's too impatient. He's ready to do this now.

He sits on the edge of the bed and it dips under his weight as he scoots up and props himself against a stack of pillows. Lucius looks peaceful and a part of Sirius’ brain tells him not to interrupt, but it's a very tiny part. He runs the tip of his finger down the blond's nose and smooths it over the man's lips, but Lucius doesn't stir. But Sirius isn't going to give up and moves on to more persuasive tactics. He grazes his lips over the man's forehead, gently going lower until he reaches pliant lips.

Sirius sits back and waits.

"Go away, Siri," Lucius mutters and turns his face into the pillow.

Convinced of his brilliance, Sirius attempts to coax Lucius awake by annoying him like an irritating fly. "Luce...Lucius, get your gorgeous arse up. Luce? I've made plans for us. Lucius." Sirius blows out hot air and grins. "Luce, baby..."

Lucius' eye snaps open and narrows, the silver shade of it glinting like steel. He's just trying to have a rest; a nice nap that does not include Sirius and his maddening wit. Or his smug grin. Lucius sounds cold and ominous as he says, "Have an exceptionally good reason for waking me."

Sirius tries to keep the amusement out of his voice. "Sorry. Did I interrupt your beauty sleep?"

"Do you want to be hexed?"

"Yes, please," Sirius smiles. He gets off the bed and says, "Come on, Luce. I have a surprise for you."

Lucius, naturally sceptical, narrows his gaze a fraction. "What sort of a surprise?" He doesn't enjoy surprises. He enjoys gifts. And maybe Sirius wants to give him something. That itself makes him curious. But he's still annoyed.

"How about you just come with me and see for yourself, Luce? Don't give me that bratty attitude of yours."

Sirius dodges the wandless hex that Lucius hurls towards him with a glare.

"Hah, missed me, love." Sirius laughs and winks."Now be a dear and please follow me. You'll be back in our bed before you know it. Naked. Whimpering sweetly as I plough your arse all night."

The next hex scorches the doorframe above Sirius' head. But the man's already gone, laughing.

When Lucius finally steps through the terrace doors, he sees a table set for two, candles, his favourite wine. The smell of delicious woods rises from the table. All in all, it is very romantic.

Sirius, unusually suave but characteristically attentive, pulls out Lucius' chair for him and seats him before returning to his own seat. He pours the wine, grey-blue eyes gleaming with adoration and some sort of hunger. But he's not desiring the food.

"I know you're not a big fan of being gawked at, so I decided against a fancy restaurant." Sirius smiles. "Although you do love the attention."

For a brief moment, Lucius is stunned. He flips through countless memories and dates, trying to figure out whether it's a special occasion or some kind of important day, but he comes up with
nothing.

Lucius' silence seems to drag on and Sirius tries to desperately hold on to his courage. He is a Gryffindor but his jittery all over. A tightness around his heart grows. It feels like a terrible idea now.

But Lucius isn't running for the hills. He just looks a bit dazed.

"Let's eat, all right?" Sirius smiles, but he's losing confidence. He chews his food a little too mechanically, finding it hard to swallow. There is a lump of fear blocking the way down. He knocks back the wine and pours himself another glass. He knows that he's acting weird; he likely looks demented and awkward, but that's because he is.

Lucius does eat, but he's mostly pushing it around on his plate. He's not hungry, feeling nauseous instead, and he's a bit worried because Sirius seems nervous and agitated. Like he's sitting on a massive secret that he wants to spit out but can't. He's twitching a bit.

"You look like you are being attacked by fleas." Lucius comments, his lips curved into a half-smile.

"A bit hot, that's all."

Lucius hums, but he's not convinced. He takes a sip of the wine, the kind he usually enjoys, but he instantly regrets it. It sits on his tongue, sour and strange. The mouthful of wine only intensifies the queasiness.

Sirius notices. "Everything all right?"

"I think I'll have water instead," Lucius calls for an elf and has the creature deliver a carafe of water. The cool drink eases the man's unsettled stomach.

The weird silence stretches. It grates on Sirius' already battered nerves and he feels that it's all slipping away. He looks at the blond and understands that he hasn't done it right. But the thought is liberating. He's not perfect. The moment is not perfect. But it doesn't have to be. It doesn't matter where they are as long as Lucius says yes.

"I'm fucking this up, aren't I?" Sirius mutters, partly to himself, partly out loud. He gulps down the rest of his wine and feels himself relax. He is trying to be someone he's not. But Lucius loves him exactly as he is. He doesn't need Sirius to be proper and sophisticated and straight-laced. Sirius only needs to be Sirius, smugly charming and strong-minded. With good hair and all. He gathers himself for a moment, feeling his true self coming back and snapping into place.

Lucius eyes him with concern, but the man is acting a bit different. Sirius Black is never quiet; he doesn't sit silently and fiddle with his thumbs.

"You know what? Let's just skip the pudding and hop between the sheets?" Sirius stands and holds out his hand. Lucius takes it even though he has no idea what's going on in Sirius' head. They step inside the manor.

Sirius feels like a teenager, holding hands with his boyfriend while sneaking away to snog in private. Lucius would likely curse him with baldness should he share this image, but the man hasn't let go of his hand. No one is around; Lucius allows the display of affection because there are no witnesses and he actually likes it. They walk up the staircase.

Lucius notes, "You are acting rather strange tonight."

Sirius smirks. It's a special night. A first for him. "I'm not. Just...anxious, I guess."
"Anxious about what?" Lucius inquires. "You resemble a first-year who got caught while sneaking around after curfew."

"I did that a lot, you know." Sirius snorts. "James and I were always getting in trouble for something. People think that I was the troublemaker but James was the real instigator most of the time. He was the one who got us caught up in all sort of rule-breaking."

"You and Potter were close." Lucius states. He's not jealous. Really, he's not. He has no reason to be. But there is a seed of resentment embedded in his heart. He has no right to be, of course. Sirius had a life before him. Friends and lovers. Many lovers if Sirius' boasts about it are correct. It's an irksome notion. It is quite possible that James Potter had been a lover as well, before his marriage.

Sirius sees the glint in Lucius' eyes and instantly understands it. "Yeah, we were close. But like brothers. We didn't fuck. I mean, he was a fit bloke. Quidditch muscles, you know. Nice arse." The vexed look on his lover's face causes Sirius to laugh. "Don't make that face, Luce. I'm kidding."

"I don't care what you and Potter did." Lucius sniffs. He disappears into the bathroom as soon as they enter the bedroom. Laughter crackles in Sirius' throat as he thinks about it. It is clear to him that Lucius is acting like a spoiled child who was just told that his teddy-bear had once belonged to some other kid. It's true, though. Sirius only saw James as a friend and brother. Not that he didn't notice James' good looks, but he didn't entertain any kind of lusty thoughts about him.

When Lucius re-appears and steps inside the huge walk-in wardrobe, Sirius starts stripping off his clothes. He's not anticipating anything. Lucius probably won't be in the mood, too busy warding off images of Sirius and James tangled together in the throes of passion.

The blond comes out, wearing a blue velour robe that belongs to Sirius.

"Are you jealous, Luce?" Sirius asks with his smile stretching over his face.

"Don't be absurd." The man splutters, expression twisting into a sneer, but he's not fooling Sirius with it. "Why would I be jealous...of Potter, no less?"

"You thought he and I were more than friends, didn't you?" Sirius smiles, watching through the open door of the en-suite as Lucius conducts his evening ritual. It is not his wish to anger Lucius but he's definitely poking fun at the man.

From the bathroom, Lucius hisses. "Why does that even matter? Why should I care if you buggered that speccy git!"

"Then why are you so pissy about it?"

Lucius snaps his mouth shut and throws Sirius a fuming glower. The Animagus gets to his feet, hoping that Lucius won't slam the door in his face. "Don't get your knickers in a twist, Luce." The blond man squirms as Sirius slips his arms around him. "I didn't fancy James."

"I don't care—"

"Yeah, you don't care, blah, blah, blah...you definitely didn't feel jealous thinking about James Potter bouncing on my cock." Sirius laughs. He gives Lucius a pointed look. "Never happened. Never had any desire to be more than friends."

Lucius seems to relax, but just a smidge. He had thought about it; Sirius being intimate with Potter. And it's true—James Potter had been good-looking. A carefree, reckless Gryffindor. Just like Sirius. But such thoughts seem highly peculiar to him; he is feeling annoyed over something trivial and
getting worked up over nothing. He's emotional like a witch. It's complete nonsense.

"I only get hard for you, Luce." Sirius pulls Lucius against his body, grinding into the blond with a small grin. "Which reminds me—why aren't you naked yet?"

"How presumptuous of you to assume that you are even permitted in my bed."

"Oh, it's your bed, is it?" Sirius licks his lips, manhandling Lucius around in his arms. He knows that the threat is half-hearted at best. The blond is just miffed. Sirius has a remedy for it. "I still haven't given you your surprise."

Lucius stiffens in Sirius' arms, but he's curious. He had thought that the quiet dinner for two had been his surprise.

"You do want your surprise, don't you?"

The blond tilts his head a bit. Of course, he wants to know what it is. Sirius looks excited, which seems suspicious. He has been acting strangely all night.

"I know we haven't followed proper courting rules," Sirius says, a small smile on his face, "but that doesn't mean we haven't been courting." He summons the ring, clutching it in his hand. Lucius looks delightfully confused. Sirius takes the blond's hand. "I wanted to do this right, wine and dine you first and make this big romantic gesture, but I'm not good with plans."

"Siri—"

"Let me say this, Luce." The Animagus silences the man. He takes a deep breath. "I know I'm not exactly a dream come true—I probably drink too much, I'm intolerably annoying and crude and I have little respect for pure-blood propriety because it's so fucking stiff and boring. I'm pushy and immature and I don't always think things through. I'm impulsive and tactless and jaded. Likely a little mad." Sirius takes Lucius by the hand and pulls him close. "I don't deserve you. I'm not the decent sort. But I'm selfish too. Selfish enough to tell whoever tries to stop me from seeking happiness to fuck off."

"Sirius..." Lucius frowns, eyes searching. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I love you. I love how snooty and arrogant you are, how easily I can get you riled up. I love the way you look at me, even when you glare at me all sulky and pouty. I love how high-maintenance you are, so elegant and haughty. Beautiful and vain and all mine. I love how much you care for Cissy. I love how loyal you are to your family." Sirius smiles and steals a quick kiss. "I love how responsive you are, so eager for my touches, yielding to them effortlessly. I love how your eyes, like silver frost, burn for me, with so much life and adoration that sometimes I forget how to breathe."

Lucius thought that the evening was odd before, but he certainly did not expect it to get even weirder. There is a tangle of emotions coiling in his chest and he is aware that his looking a bit too flushed. He's having one of those ridiculous moments that Cissy usually experiences when she's reading Madame Marcheline's nauseatingly inflated tales of great romances while pretending to read about Charms. Lucius sincerely hopes that he's not glowing or visibly swooning.

Sirius sticks the little box under Lucius' nose. A bashful, almost boyish smile edges its way on the man's beaming face. 'I'm not proper or well-regarded or perfect, but that doesn't stop me from loving you. There are probably other blokes out there who are tediously sane and respected and into being massive pure-blood dicks, but none of them will ever get to be near you because I fight for the
people I love."

Sirius flicks the box open and presents it to Lucius. He has to clear his throat to unclog the lump of emotions which seems to be stuck like a hairball. "Lucius Malfoy, the beautiful bane of my previously dreary existence, will you do me the honour of becoming my husband and making me deliriously happy?"

Lucius, mostly dumbfounded, just stares. The ring is stunning; the most gorgeous piece of jewellery Lucius has ever seen. It's bloody blinding and utterly beautiful and the shock just does not fade as time ticks by. Lucius can hardly remember his life without Sirius; the man consumes each memory of solitude and replaces it with a warmth. There is no question about his feelings—he loves Sirius. Today, tomorrow, fifty years from now. Sirius offers him an equilibrium that he has never before experienced. Sirius provides endless affection, an incessant level of admiration and care. Of course, the man isn't perfect; he shouldn't be what Lucius wants, but he is everything he wants and needs.

By now, Sirius starts to feel doubt. He's frantic but keeping outwardly cool. Lucius hasn't said anything. He didn't fall into Sirius' arms like a ditsy school-girl. But he hasn't rejected Sirius either. The silence is cutting away at Sirius' confidence.

"I fucked up, didn't I?" Sirius mutters, an uneasy, clogged-up laugh escaping past his lips. "Of course you don't want to marry me."

Lucius does not panic. It's not part of the Malfoy genetic code. Although there seems to be a glaring amount of glitches in the otherwise perfect system because Lucius did fall in love with a reckless Gryffindor nitwit. So it is only normal that he's panicking a little.

Sirius looks wounded and annoyingly insecure. "Fuck—I'm sorry, I shouldn't have...it's okay if you don't want to—"

"Shut up, you in-bred oaf." Lucius can't stand any sort of moaning from Sirius. Frankly, Lucius had considered the surprise to be something along the lines of sex. Maybe a pair of cufflinks. A nice pair of gloves even. But he's being offered a ring; an engagement ring that is incredibly expensive and flawless. He is entitled to a bit of processing time.

"If you don't want to get married—"

"I did not say that!" Lucius snaps, still staring at the ring. Sirius is ruining his moment of silent excitement with his whimpering dog act

Sirius mutters grimly, "You didn't really say anything."

"Oh, pardon me for needing a bloody moment, you arse. I've never been asked before. It is considered polite to wait for an answer before you start griping about it."

A slow grin appears on Sirius' face. "So, are you going to give me one?"

Lucius watches as Sirius takes the ring from the box. The man smiles as he grabs the blond's hand and starts to slip it on his finger, only to stop halfway. Lucius seems utterly transfixed but then his gleaming eyes snap up and he sees Sirius, grinning, waiting, hoping.

"You're such a sucker for pretty things. Like an adorable little magpie."

"Do you want to marry me or not?" Lucius sneers, his tone daring Sirius to be witty again.

"More than anything in this life." Sirius flashes the other man a sincerely smile. "Lucius, light of my
"life, will you marry me?"

It seems like forever to Sirius but Lucius finally says, "Yes."

The ring looks right at home, Sirius muses as he places it on the man's finger. He can't control himself and slides his hand behind the blond's neck and pulls him into a soul-numbing snog. It feels a bit different but not in a bad way. The feelings of lust and love are enhanced, so intense that it seems to tremble around them.

"You really had me worried, you know." Sirius hums, tracing his lips down Lucius' neck. He nips the sensitive skin. "I thought you were going to leave me standing here like an idiot, a 12-carat diamond ring dangling in my hand."

Lucius pulls away, a look of puzzled amazement on his face. "Siri...12-carats?"

"Why not? I would have gone up a few carats but I liked this one," Sirius says with a shrug, taking Lucius' hand to place a kiss on it. "It didn't clean out my vaults. You're not going to lecture me about spending my money, right? Because I will spend it on you if I want to."

"It is your money; it is not for me to instruct you how you ought to spend it. Although, I do recommend investing a portion of it. The Black Family is old and wealthy, but you do not have another source of income aside from the gold in your vaults. Eventually, it will run out and I will not have my husband penniless."

"I love it when you remind me that you wouldn't want me without any gold."

"I do have standards," Lucius sniffs. He disrobes and moves under the covers.

Sirius joins him, but he's not ready for sleep yet. "We should go over to Harry's in the morning. Can't wait to see Tommy's face. And Snivelly—he'll choke."

Lucius doesn't say anything but he figures that Severus will likely suffer a minor choking incident when he finds out. But he doesn't particularly care for Sev's feelings at the moment. He keeps his eyes on the lovely diamond. Sirius had not been wrong—he is a little vain and he does like pretty things. There is nothing wrong in appreciating excellence and quality.

Sirius catches the spellbound look on Lucius' face and snorts, but he is happy that Lucius is so taken with the ring. It means that he did a good job. "It will still be there in the morning, Luce."

The blond pins Sirius with a sort of prickly look but he keeps silent. The message, however, is clear. There is a limit to the wizard's clever little quips and Sirius is dangerously close to overstepping it.

Without saying a thing, Sirius slips his arm around his lover and with a flick of his hand, the bedroom goes dark. He's feeling exhausted; it has been a taxing day and he is emotionally drained.

But still, he can't help himself and thinks about Snape's eyes bugging out of his skull upon seeing the ring.
Okay...this is a little notification. Regarding Remus. I've decided to reform him because I now regret my initial choice to ignore him and leave him all alone in Dumbledore's camp. We all make mistakes. I'm inserting him into this story. He will, however, earn his spot. I welcome any sort of ideas regarding Remus. Also, he's alone and looking for a bit of love. Since the wizarding world does not have a magical Tinder, maybe you can help him out. And by that I mean help me out in my quest to find him a potential snuggle partner.

And yes, mpreg is coming. It is already happening but men can be clueless, right? Oh, and a massive thank you to everyone who still reads this and comments and leaves me precious kudos. My readers provide the wind for my writing sails. Seriously, you are all awesome and deserve a round of applause.

Tom is not entirely happy to hear about Harry's plans to visit Greyback's wolf colony just a week before the full moon, but he doesn't particularly want to upset Harry by denying him his wish. So they end up going.

Around noon, the Dark Lord finds himself in the middle of pack land, surrounded by Fenrir's pack members. Tom is impressed to see how well Greyback has done. Everything he sees is actually habitable and the people moving about seem content to be out in the open and live in a natural environment.

The wolf colony is thriving once again. Not only are they under the Dark Lord's protection, but werewolves are no longer being hunted by the Ministry. A while back, the Ministry had employed so-called extermination squads to eliminate the werewolf problem. Fudge, in his infinite wisdom, had just signed documents, never really taking a closer look. Dolores Umbridge, known hater of everything she didn't classify as fully human, had slipped all sorts of things under Fudge's nose, having him sign them without the man even understanding most of it.

The exterminators had tracked werewolves across Britain. They had kept tabs on werewolves living peaceful lives. Umbridge and her cohorts had started a registry for wizards and witches suffering the curse of the moon; not to monitor them but to round them up, tag them, and possibly kill them.

Tom's plans, however, include integrating werewolves into society, helping them stay safe during their transformation and providing werewolves with housing, jobs and medical assistance. It is time
for the wizarding world to accept that creatures are not mindless beasts, but intelligent and powerful.

"My Lord," Fenrir stalks closer, bowing his head a bit. He's not one for grovelling or kissing the hem on the Dark Lord's robes, but he has enough self-preservation in him to know that disrespecting the Dark Lord always ends rather badly for the disrespectful party. The werewolf doesn't spot the young one and raises a brow. "Where's the meddlesome cub?"

"Careful," Tom's smile is sharp. "You are close to disrespecting my husband."

Fenrir huffs a rough laugh. "He likes it when I disrespect him, my Lord. Tried to hex me when I addressed him by his proper title. Said something about stupid wolves being cheeky."

Of course, Harry's sole mission in life is to drive Tom barmy. He doesn't hex Fenrir for his gall and says, "He was distracted by the children of your pack and they disappeared somewhere."

Fenrir grins, all teeth. The handful of children in his pack are all strays. Unwanted cubs infected by wolves that do not belong in any pack. Strays themselves mostly. The children are often abandoned by their parents because they do not want to raise a half-breed child. Humans start fearing their children and leave them in the woods or on the streets. The youngest in Fenrir's pack is a two-year-old boy, cast aside by his mother who could not deal with her child's curse. The other children are all between the ages of six and thirteen. Some are runaways, but others have only known the warmth of proper house and luxury of a good meal. It is a harsh change to suddenly live in the wilderness.

Fenrir takes them in while other, lesser packs do not. But the strong Alpha wolf has a soft spot for tiny wolves stumbling through their first full moon, howling and yowling like puppies. He has not always been the wolf he is today; having a similar start like so many young werewolves under his care. No mother, no father, all alone and scared, running through the forest with nothing but rags on as people chase him away from their homes. Begging for scraps, struggling to survive—until running straight into a small pack of wolves who took him in and taught him how to survive.

He had been a troubled young boy and then he became a troubled young werewolf with a massive chip on his shoulder. And it is true that he had done horrendous things if only to avenge the humans who so viciously cast him aside because they thought him a monster. So he decided to become a monster. He infected people out of spite. Now he regrets it, even though the past cannot be changed. He takes in children like himself and makes sure that his pack is protected and cared for. He makes sure no one infects anyone like he used to.

He takes the Dark Lord towards the housing area where several log cabins stand in a neat row against the trees. Nothing fancy but it's a roof over their heads and no one has to sleep under the stars.

Lupin is in one of the smaller ones, being nursed back to life.

Fenrir had infected many during his madness and time of rage. Lupin is one such wolf. A child Fenrir had infected to teach the boy's arrogant father a lesson. Of course, Fenrir understands now that he had acted without thought, drunk on fury and something far more bitter. But Lupin's self-loathing is a problem Fenrir has no desire to deal with. He has a pack to take care of and Lupin isn't part of his pack.

Harry is already standing in front of the cabin, surrounded by kids. Fenrir chases them away, a growl rumbling in his chest. All the kids shriek in playful delight and scuttle, waving goodbye to the young wizard.

"Do they get any sort of education?" Harry asks.
"Only what we are able to teach." Fenrir huffs. "Wolves tend to make people jittery. No school would take these kids."

Tom is trying to change that and assures the werewolf, "They will once Hogwarts is purged from Dumbledore's filth."

"I think they would benefit from a proper education. I'm sure we can find some wolf friendly teachers willing to teach these kids." Harry looks to Tom for confirmation and smiles as the man gives a nod. "I'd like to come here again. They're great kids."

Fenrir doesn't mind. He does respect the young wizard. He treats everyone equally and never shies away from Fenrir as many seasoned wizards do. Harry usually just grins and acts as if Fenrir is an overgrown puppy or something.

"Lupin's in the first cabin." Fenrir nods towards the house. "He's mostly out of it, but I reckon he won't die. At least not from the poison." He takes Harry inside. The Dark Lord has no interest in the man, so he decides to stay outside.

Harry is a bit anxious. But only because he has no idea what he's about to encounter. Lupin might be just another Dumbledore fanatic, ready to scream insults and praise the old man.

Fenrir waves the other wolves out of the room, telling them to come back later. Harry gives Fenrir a nod. "I'll be fine on my own. Go and make sure Tom hasn't been chased up a tree somewhere. Those kids are deviously funny."

The werewolf snorts and disappears. It is entirely likely that the rambunctious cubs have decided to play some games with the Dark Lord.

Lupin is motionless on the bed, covered by a woollen quilt. He's pale and shivering, obviously suffering a fever. It's rather like having the shakes and Lupin has been using a poisonous potion for months now. His body is fighting it but weak as it is, the poison seems to be winning.

Harry feels a sort of ache in his chest. Remus had been a friend. An advisor, a source of wisdom during difficult times, and Harry had tentatively trusted the man. But all that had been before. After Dumbledore's funeral, Remus had disappeared without a word. He never tried to contact Harry. And he didn't trust Sirius either. For a dark creature, Lupin pathetically clings to the Light. Perhaps he is simply uninformed, perhaps he is deliberate in his avoidance or maybe he is truly treacherous—Harry can only guess.

The young wizard isn't going to treat the man with gentle hands. He can't afford to be trusting. Despite knowing that it will aggravate the man's condition, Harry hits him with a Reviving Spell.

Lupin looks frail and pitiable as he awakens and seems disoriented. Perhaps it is instinct, but he tries to move, eyes suddenly open although bleary. He appears frantic a moment later.

"Relax. You're safe. For now." Harry says, forcing himself to be emotionless. He has to handle this like Tom might; by keeping up a cold mask. There is a cup of water on the floor by the bed and Harry gives it to Lupin, telling him to take a sip.

"Where—"

"You're enjoying the hospitability of Fenrir Greyback," Harry informs the man, "His pack mates found you in the forest in a rather dreadful state."

Upon hearing Greyback's name, Remus attempts to get up. Harry pushes him back down, seeing as the man is skinny and sickly. "There's nowhere to run, Remus. I told you—you're safe for now."
That, however, might change. Do not tempt the big bad Alpha with the really sharp teeth. You are only alive because I have ordered so."

Remus, confused and in pain, feels a tremendous sense of fear but he's also glad for it. He welcomes death. For months now, he has suffered, clawing at his own skin to relieve the ache. Moony, close to madness, keeps trashing inside his mind, howling and whimpering in deep pain, betrayal and confusion.

He's sick because he deserves to be. He just wants to find a bit of peace and stop the constant pain deep in his very core. He doesn't care whether Greyback rips him to shreds. Of course, he doesn't really know why he is where he is, but maybe he had wandered into pack land out of some sense of suppressed longing for a pack of his own. Subconsciously, he might have drifted towards his maker—the Alpha wolf who had turned him into a loathsome creature.

Werewolves are not solitary; they need a pack. The support system of other werewolves often helps them stay safe and sane. Remus once had a pack of his own—James, Sirius, Lily, even little rat Peter. Then his world had been obliterated in an instant; James and Lily dead, Sirius in Azkaban and Peter dead as well. Grief had clouded his mind. Rage had paved the way for his solitude and dependency. In his darkest moments, Dumbledore had seemed like a shining beacon of light. Offering him a way to belong, but he never did. A werewolf trying so hard to be a normal human.

He had pushed Sirius away; distrustful and still wrapped up in his own sorrow, Remus had only seen the possibility of something nefarious. But he hardly cares about such matters now. The Order had betrayed him. Dumbledore had used him. He had lost his friend and Harry. And now he's just waiting for death to arrive.

"Before I let you meet your pathetic end, I want to know why you did it, Remus? Dumbledore put a collar on you and you let him hold the leash without ever questioning it. You know, I really thought that I could trust you, but you're just like the rest of them. You never cared about me."

Remus' brow puckers, the haze of pain strong enough to knock him out, but he recognises the voice. He blinks, vision blurry, but he sees a dark-haired man. So familiar yet so distant. He believes that he knows him. "Harry?"

"Yeah, Harry, the one you so willingly discarded in favour of Dumbledore's bloody approval." Harry snorts without humour.

"Harry, please—"

"Tell me, Remus," Harry asks, stopping Remus from speaking further, "did you know about the Dursleys? Did you know what sort of fucked-up Muggles Dumbledore left me with? Did you know about his plans to use me as a bloody pawn in his own agenda? Did you know about his grand plan to have me die for his own selfish purposes to become a great hero after the war he himself wanted in the first place? Did you nod along as the Order talked about sacrificing me? Did you ever care about me at all or were you just being a good little lapdog?"

Remus shakes his head, eyes filling with tears. "No, please...I—"

Harry's magic flickers around him, making the room shake a bit. Somewhere something shatters. A chair splinters. A sudden gust of wind rattles the windows.

"What? Can't handle a bit of truth, Remus? What did Dumbledore offer you? Did he promise you that he would keep you safe from ending up tagged and collared by the Ministry? Did he promise to fight the atrocious registry proposed by Umbridge? If you believed that, you really are gullible.
Dumbledore controlled the Wizengamot through my seat, through Siri's seats, and he never lifted a bloody finger to stop it from happening. He didn't care. He likely wanted it to come to pass. Moody said it best, didn't he? Half-breeds and creatures ought to be put down, no matter their human side. Did you really think that you were special, Remus? That they gave a rat's arse about you, a werewolf?"

Remus shakes all over, but Harry doesn't stop.

"Instead of opening your fucking eyes to the truth, you chose to run away. You chose to remain blind. You told me how much I reminded you of Lily, how you saw her as a sister because she was kind and treated you with love, but you had no problem with spitting on her fucking memory by betraying her son. And Sirius...he would have died for my parents and you still think he had something to do with their death. Even when Pettigrew was arrested and it was proven that he was the traitor, you still suspected Sirius. Your friend, a man who willingly stayed with you during your transformations because he cared about you. He never cared about you being a werewolf."

The magic is like a whip and it cracks, making the window shatter. Harry's temper is climbing. "I don't even know why I'm here! I should just let Fenrir have you—fuck!"

"Harry, calm down." Tom enters the room, his magic instantly seeking out Harry in order to help him settle. "Fenrir would likely be upset should you demolish one of his cabins."

Harry twists around. Tom is his rock and he can always make everything better, but anger is a powerful emotion. "Tom—"

"Dearest, I urge you to leave the room and regain control over your emotions. While I do enjoy seeing the destructive side of your magic, the children are scared. You've created a bit of storm outside."

Winds beat against the window, trees whip back and forth like thin blades of grass. The sun is shrouded by thick grey clouds.

A bit embarrassed about losing control like a child, Harry takes a shuddering breath. He buries his head into Tom's chest and mutters. "Sorry. Got a bit carried away."

"Do not apologise. Perhaps it would best to return home for now?"

Harry nods. He can't stand to be near Remus. Knowing that he's right, but still hoping to be wrong about the man. Still hoping that Remus isn't the sort of man who would walk away from a child like so many others have done.

"Ask Fenrir to escort you back to the manor."

"No, I want to reassure the children that I'm not a psycho. Well, not a huge psycho."

Tom stays in the room as Harry leaves. He watches the werewolf trembling under the covers. Lupin looks like death warmed over; pasty and gaunt, with dark circles under his eyes. He's looking delightfully scared and wretched.

"We have not been introduced, Mister Lupin. Allow me to correct that appalling show of manners. I am Lord Voldemort, the Dark Lord. Also known as Tom Riddle to some. But most importantly, I am Harry's husband."

Lupin's eyes widen and he presses himself deeper into the mattress.
"Aside from conquering the wizarding world and attempting to clean up after fools like your good Master, I am wholly dedicated to keeping my husband happy and protected. This also includes eliminating those who have harmed him. I could tell you that I derive no pleasure from it, but I would be lying. Now, Mister Lupin, seeing as you are one of those people, I regret to inform you that I will kill you for bringing Harry such sorrow." Tom's smile isn't pleasant. His eyes shine maroon as he contemplates snuffing the life out of Lupin. "However, I do believe that Fenrir should receive the honour of disposing of you. He is, after all, strangely fond of Harry. And of course, Fenrir does not look kindly upon those who have betrayed his pack by siding with the ones looking to slaughter werewolves for no other reason than hatred and disgust."

"Is he happy?" Remus asks, voice trembling. "Did you force—"

Tom laughs, but his eyes are cruel. "You dare imply that I would force Harry into a marriage? Harry has been mine for a long time, Lupin. At first, as a friend. Then as a lover. And now he is my husband, my equal. I cherish him. He belongs with me; not because I have forced him but because it is what he wants."

The notion of Harry Potter being married to the Dark Lord is mindboggling. Harry being Dark is even more so.

"Dumbledore hoped that Harry and I would kill each other. He did everything he could to make Harry suffer; to make him feel alone and worthless. His friends betrayed him. The Weasley boy and the Mudblood were both Dumbledore's puppets. And then there is you, Lupin. A dear friend of his parents, but nothing more than a weak man, clinging to Dumbledore. Do you think it was a hard choice for Harry to make? Loathed and betrayed by those who he called friends, Harry decided to cut his strings and free himself from an old bastard's manipulations. He is finally happy, surrounded by loyal friends and family."

"I—"

"You are alive still because Harry wanted to talk to you. I think he is merely looking to convince himself that you are not a traitor, even though he understands the small likelihood of it being true. You will not be missed, Lupin. Harry will not shed tears. Neither will Black."

"Sirius..." Remus isn't all that shocked. "He is a Death Eater then?"

"No. Black is a free agent, as they say. He is a Dark wizard, affiliated with my cause, but he is not marked by me. He is too much trouble. I am not overly fond of reckless idiots."

Remus shakes his head, feeling a deep sense of sadness. "So he did betray James and Lily."

Tom laughs. "No, he did not betray his friends. I tortured him for the location but he did not say a word. I tried to pry his mind open but he has surprisingly good mental shields that I could not break without leaving his mind fractured."

For a brief but wonderful moment, Tom tries to imagine it. But Black's already a tad unhinged, Azkaban leaving its mark on the man's mind. He is forced to admit that Black is no weakling magically speaking. And he makes Lucius happy which, of course, is important to Tom. In the privacy of his own mind, he is willing to admit that he feels somewhat fatherly towards the fair-haired wizard. It is hard not to, considering the many years he has known Lucius. The number of years teaching him, protecting him, cultivating a type of lust for magic—it is something a parent might do.

Tom turns back to Lupin and says, "He told me that he'd rather die than sell out his best friend and
Potter's wife. I did not learn anything from Black. It was Pettigrew who eagerly revealed their location. He framed Black for the murders because of some sort of petty resentment. You see, Lupin, you have thought ill of your friend for many years without any cause. Yes, Black is one of mine, but he was fiercely loyal to the Potters. I could not break him."

Aghast, Remus closes his eyes. He had never trusted Sirius. But he does believe the Dark Lord. He knows it to be the truth. And it feels awful.

"Now, Mister Lupin," Tom says, a dangerous smirk on his lips, "I shall leave you in Fenrir's capable hands. He will likely dispose of you."

Remus simply nods. He doesn't have anything to live for so he welcomes it. He smiles a little sadly. "Harry's right...I did run; I hid away from the world. But I didn't know about Dumbledore's plans regarding Harry. I was a fool, blind and obedient. But I didn't know. The moment I met Harry, I felt connected to him. He reminded me of what it's like to have a family. And I was a coward. So blinded by self-hatred and fear that I was only capable of making poor choices. I'm not trying to excuse what I did. Harry has every right to hate me. I accept his anger and retribution."

Tom does not say anything and leaves Lupin on his own. However, he does not give Fenrir an order to kill the man. Instead, he tells the werewolf to keep the other one alive. It has to be Harry's decision.

*****

Breakfast is a family affair around Malfoy Manor. Even Severus attends because Cissy makes him. He can't spend every waking minute with his precious potions or so he's told.

Draco is an early riser, unlike his father who tends to be the last one down. But they all wait for him because he is the master of the manor and it is simply rude to start a meal without the Head of the Family.

Narcissa toys with her napkin as she waits. She's incredibly hungry, but a lady of her status will not break the rules and nibble on a piece of fruit.

Sirius arrives first, sailing into the dining room with a bright smile. Cissy offers a warm smile in return but Severus sneers in his own special way. He can't tolerate such cheerfulness so early in the morning. When Lucius finally steps into the dining room, perfection personified, Sirius grins and takes his seat as well.

After the initial round of pleasantries, Cissy lets out a small trill, just like an excited bird, and her eyes widen. The clinking of the silverware stops.

It draws Severus' attention away from his coffee. He spots the dreamy look on his partner's lovely face, but he isn't sure why she's suddenly looking so delighted and ditsy. Since no one is explaining it to him, he looks around the table. Black is wearing an irritatingly smug smile; the one that makes Snape's teeth ache.

"Oh, my wonderful boys." The witch gushes, her hands flattened against her heart. She practically beams. "I am so happy for you both."

It only takes Severus a few seconds to notice it. It's bloody hard not to. Coupled with Narcissa's
dewy-eyed look and Black's annoyingly smarmy face...it becomes painfully clear.

"Merlin's balls, what is that?" Severus inhales, sharp and close to choking as he eyes the ring on his friend's finger. "Is that—"

"Glad you asked, Snivelly." Sirius barks out a laugh. "Now, I hope you forgive me for not asking you to attend our wedding, but the thing is that I don't really fancy you. Try to get it over it."

Lucius ignores Sirius' laughter and clears his throat, seeing as he is the one everyone is eyeing with interest. "Last night, Sirius asked my hand in marriage and I accepted."

Draco smirks. "Congratulations, Father, Sirius."

Relieved to hear sincerity in his son's voice, Lucius smiles. "Thank you, Draco."

Severus, however, splutters. "You're honestly going to marry that? The dim-witted Gryffindor moron?"

Cissy hisses through her teeth. "Severus!"

"I understand your animosity, Severus," Lucius informs the man, his voice a shade colder than before. "But that does not, in any way, concern me. Sirius is who I have chosen. While I value your opinion, I urge you to control yourself. I will not allow you or anyone else to criticise my choices."

"I cannot offer my heartfelt congratulation because your choice leaves much to be desired, but for the sake of our friendship, I will attempt to make an effort to respect it."

Severus gives a curt nod before disappearing.

Cissy lets out a sigh. "He will sulk for a while but he will come around." She smiles, forgetting about decorum, and slinks closer to Lucius. She takes the vacant seat close to the man and demands to see the ring. After a few moments of admiring it, Cissy's face transforms completely. A sort of ravenous look appears. "You must let me arrange the wedding reception."

Sirius senses that it's not a request but rather an order. "Don't look at me, Cousin. I'm just going to pay for it, show up, get hitched and spend the night drinking and dancing with my husband."

Narcissa grabs hold of Lucius' arm, her nails digging into his skin, With her eyes gleaming, she smiles. "We will plan the entire thing together. Oh, I've wanted to do this for ages. Ages, Lucius!"

"Well, pardon me for not getting married sooner."

"Do not joke, Lucius. I am incredibly honoured to have been trusted with such an important event." Cissy sniffs. She takes one last look at the ring and makes a fluttering noise. "I do not know whether to be jealous or not."

"Snivellus certainly can't afford something like that."

Cissy's eyes narrow and she tells Sirius, "Just for that alone, I am going to make you wear Slytherin colours."

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Harry admires the ring on Lucius' finger with a happy glimmer in his eyes. It's beautiful and definitely suits the blond. The smile on Sirius' face doesn't slip once and he happily pulls Harry into a tight hug to accept his congratulations.

As Lucius and Sirius seat themselves, Tom arrives and raises a brow at the two. Harry's face is shining with glee.

"Dearest, Siri and Lucius have some news they wish to share with you."

Tom, intrigued, takes a seat next to Harry and eyes the two wizards as if to say 'well, get on with it'. But before either of the wizards can get a word out, Tom spots the magnificent stone adorning Malfoy's finger. "I see." Tom muses, equally amused and a bit perplexed.

"Luce is going to marry me." Sirius beams.

Harry snuggles closer to his own husband. "It's a really nice ring, don't you think?"

Nice doesn't even begin to cover it. Tom feels like he should buy Harry a bigger stone just to make sure that Black's not outshining him. It's childish, Tom realises that, but it is a massive diamond.

"Go on, take a closer look," Harry whispers to Tom, a smile on his face.

"I don't need to take a closer look. One can see it from space." Tom mutters.

Lucius hears all that and clears his throat, gaining the Dark Lord's attention. "Seeing as we haven't settled on a date yet, we can't exactly tell you when the ceremony will take place. But I do have a request, my Lord."

Tom's eyebrow goes up a little. He sees that Black's still beaming like an idiot, so the request cannot be anything too outrageous. He gives Lucius a nod.

"Sirius and I discussed this and we have decided that we wish for a traditional bonding ceremony."

The Dark Lord is, frankly, a bit shocked. Not many opt for such a ceremony, for magical bonds are unbreakable and should not be taken lightly. A traditional bonding ceremony is a magical ritual that requires a bit of power and unwavering commitment.

"What's that?" Harry asks.

Tom says, "It is a magical bonding that binds two people. In essence, all marriages in the wizarding world are magically binding on some minor level, but a traditional bonding involves a ritual. During the ceremony, natural magic is called upon to bless the union and magic ties the bonded couple together. It is an old ritual that has mostly fallen into obscurity due to the declining of the old ways."

Sirius pipes in. "It's considered a Dark ritual. That's why no one's doing it. That and the fact that only pure-bloods know about it."

"But what's so dark about magic blessing a marriage?"

"It requires a blood sacrifice," Lucius explains. "Although it is no more than a few drops. However, all rituals that require any sort of blood sacrifice are classified as Dark."

"That's stupid," Harry snorts.

Lucius agrees wholeheartedly. He returns to his request. "My Lord, we wanted to ask you to perform the ritual to evoke the natural elements."
It is a great honour and Tom is aware of it. He is quite powerful and evoking the natural elements is no hardship for a wizard like him. But it's mostly the reverence of being involved in such an intimate and important ritual. It's the sort of thing one might do for their...son. Clearing his throat, Tom pushes down the weird lump of emotions. "Of course, I would be honoured."

"We're going to have a wedding reception before, to sign the papers and all that, but the bonding ceremony is just for close family. Obviously, we're going to kick you all out when it's time to consummate the bond."

Harry's face is a delightful mix of confusion and a shred of cautious understanding.

"Sex magic is also considered a Dark practice," Tom smirks as Harry flushes a pretty shade of pink. "But it strengthens the bond and adds to the sacrifice. Any sort of bodily fluid makes the magical sacrifice stronger and a strong sacrifice makes for a generous blessing."

"It's creepy that you know all that," Harry tells the man. "Seriously, Tom."

Sirius grins. "So consider yourselves invited. Cissy's planning the reception and she's in charge of all that stuff."

"When will you make the announcement?" Tom inquires.

Lucius shares a look with Sirius and the latter says, "Err...not sure."

"It is customary to announce such matters to avoid rumours." Tom muses with a small smile. He smirks, eying the blond wizard. "You need only appear in public and the rumours will start. Everyone will speculate and try to perk up their tedious lives by digging into yours. It is what common people do."

Harry tries not to laugh as he looks at his husband. "This is next level snobbery, Tom. Really, how your neck can support that ego bloated head of yours is a mystery to me."

"That is what they are, Harry. I'm only using the correct term." Tom sniffs. When he sees that Harry's still amused, hiding a laugh behind quivering lips, he stands. "Come along, Lucius. I need you to take a look at some documents."

The blond wizard shoots Sirius a reprimanding look because the Animagus is about to laugh. It's clear that he's holding it back. Harry, the picture of innocence, smiles up at him, but his green eyes are filled with mirth.

Tom mutters something about cackling children as he and Lucius leave the room, Harry's laughter escorting them out.

"I'm on probation, so cool it, Pup," Sirius comments with a lopsided grin. "Once we're married, Luce can't divorce me for being an idiot."

"Too late now anyway," Harry says. "He's stuck with you."

"Sometimes I wake up and I can't believe I'm actually here, you know. And I'm getting married to Lucius Malfoy, the bloke I despised and secretly lusted after ever since I figured out what to do with my prick. For years, I watched him. And then he married Cissy, the cousin I actually liked. It was bloody annoying. We knew about each other, sure, but we never really interacted. I wasn't marked so I didn't get involved with the big boys until I graduated and got sent on missions for the Dark Lord. I had casual lovers and it was fun, but no one quite so stunning as Lucius. No one made my blood boil."
"And then Azkaban happened." Harry sighs.

"Yeah, then Azkaban happened and I knew... I knew that even if I did get out, I would never be the same again. I just accepted the fact that no one would want a fucked-up ex-convict. But I just had to try, Pup. Lucius—he's bloody perfect. And I'm a washed-up Azkaban dweller who drinks too much and can't handle the dark because I'm reminded of the prison cell I lived in for twelve pointless years. I'm mostly made up of bad ideas, alcohol, ancestral Black madness and bravado that is meant to hide how screwed up I am inside. And I know how fucking pathetic all this sounds but I thought I would die on that forsaken rock in the middle of nowhere. I thought I deserved it."

Harry lets out a pained sound. "No, Siri...You didn't deserve it. It's completely unfair that you were locked up for so many years."

Sirius blinks away the tears starting to gather and attempts to smile. "I have a chance now; to finally live, to be free, to love. And I have you, Pup."

"Did you ever think you'd marry?" Harry asks, curious to know.

"It was never something I thought about. When James told me about his plan to propose to your mum, I didn't feel any sort of desire to find someone for myself. Relationships weren't really my thing. I never had a shortage of partners, but I never considered anything long-term with them. In all honestly, Luce is the first—and last—for me. The first person I have romantic feelings for, the first person to make me feel anything, the only one I want to marry. I can't see myself bonding to anyone else."

"This bonding ritual—it's permanent, right? It's literally 'till death do us part'."

Sirius nods, a happy smile flitting over his face. "Yes, it's permanent. I mean, we can't undo the bonding, but we can still get a divorce. It won't change the fact that this ritual will tie us together for the rest of our natural lives."

"Have you thought about what that means, Siri. Don't get me wrong, I think it's great, but—"

"I want to spend my remaining years with Lucius. That won't ever change. I love him. That's for life, Pup. I'm wholly devoted to him. Lucius is all I want."

"Yeah, I get it. And I am happy for you, Siri. I'm not trying to dissuade you or something. And I'm kind of jealous that Tom didn't mention it—I would have loved to do this bonding ritual with him."

"You're young, Pup. Maybe he didn't want to overwhelm you. And it's not like you can't do the bonding ritual in a few years." Sirius makes a face and says, "Just don't ask me to be a witness."

Harry frowns. "Why?"

"Because I don't want to see Tommy's dick hanging out."

Harry bursts out laughing.

"I'm not joking, kid. Cissy is going to be our witness for the rune marking. And since that comes right before the summoning of the elements and the shagging to seal the deal, it's going to be a bit drafty down there. She has seen me naked before so I don't mind and she has definitely seen Luce naked."

"Leaving aside the fact that it's in my head now, what's the rune marking for and why do you have to be naked?"
"You draw a number of runes which symbolise the natural elements on each other's bodies. They should start glowing once the blessing of the natural magic takes place. It doesn't actually have any other purpose," Sirius explains. Then he grins. "And I get to fondle Luce."

"I feel like I should know more about this only to annoy Tom." Harry muses. "But I still don't get why someone has to witness it."

"It's tradition, Pup. The blessing has to be validated by a third person. A traditional bonding ritual isn't something you can improvise; there are rules and all that shite. That's why it's mostly a pure-blood practice and a lot of them won't bother with it since it's borderline Dark magic and not a lot of marriages are love matches. Not to mention the fact that someone powerful has to evoke the elements. Tommy is among the few who actually has it in them to summon all four elements at once. Not everyone can ring up the Dark Lord and have him put on a good show."

"Well, lucky you that we're all a big, happy family. He would have probably done it for Lucius anyway since they have that weird father-son thing going for them," Harry says.

The younger wizard has an elf bring them some snacks and tea.

Sirius plops a biscuit into his mouth and hums. "Tommy didn't look as constipated as I thought he would. I'm not the ideal son-in-law."

Harry stirs honey into his tea and smiles. "That's because he has accepted the fact that he can't get rid of you. And he knows that Lucius loves you. He cares, in his own weirdly affectionate but disturbing way."

"You should have seen Snivelly's face." Sirius laughs.

"Well, he despises you, Siri. Did you think he'd be thrilled?"

"Whatever. I don't give a toss about Snape or his feelings." Sirius shrugs. He takes another biscuit and relaxes against the sofa.

Harry clears his throat, wondering if he should burst Sirius' happy bubble or not. But he has to tell him. "So, there's this thing I need to talk to you about."

"If this is about that ginger bitch, I already apologised to you for forcing the issue."

Harry shakes his head. "No, it's not about Molly. Although I'm still a bit mad at you for that. Not about Molly ending up dead, because I don't really care. It had more to do with everyone disregarding my wishes in favour of their own. I feel like I had no say in it, you know. Anyway, that's not what I want to talk about." Harry takes a breath to placate his own anger and says, "It's about Remus."

Sirius' face darkens. "What about him?"

"Fenrir's pack-mates found him near their land, barely alive and in rags. Fenrir told me about it and I decided to pay him a little visit. He was totally out of it but he figured out who I was. I didn't actually get anything useful out of him because I lost my temper and caused an embarrassing scene when my magic lashed out."

"What did you expect to hear, Pup?" Sirius asks, his brow furred. "Too little, too late, I say."

"I don't know what I expected to hear, Siri. Maybe for him to confirm what I already know or maybe I wanted him to slip me another lie about how he didn't know about anything. I don't know."
Losing a friend is never easy, but Sirius didn't really lose Remus. At least, the loss isn't fresh. Remus disappeared years ago, right after Sirius was locked away, and he never made an attempt to help or even believe the wizard he had called his friend. For Sirius, it is an old ache; a dull and forgotten memory.

"Be realistic, Pup." Sirius sighs. He understands Harry's conflicting emotions but says, "Remus might not be on Dumbledore's side, but he's not on your side either."

"I can handle him not being on my side but it burns me up inside when I think about Remus betraying me... betraying us for a chance to stay on Dumbledore's good side."

"Yeah, well...it did happen," Sirius mutters. "Remus hates parts of himself that cannot be changed. He keeps Moony suppressed because he fears the wolf's nature, fears the transformation into a mindless beast."

Harry snorts bitterly. "Isn't that what Dumbledore did? He twisted Remus' fears and intensified them for his own selfish bullshit. The old man made him think that only the Order can keep him safe from the nasty world that hates his kind. The old fucker chained Remus to himself, made him grateful for false protection. He made Remus feel obligated."

"You can't save everyone."

"Well, I want to save this one, Siri," Harry states, eyes blazing. "I feel that no one really gave Remus a chance. To be more than just a sickly werewolf trapped in a cycle of self-hate. Dumbledore used him. He took away Remus' choice by shackling him to some sort of redemption that could be gained by fighting against his own kind, against those who Dumbledore labelled evil and corrupted."

"Dumbledore got his claws in him from an early age," Sirius tells the younger wizard. "He kept his status as werewolf secret, provided him with Wolfsbane, made sure he had a place to transform. Dumbledore made himself into a bloody hero and Remus looked up to him, trusted him completely."

"And he felt that he had to pay the old man back somehow. Dumbledore's kindness was nothing more than an invisible collar around Remus' neck."

"Look, I don't think Remus knew about those Dursley bastards. I believe he thought you were safe and taken care of. But the fact still remains that he never tried to contact you when it became clear to the Order that you weren't with the Muggles. He just disappeared with his tail between his legs."

Harry nods. He agrees with Sirius' assessment. But there is something that still makes Harry hope. "And we never made an effort to get him to switch sides. Siri, I know that this might sound completely insane to you, but I want to try."

"The last time I saw Remus, he didn't even look me in the eye. He didn't talk to me. But I knew he was looking at me with fear. He probably still thinks that I sold out your parents and got them killed. Nothing can repair that sort of distrust, Pup."

"I'm not asking you to be best mates again," Harry says, "I just think that maybe giving him a second chance is a better choice than killing him. If he refuses then Fenrir and his pack can have him for a chew toy."

"I'm with you, Pup. But you shouldn't jump in head first."

"You mean I can't be a Gryffindor about this?" Harry smirks.

"Something like that, yes."
Tom and Lucius walk back into the sitting room to collect their Gryffindors just in time to hear Harry say, "I should probably send a Healer to check on him. He didn't look so good when I left."

"A Healer for your treacherous wolf?" Tom questions.

"Actually, I've decided to reform him," Harry informs his husband with a smile. "Maybe Fenrir can make a proper wolf out of him."

Sirius can't really picture it and huffs a laugh. Lucius settles back next to him and Sirius pushes down the urge to kiss the wizard. It will likely get him hexed anyway. But he does sneak his fingers around the blond's without having his hand removed by Lucius. It's nice to share sweet comforting touches.

Tom considers Harry's idea and asks, "You think you can reform Dumbledore's pet? Fenrir will not have the patience to deal with a weakling like Lupin."

"Greyback's pack will likely not accept Lupin as one of them," Lucius throws in his two Knuts. "He is known to them as a traitor."

"Let's talk about something more cheerful for a change," Harry hums, "like the fact that Neville has decided to take charge of the Longbottom lordship and the seat in the Wizengamot."

Tom is delighted by the news and says, "It will mean another seat for our faction."

"Well, he's going to need some help with that. Augusta never bothered to teach her grandson anything. She just thought that she'd have it all to herself. She doesn't respect Neville at all; she thinks Neville's useless. Fucking bitch."

"We can teach the boy," Tom muses. "The House of Longbottom was once a prominent family. It will be remade as such."

Sirius points out, "Augusta won't just allow Neville to usurp her spot. That old crone is as wily as they come."

Noticing a certain gleam in Tom's eyes, Harry groans. "No murder, Tom. I'm serious. We can't kill her. She's still Neville's grandmother; his only family."

"I can always keep her in the dungeons until she agrees to vacate the Longbottom seat in favour of her grandson."

"Sorry, have you actually met her?" Sirius barks out a laugh.

"I have to agree, my Lord," Lucius says. "She is perhaps one of Dumbledore's most ardent followers. Even after the old man's death, she shows him unwavering support. She will not back down without a fight."

"We will find a way to silence the witch." Tom adds when he sees Harry's glare, "Without murder."

*****

Two weeks after Tom's announcement to run for Minister, the first hurdle gets eliminated thanks to the wizard's deadly aura alone.
One of the wizards running against Tom drops out of the race and decides to take a very long holiday abroad.

The Wizengamot is clearly divided. Pure-bloods support the relatively unknown Thomas Riddle, the current Lord Gaunt, while the Light wizards and randomly selected members appear to support Elphias Doge, an old friend of Dumbledore's.

It does grind on Tom's nerves to go up against some old doddering fool but as Harry has told him multiple times, murder is not a magical solution. He has to win legitimately in order to gain public support.

Doge is ancient. And firmly Light. His smear campaign seems to gather allies but since he is old and obviously narrow-minded, he's also gaining a lot of negative attention. The younger generation is more open-minded and less likely to go along with solutions that seem way too harsh.

Sirius has proven to be a useful tool in irritating Doge and his supporters, getting them to spout insults at him.

Tom's campaign is simple, yet pioneering. Equal rights for creatures, a comprehensive education for wizarding youth, new reforms to battle the Ministry's problems with ineptitude and unqualified officials, a renewed Statute of Secrecy, pre-schools for Muggle-borns among others—that is what the Dark Lord offers. Officially, that is. He has a lot of unofficial plans as well, but that's his own business.

Doge wants the exact opposite. Many see that but others do not. They would rather blindly follow someone they consider to be Light than support someone who seems to side with the Dark. Doge speaks of the dangers involving creatures and magical beings. He speaks of them as if they are all evil and bloodthirsty. He says that Hogwarts needs to stay as it is because it is Dumbledore's legacy. He badmouths those who he believes to be Dark. He claims to care deeply for Muggle-borns but doesn't give a toss about their education or integration. He has no ideas, nothing new to offer—just Albus Dumbledore's vision.

But Dumbledore is no longer the hero starring in everyone's dreams about peace and unity. The old man's past is being dragged to the surface thanks to the efforts of Luna's father. Dumbledore is a fading star.

It is too soon to tell if Tom's plans will come to anything, but crushing Doge is necessary.

It takes another week for Tom to snap. It's a dreadfully cold February night when Bellatrix, Rabastan and Fenrir arrive at their destination. Doge gets dragged out of his bed in the middle of the night by a masked assailant. Rabastan pulls the old man to his knees and Disapparates with him. Bellatrix and Fenrir follow the two into an abandoned house outside Little Hangleton.

Doge yells for help but no one hears him. "Murderers, fiends! Release me at once! Do you know who I am?"

"Quiet, old man," Bellatrix purrs, dragging the tip of her wand down the wizard's cheek. "Pathetic, snivelling old man."

"He reeks of bigotry," Fenrir grins as he steps forward, revealing himself to Doge.

"Fenrir Greyback! Monster...Dear Merlin." Doge splutters, eyes wide. He shrieks out, "Help! Someone help me, please. Help!"

Bellatrix laughs. "Are you scared, old man? You should be scared. All that juicy fat meat...you'll
make a fine meal for hungry wolves. Come on, old man, scream for me. Scream!"

Doge does scream. Bellatrix casts the Cruciatus five or six times in a row. It only takes a smile from Greyback to make Doge's eyes roll into the back of his skull.

"Thin-skinned bastard." Rabastan tucks his wand away and turns to Bellatrix. "We should take him to the dungeons before he wakes up."

The Dark Lord is already waiting as Rabastan goes to report. "My Lord, the wizard is unconscious. Bellatrix locked him in."

"Excellent work. Tell Bellatrix and Fenrir to leave him alone for now. I want him to experience dread once he wakes and finds himself in a magically binding cell."

Rabastan gives a small bow and Disapparates.

He could win through legal means, but he is still Lord Voldemort, the fearsome Dark Lord and he shouldn't have to wait. He will eliminate Doge and be done with it. But first, he's going to let the old man suffer in the darkness. He'll pluck strand after strand of the man's hair to make Polyjuice potion for one of his loyal followers. He will have this fake Doge trample on his own reputation and when the time is right, Tom will simply tell the imposter to recant his candidacy and retreat in shame. No one will want to go up against him. Everybody wins. But mostly the Dark Lord will win.

*****

Harry is tackled by a small army of children as soon as he enters pack land. Fenrir grunts something about disobedient cubs but doesn't tell the young wolves to scatter.

He has far more pressing matters to deal with. Namely Lupin. The wizard has been there close to a month already. Now he is well enough to receive visitors, namely the Dark Lord's husband and Sirius Black.

Black, having changed into his Animagus form, trots after Harry and tries to dodge eager wolf cubs who want to ride on his back.

Lupin is an odd one. He's quiet and submissive, but snarls and snaps at anyone who attempts to get close to him. He doesn't like the other wolves sniffing around but he doesn't dare chase them away just yet. The next full moon is in six days. Fenrir almost dreads it. Either Lupin manages to get the pack to accept him or he'll be ripped apart by the others. In the end, Fenrir has to deal with it. He hates that sort of thing.

He spots the young wizard walking towards him. Black remains with the gaggle of children, chasing the giggling terrors around the clearing.

Remus is inside a different small cabin that sits just on the edge of the forest, away from the other cabins and communal areas. Harry doesn't knock and walks right in. The man is in the small kitchen, pouring himself a cup of tea. The teapot slips from the wizard's grasp as he sees Harry standing in the middle of the room. "Harry—"

"You look healthier."
Remus grabs a towel from the counter to clean up the spilt tea from the floor. He looks a bit fearful and awkward, unsure what to do or say. He clutches the towel between white knuckles. "The Healer purged my body from toxins. I've been taking Wolfsbane for so long..." He clamps his mouth shut and looks at Harry with muddled eyes. "The potions Moody supplied me with were laced with undiluted aconite."

"Then you'll be glad to know that the bastard is dead. He didn't enjoy it either. But he deserved it."

Remus looks momentarily stunned but he can't find enough sympathy for a man who had tried to poison him.

Harry doesn't like the stiff mood and sits down on the patched-up sofa by the fireplace. He keeps his eyes on Remus. "I'm not going to kill you, Remus. No need to look so petrified."

That does nothing to ease Remus' mind. This Harry isn't the same Harry he remembers. This young wizard smells different. Powerful magic, sharp and metallic, like a crackle of electricity in the air. It makes Moony twitchy.

"I know I sort of alluded to the fact that you're about to die horribly, but you are not in any danger from me." Harry sighs. "And I'm sorry about last time."

"No, don't be. You were right." Remus takes a seat as well, although he doesn't relax just yet. Not with all the tension in the room. "Albus, he...he did a lot of things that made me feel thankful. During my time as a student, later when I struggled to find a job...and for a long time, I thought he did it because he genuinely cared. I didn't see his manipulations because I felt a great deal of gratitude. To me, it felt like I was obligated to join the Order and go on missions."

Harry snorts to himself. "He used you."

"I know. And I think I allowed him to use me because I felt like I owed it to him." Remus offers a sad smile.

"Dumbledore is dead now. So is Moody, Shacklebolt, Molly Weasley...The Order is no more; most of its members dead or scattered." Harry pauses and tilts his head. "I'm going to be frank with you, Remus. Initially, I did want you dead. But after I thought about it for a bit, I decided against it. Largely, because I do believe that you didn't know about Dumbledore's schemes. And you were only loyal to him out of some misguided sense of obligation. That's done now. We're giving you a second chance."

Harry pauses and goes on, "We as in Sirius and I...The Dark Lord doesn't really care as long as you don't start up any shite."

"I don't think I deserve a second chance."

Harry grins and says, "Well, too bad. You're getting one." After a moment, Harry adds, "But you have to stop taking Wolfsbane."

Remus flinches and his eyes widen. "I can't—"

"Forget everything you think you know about werewolves. Most of it is crap. Wolfsbane dulls the wolf's senses, makes it weak, chains it up and locks it in. That's bad for you, Remus."

Remus argues, "But I'll lose my mind without it! The wolf...it will be completely out of control, a beast without any rational thoughts."
"Yeah, that's a load of crock," Harry says and points out of the window. "Do you think the werewolves out there take Wolfsbane? No, they don't. They transform, have themselves a little hunting trip and chase their tails until they feel like taking a nap."

"I don't want to hurt anyone, Harry."

"And you won't." Harry smiles. "Look, you've been told that werewolves are savage creatures and they just kill without thought. That's what non-werewolves believe to be true. But regular humans don't know anything about werewolves aside from what they fear about them."

Remus is woefully uneducated when it comes to his own kind. But all he knows comes from books. Books that Dumbledore had given him. He had not wanted to learn anything else; just the parts he now hates the most.

"Moony is not separate from you. He is you, just as you are him. Fenrir can explain it better but basically, you just have to merge the two—you and Moony—and you won't ever have to worry about being a mindless monster. You and Moony share an awareness; you control it outside of the full moon, but Moony is in charge during the full moon." Harry says, "Remus, you have to accept that this is you. You can't change it. You are a werewolf."

"And I've hated myself for more than thirty years."

"The wizarding world has been fucked up for the past thirty years. And Tom's been trying to fix it." Harry tells the man. "Discrimination against magical creatures is pretty stupid considering the fact that we are all magic users."

"Harry—" Remus snaps his mouth shut and takes a deep breath. He's getting restless again, so he goes to the kitchen to make a new pot of tea. Hands shaking a bit, Remus stands in the doorway and says, "You married Voldemort."

"Yeah." Harry's smile is blinding. "And please don't ask me about my sanity. I know who I married and I won't apologise for loving him. I'm not the Golden Boy of Gryffindor. I was never Dumbledore's weapon." Seeing that Remus is a bit pale, Harry says, "I guess I'm a bit of hypocrite because I didn't tell you about my little double-cross, but I had to keep it under wraps in order to have Dumbledore hang himself in a noose of his own making."

"So you and Sirius...you pretended for years?"

"Hmm, yes, you could say that we pretended," Harry muses with a smirk. "But it had to be done. Sirius had to do it for longer, though Dumbledore never really trusted him. That's why he didn't lift a bloody finger to help Sirius; it was more convenient for him to let them lock Sirius up. With Sirius out of the way, Dumbledore made sure that he had me where he wanted me."

Remus recalls the day he heard of Sirius' supposed crimes. And he now knows that he had been a fool to believe any of it. Some part of him had believed Sirius to be capable of such horrible deeds—despite the friendship they had shared. Sirius, dishevelled and distraught, had screamed obscenities. Kicked and struggled as Aurors had attempted to detain him. He had appeared completely mad. Mad with grief and just plain crazy had seemed too similar for anyone to really spot a difference between the two.

"I need you to fully understand one thing," Harry says, his eyes firmly set on the werewolf. "Sirius did not betray my parents. He was not their Secret Keeper."

Remus nods. "Volde—I mean, the Dark Lord told me."
"Then you know that Sirius spent a lot of years in Azkaban for nothing. No one from the Order ever gave a fuck about him. They just didn't care. Dumbledore used it to gain all the Black seats and to bollocks up my life by dumping me with my mother's hysterical Muggle sister and her bigoted husband. Shacklebolt and Dumbledore stole from Sirius, waving a fake permission slip in front of some moron's face in Gringotts. Having Sirius in Azkaban was useful to them and not one of them ever cared whether he really did it or not."

"The evidence—"

Harry laughs, cracking one of those are-you-kidding-me smiles. "What evidence? All they found was a finger. A fucking finger! The Aurors were dumb as bricks and never bothered to find any real evidence. No one checked Siri's wand. All they had was a sodding finger, a few dead Muggles and a completely frantic Sirius who had just learned of his best friends' deaths. Of course, he was bloody upset and acting a little crazy. He knew that Pettigrew had betrayed my mum and dad. Then the old goat showed up and ripped me away from him. Can you really blame Sirius for going after Pettigrew, knowing how close he and my dad were? He snapped."

It seems obvious to Remus now. It makes perfect sense. But it hadn't made much sense to him all those years ago.

"And there was no trial. Everyone just assumed he did it and they locked him up without ever considering the possibility that he might not have done it. He was just thrown away like yesterday's rubbish. He wasn't allowed any visitors. They didn't even let the man's family members see him. Not one person from the Order supported him."

"Not even me," Remus sighs.

"No, not even his friend." Harry doesn't want to talk about depressing things, so he goes on, "Anyway, we can't change the past. Sirius is putting all that behind him now. He's finally happy again."

Remus feels a lot of conflicting feelings all at once. Guilt for abandoning Sirius and never fighting for Harry. But he's also scared to look forward. All he seems to have is his past.

The door is pulled open and Sirius appears in the doorway. He looks younger than Remus remembers; healthy and happier. A lot like the Sirius from old, the one that used to smile and laugh with James. The one that had twirled Lily around the room before her wedding. The one that had cradled little baby Harry with tenderness.

But he also looks different. Like a proper Lord Black ought to look like, with tailored robes, all neat and graceful with his shoulder-length curls. Tall and handsome, with his usual confident manner shining brightly. He steps inside but doesn't speak. He assesses Remus, trying to figure out whether the man is likely to run or welcome him in.

Remus truly feels like a rabbit caught in a snare, with a rather unpredictable predator glaring at him. Sirius has a temper and he requires little encouragement to go on a rampage.

But Sirius seems relaxed and says with a good-humoured smile. "I don't know how Fenrir puts up with those little terrors."

"Got your tail yanked?" Harry snorts. Seeing Sirius' subtle eye-roll, the young wizard shifts a bit to make room for the other wizard. The awkward moment seems to linger but Sirius takes a seat.

"Sirius—" Remus sighs, an apology on the tip of his tongue. But he can't bring himself to say it
outright. "I—"

"We won't ever be best mates again, Remus. Harry wants to give you another shot because he's Lily's kid and you know what she was like. I'm not going to pretend that things will go back to how they were twenty years ago. I can, however, be civil and offer you a clean slate because Harry thinks you should get a second chance. So just take it and stuff your griping, Moony."

Remus, a bit stunned that he's not being hexed, just nods. He knows that he and Sirius will never be best mates. He knows why that won't happen. But he's grateful to have a second chance if only to prove to Harry and to himself that he's not weak. He has to do right by James and Lily. Even if that means joining Voldemort's faction.

"Severus is going to send you some potions, and before you ask, it's not Wolfsbane. Just some nutritional potions and something to fully purge your system of toxic shit. You're going to live a healthy life from now on. Fenrir is going to educate you because you know next to nothing about werewolves despite being one. That's going to change. But this isn't an all-expenses-paid vacation, Remus. The pack won't accept you unless you prove to them that you're not Dumbledore's pet. You have to take charge of yourself and learn how to let go of this resentment you feel for Moony."

"I will likely be ripped to shreds in a few days time," Remus says without any humour.

Harry shrugs with a smile. "Adapt or die. Fenrir won't protect you, even though you are his cub. You have to embrace the fact that Moony is wild and he has the potential to be powerful."

"You've been hiding your whole life," Sirius tells Remus. "But you can't hide now. There's no point. You may not like it but you are a Dark creature. You have spent a lot of years denying the pull."

"And I should probably mention that if you don't settle your issues with Moony, you will be killed by a pack of werewolves," Harry says with a smirk. "They won't recognise you as a wolf if you don't merge with Moony."

"That's very reassuring, Harry." Lupin shakes his head, feeling a pinching pain around his eyes. He has been feeling agitated all morning but being forced to acknowledge the facts is another cause for a headache. Yes, he knows that he's a Dark creature and he has denied the pull for a lot of years, but accepting it is not easy. It will not happen overnight.

Harry isn't going to make it easy for the wizard and says, "You'll get a crash course courtesy of Fenrir. You're his problem because I said so. Dumbledore dug a big hole and told you to get in it, but I'm giving you a bit of rope to pull yourself out. Start fixing up your life, Remus."

Utterly baffled and filling with dread, Remus decides to pour himself a cup of tea. Tea always helps with troubled thoughts.

Sirius gets to his feet and groans a bit as he stretches. Harry's smirks seems a tad too crafty as he asks, "Old age catching up, Siri?"

"Too damn old to give pony rides to scruffy little brats."

Harry snorts. He turns to Remus and says, "I expect you to still be alive when I visit again. Otherwise, I will be rather disappointed with you."

"I'll try not to get maimed by wolves who want nothing more than to play tug-of-war with me."

Sirius laughs. "Good to know you haven't lost that twisted sense of humour, Moony."
"I like it," Harry states and says, "Take care, Remus."

Outside, walking towards the clearing, Harry asks Sirius, "Do you think he'll make it out alive?"

Sirius throws an arm around Harry's shoulders and smirks. "Trust me, kid. Remus isn't the meek pussycat he seems to be. He may deny it and try to shove it into a tight little box deep inside, but he has a darker nature than he lets on. He just has to get over his fear of being shunned. Once he realises that this is who he is and has always been...well, I think you'll see a whole new Remus."

"Is it weird that I want him to snap and see him go wild? Not that I want him to wolf-out and wreak havoc, but I think he needs to let loose, you know. Release a little chaos into the world."

"Remus came up with the best pranks when we were young. There's a reason he and Peeves got on. Remus is a trickster at heart. I don't know how Dumbledore managed to snuff it out, but it's high time for Remus to pull his head out of his furry arse."

Harry nods, feeling rather proud of himself. His decision to reform Remus feels like a good idea that might not blow up in his face.
Chapter Notes

I bet you're all thinking: "Is that an update I see?" or "Can it really be true?"

THIS STORY IS NOT DEAD, PEOPLE

Yes, after three months, I have finally updated. Please don't be too mad. As soon as September appeared from a shadowy place, I knew that I would not be able to dedicate as much time to this as I wanted to. Because as it turns out, all those people who told me that being a third-year student at University is way easier and that I would have lots of free time lied to me. Shame on you. Because I am doing more work now than ever before. I should be writing a 15-page analysis on Frankenstein but instead I decided to post another chapter because you all deserve this after waiting for months.

PS: I'm still interested to hear everyone's ideas about Remus and his Tinder match. Since Ao3 has no poll option, I'll just list possible candidates: Fenrir Greyback, Bill Weasley, Fred Weasley, Charlie Weasley, any of the Lestranges, OMC or OFC.

PPS: If I didn't list someone you have in mind, it's likely that they are not an option. I don't want to resurrect dead characters, so that's that. But feel free to suggest characters who are not listed here and are alive and not in a relationship with someone else.

As always, I treasure your kudos, comments and other forms of love. And constructive criticism as well. That's also a form of love, folks.

Chapter Twenty

Counting Stars

The Ministry building sees a lot of interesting characters just hours before the vote. The Wizengamot has already gathered, but no one really misses the fact that there are a few new faces around. And some old ones are missing—mostly supporters of Doge and his fraction. Tom enters the chamber as all the members take their seats. Unfortunately for those hoping to see the Light triumph, Doge is still lounging in one of the prison cells under Tom's manor. Doge—or rather the one pretending to be Doge—had recanted his candidacy without any sort of explanation. Tom is the only candidate but he still has to win the vote, otherwise, the election process will just start again.

Sirius sits with Lucius; the two of them are figuratively sitting on seventeen seats. The Animagus is
pleased to see Augusta Longbottom gone from the assembly. He sees Neville in her stead, looking a bit overwhelmed but mostly assured. He's young still but capable and he should be regarded like the Lord he is. The House of Longbottom should not be trifled with.

“I bet he regrets it now,” Sirius mused with a smirk.

Lucius, curious as to what Sirius is referring to, turns to the man, an eyebrow raised.

“Tommy.” Sirius nods towards the man who looks like a seething rain-cloud. “When has he ever cared for legality?”

Lucius, in fact, feel the same way, but he says, “This is not about legitimacy. This is about appealing to the public and creating a pleasant image to go with his reforms.”

Sirius hums. “Yeah. I can understand that. But it seems like a hassle, you know. Easier to blow shit up and just take it.”

The blond wizard pins the man with a surprised look. “You are not one for needless violence.”

“The wizarding community is steeped apathy. People are narrow-minded and only concerned about their own personal business. We are dying out, Luce. Pure-bloods, half-bloods, Muggle-borns… what does any of it matter if we're just standing still. All those wankers sitting in their offices… Tommy ought to just set fire to the Ministry and built a new one.”

The blond gently squeezes Sirius’ knee. He knows that it's the man’s bitterness speaking. No one had ever bothered to look into his case. He had not even received a trial for Salazar’s sake! At the time, Lucius had not bothered either. Cissy had expressed her concerns, had practically begged him to use his Ministry contacts to get some insight—but he had not lifted a bloody finger. Of course, they could not really look into it without compromising their position. They could not appear too sympathetic or risk alerting Dumbledore. And they had Draco’s well-being to think about.

Thinking about the years Sirius had spent in Azkaban, alone and hated, makes Lucius push down rising guilt. Forgotten by all, Sirius had suffered. It makes the blond’s heart constrict. All he had to do was get someone to look into Sirius’ case. Just place a few inquiries. Raise some red flags to get someone’s attention. But he had stayed in the sidelines, choosing to ignore Cissy’s frantic pleas.

It doesn’t matter that he hadn’t really cared for him back then; he hadn’t known him as he does now. It does not excuse his own apathy.

“Hah, look at him. I swear he’s clutching his wand right now.” Sirius nudges Lucius’ arm, smiling.

Such thoughts make something bitter rise up in the blond. He does not complain when Sirius takes his hand and laces their fingers together. There is a place for public displays of affection, but Lucius doesn’t have it in him to deny the man anything. He deserves affection.

“This is something new,” Sirius points out, looking down at their joined hands. “You're usually such an arse about me touching you when there is a crowd.”

Lucius just hums a non-verbal reply, keeping his eyes ahead.

“Don’t get me wrong, I'm not complaining. Fucking finally more like it.” Sirius smirks. “Is it something I can expect to see more often?”
“Perhaps.” Lucius clears his throat. “If you behave yourself, that is.”

Sirius knows that he’s treading on a very fine line but he places a light kiss on the wizard’s hand with a sly smirk. Even though he wants to do a lot more, he stops himself just in time. Maybe he can get away with more once they’re married.

They both turn their attention to the podium as Tom steps up. He is the perfect picture of a commanding wizard. He looks calm and completely in control. Of course, he controls his emotions and reactions, and only those closest to him can tell that he is somewhat restraining himself.

The voting is not anonymous—Tom will know who to curse later if he does not get the needed votes. It is time for his speech. He hasn’t prepared anything but already knows what he’s going to say.

“The wizarding community here in Britain has suffered a political stagnation for many years. The Ministry is not functioning as it should; it has fallen into disorder. Our reality is that wizards and witches do not trust the Ministry. All that will now change. It is my intention to bring Britain’s magical community out of the muck it has fallen into over the years. The constant and unstoppable stream of Muggle conventions will now come to an end. It is time for us to start honouring our own traditions. There is a violent distinction between Light and Dark magic, a cause furthered by many who would rather see us become relics of the past than acknowledge magic as a gift, whether Light or Dark. Dark magic is considered harmful and some may even call it evil, but that is simply propaganda spread by the misguided. I intend to bring back the old ways which have served us in the past. All magic is to be celebrated.”

It creates a mild buzz in the courtroom. Tom lifts his hand to silence them and it works splendidly. “Our children will learn all areas of magic. There will be no discrimination. Healers will no longer have to rely on spells which are considered fully Light magic to save lives. A mother will not be arrested for using blood magic in order to free her child from a curse. There will be restrictions, of course. Unforgivables will still be banned from widespread use, excluding Aurors and Hit wizards.”

“I believe that is it time to bring back the long-forgotten days of glory when magical society thrived. I wish to see our world prosper once more. This can only happen if reforms are implemented and the Ministry purged from incompetent and corrupted bureaucrats. Positions will not be handed out for special favours or bought with gold but rather assigned to those skilled enough to do a proficient job.”

The Chief Warlock clears his throat as Tom ends his speech. “The Wizengamot will now vote. All in favour of appointing Lord Thomas Gaunt as the Minister for Magic for the next four years please raise your hand.”

Tom’s plenty menacing to scare people into raising their hands but he hopes that he doesn’t have to. The Dark faction raises their hands. Sirius with his twelve votes, Lucius with his five, Greengrass, Parkinson and Nott with their votes. Almost all the pure-bloods raise their hands. Neville makes the first move and raises his hand, signalling that he, as Lord Longbottom, supports the wizard and his ideas. It prompts many others to raise their hands as well. As a whole, Tom’s ideas are not all that outrageous.

Doge’s supporters remain steadfast in their refusal to see beyond Dumbledore’s dead arse. But those who had not seen Doge as a possible Minister can be swayed. Tom is impatient but hides it well. Frankly, this is all unnecessary because he’s the Dark Lord and he can just storm the Ministry and take over. He could just kill everyone. He misses it. He misses the torture.

The voting comes to an end, shaking Tom out of his daydream. “Forty-seven against five. Lord
Gaunt takes office.

Members of the Wizengamot applaud but this is all a formality for the Dark Lord. Things have already been set into motion. He looks up to the stands and spots Lucius and Sirius, looking rather comfortable sitting side by side. He even sees Black holding Lucius’ hand. It’s…strange, he thinks. Never before has he seen Lucius so relaxed, especially in public. Black’s softly speaking to the man, leaning in closer than socially acceptable. But it seems that Lucius no longer cares to hide.

People shake his hand and congratulate him and Tom is forced to smile and make inane small talk. After a while, Tom is able to get away and he meets up with Sirius and Lucius. The couple congratulates him as well, but it’s only for show. He has to stand before reporters in a moment but wants to prepare himself. He isn’t sure how he will manage to smile for photographers. It’s murder.

“Harry will be pleased.” Lucius hums. “I believe he was worried that you will scare potential supporters away with your—scary Dark Lord aura, was it?”

Sirius snorts.

Tom is actually proud. “I am intimidating and the Dark Lord. And now I have to stand in front of all those idiots and smile and give ridiculous interviews to the likes of Skeeter.”

“Sirius and I will come by Riddle Manor later today. Expect us for lunch.”

Tom just nods, waving the two away. “Speak to Harry about lunch.” He can see that he is being called by his new adoring fan-club. It’s tedious but part of the game he’s playing with the gullible public. He takes a deep breath and conjures a smile on his face. It is fake but it will do.

*****

Lunch ends up being a party. Almost all the Inner Circle Death Eaters are present. News of their Lord’s win travels fast and they all wish to congratulate him. Harry is acting the part of the perfect host, ordering the house-elves to prepare refreshments and drinks for the guests.

Tom himself is still stuck in the Ministry, but Harry is happy to entertain. The green-eyed wizard sees Sirius and Lucius arriving, and walks over to greet the men. Harry doesn’t have much interest in some of the others, so he does not think of his behaviour as rude. He simply doesn’t care.

Sirius grins, pulling Harry into a quick hug. He says, “You can’t hide anymore, Pup.”

“All good things must come to an end, I guess. But I’m never going to be one of those socialites you see strutting about, hanging on their husband’s arm like a bad rash.”

“You are too opinionated to pass for one.” Lucius comments, an amused smile on his face. “One has to be upper class yet dim-witted enough to let everything pass over their heads.”

Harry tilts his head, face showing a hint of feigned confusion, “You mean smile and stare at all the men with a pretty yet blank face.”

“I’d say you would pass as one, Pup.” Sirius laughs, throwing an arm around the young wizard. “Come on, I need a drink.” He turns to the blond and says, “There’s plenty of food, so I suggest you take yourself over there right now.”
“Siri—”

“Don’t Siri me, Luce. You nearly fainted on me. I won’t allow that.”

Harry frowns in concerns. “Everything all right?”

“Everything is perfect. Just a touch of faintness because I missed breakfast. That is all.”

Sirius doesn’t look all that convinced. “If you say so, Luce. Still, I won’t stop pestering you until you eat something.”

Thankfully, Narcissa sails through the room and attaches herself to Lucius. She wants to discuss something that has something to do with the wedding, so Sirius is happy to skip the conversation. The witch pulls Lucius along with her and the two disappear, heads bent together.

Harry notices a slight frown on Sirius’ face. Probably from worrying so much. “So, tell me about the vote.”

Sirius pushes his worry aside and smiles. He proceeds to tell Harry about the vote and Tom’s hilarious reactions. Soon enough, Rabastan and his brother join them and they want to hear about it as well. Bellatrix only cares to hear about the horrified faces of those who did not support the Dark Lord and possibly get their names as well for a little gift basket. It will likely contain poison and other gruesome trinkets.

A few hours later, Tom steps into the room. He is greeted by at least a dozen Death Eaters, all of them enjoying drinks and gossip. One by one, they congratulate the Dark Lord for seizing control of Britain’s magical community and doing so without a body count. Tom preens a bit but he is not interested in small-talk. He sees Harry filling his plate with canapés, popping every other snack into his mouth. The young wizard has yet to notice his husband leering at him.

Completely invested in sampling the delicious finger-food, Harry doesn’t spot Tom’s approach and he almost drops his plate when a pair of arms slide around him.

“I never thought I would enjoy getting groped by the Minister.”

Tom places a kiss on Harry’s neck. “I do hope I am the only Minister to encourage any sort of fantasies.”

Harry leans into Tom’s warmth and says, “Well, I had this one fantasy about Fudge. It involved a lot of bodily harm and mental torture.”

The Dark Lord laughs, spinning Harry around in his arms to press a kiss to the younger one’s lips. Harry is like a handful of putty, melting into his husband’s touch. All morning long, Tom had to suffer the attention of reporters and Ministry workers, but the only attention he craves is Harry’s devoted kisses and soft smiles.

“Tom, dearest?” Harry hums.

Pulling his lips away from Harry’s neck, the Dark Lord smiles. “Yes?”

“Maybe you would like to explain why Elphias Doge is in the dungeons? Cissy and I went to see the pink bitch and imagine my surprise when we stumbled upon Doge, blubering in a cell next to the nasty witch. Do you know anything about that?”

Harry’s smile is sharp, his eyes blazing bright green with annoyance. He doesn’t care that the man is
there, but he feels uninformed. Tom had not even shared that particular piece of information.

“Did you truly expect me not to cheat?” Tom asks, not in the least bit cowed by Harry’s demanding gaze. “I did not kill him publically, Harry. He will die but no one will know or really care for his fate.”

“Not after you had the man humiliate himself by ranting about idiotic things and giving interviews to the Prophet about imprisoning half the population. Who was that, by the way?”

Tom hides a laugh when he says, “Well, Weasleys can be very useful.”

“No way!” Harry baulks. “Was it Percy?”

The Dark Lord nods, amused by his accomplishments. “He agreed because he personally knows Doge and imitating his mannerisms and words would not be hard for him. He considered it a worthy cause because he detests Doge with a passion.”

“Seriously, the twins will flip out when I tell them. They have no idea that their boring, stick-in-the-mud brother is pretty cool. Even Bill had no idea that Percy was one of yours. It’s funny, really.”

Harry plops a canapé into his mouth and moans a little. “Quite a crowd, eh?”

Tom has a small sneer on his face. “Yes, well...they can all sod off. I’d rather have a quiet end to my day.”

“Cheer up, lover,” Harry smirks. “They are all very pleased, you know. This is your big triumph, Tom. I can have Bellatrix tell them to clear off. She’s been walking around with a knife, I think.”

“No, let them enjoy it.” Tom sighs, not wanting to be a complete arsehole. “We have all worked very hard to gain this victory.”

“Ah, yes...all that bribing, scheming, manipulating, coercing, lying. Must be so hard, Tom. Let’s face it—you do not have the patience for such matters. That’s not your forte.”

Tom picks the plate from Harry’s hands, places it down and grabs the young wizard into a tight hug, nuzzling his neck. Harry is happy to wrap his arms around Tom’s neck. They stay in their little happy bubble until someone clears their throat.

Tom is ready to growl, but it’s Lucius and it would be impolite of him. Harry clings to him still, unbothered by the interruption. Lucius sees that the Dark Lord is not in the most charming of moods and would rather fondle his husband, but it is necessary. “My Lord, forgive the interruption, but I have received news about today’s mission.”

Tom’s eyes light up a little. “Go on. And yes, Harry can listen in. He is already cross with me for not telling him about Doge.”

Lucius smirks. “Fenrir has returned with his team. It is done.”

“Delightful news, Lucius.” Tom’s smile seems a tad too happy, bordering on manic. He turns to his confused husband to explain, “I had a team take care of a few pesky Ministry workers. They would have caused trouble and I want everything to go smoothly.”

“Is that what you’ve been working on?”

“Mostly yes. Although many things require my attention these days. Paperwork and other such tedious matters.” Tom sighs almost wistfully. “Things were easier when I could just kill people.
Fewer formalities.”

Lucius remembers those days. Fondly and not so fondly. It certainly is nice to not be cursed. “Fenrir has his orders, so I believe you no longer have to worry about it. He is eager to rid the world of brainless, unmitigated wankers—his words, my Lord.”

Sirius bounds over, sidling close to Lucius. His lets out a groan, “Hold me, Luce. I just saw Snivelly and Cissy snogging in the hallway. With tongue and all. I think I threw up in my mouth a little.”

“They are a couple, Black. I think even your pea-sized brain can understand intimacy between lovers.”

Sirius shudders. “But it’s Snape! Cissy is a beautiful woman; she could have any man she wishes. But no! She’s been sucked in by Snape’s greasy, slimy charms.”

“Siri, cease your whining.” Lucius hardly pays attention to Sirius’ complaints. Although he is a bit surprised that Severus is allowing such a public display. The man is reluctant to share such intimacies in view of others; even more so than Lucius.

“So when are you going to make the announcement?” Harry asks, distracting Sirius, “because one has to be blind not to spot the ring on Lucius’ finger. Or the fact that you were holding hands during the Wizengamot assembly.” The green-eyed wizard adds when he spots Lucius flush a bit, “Neville told me, in case you want to know who snitched. He said people definitely noticed. Some ladies were whispering about it, so there’s bound to be gossip.”

“Well, I don’t care either way. I’ll be fine with whatever Luce wants. I would happily tell the public to drop dead, but that’s just me.”

“Seeing as we have yet to agree on a date, making a public announcement would make us appear stupid. One does not announce something like this and put down ‘any day now’ as the date.” Lucius gripes, ignoring the Animagus’ chortle.

Sirius snorts. “I told you, Luce—I am ready now. I can marry you tomorrow. But you want it to be a big event, with members of the high society rubbing elbows. I don’t care about any of that, but you do and I want you to have whatever you wish. I get it, really…you want to wear the best robes and look beautiful and have all your guests muttering about it for years to come. I can literally bond with you anywhere. I only need you to be there. Just us.”

Lucius seems to thaw a little, despite the man’s insinuation that he’s looking for attention. Then again, it is his wedding. Why wouldn’t it be about him? Sirius uses the blond’s moment of distraction and slips both arms around his lover. The moment is charged with tension but also something far sweeter. They don’t need to say anything and, in fact, they don’t. Sirius just smiles and pulls Lucius tighter against him.

Tom gives them both pointed looks, obviously uncomfortable at that moment. It is quite odd to see Lucius so utterly bewitched by Black. To the point of melting into his arms like a teenage girl. “How very Hufflepuff.”

Harry huffs, twisting his fingers into Tom’s arms. “Insensitive git!”

“They were being rude,” Tom tries to appease Harry, but he doesn’t seem all that appeased.

Lucius wants to escape, slightly mortified, but Sirius is deviously holding him hostage. He keeps his arms around Lucius, pressing his body against the blond’s back. He won’t let Lucius get away. When they finally marry, Sirius wants to be able to show the world that they are together. He will not
have his marriage be like so many of the pure-blood unions—civility for show, only appearing together when there is a reason to put on a good act, spouses like business partners or acquaintances. It makes him slightly ill. He definitely does not want that to happen to them. He already has Lucius accepting small touches whenever they go out together but he wants more. He wants to pull Lucius into a proper snog and push him against a wall in some place public and thoroughly fondle the man. Well, it’s a nice fantasy anyway.

Lucius just isn’t used to such displays. In truth, he grew up learning that it is not done. Pure-bloods are not one for public affection. They are dignified and allow such things to happen in private. Abraxas had spoken about it in length. But he had also told Lucius to be interested in women and to never disgrace the Malfoy name by fornicating with males. Frankly, Abraxas had been a terrible father.

So it seems utterly foolish to act in a way that would make his old man’s words into a reality. Lucius had not openly defied his father but it is not even an act of defiance now; it’s his life. But back then, all those years ago, he had believed the mighty Abraxas Malfoy. It was not until he was introduced to the Dark Lord that he realised just how much Abraxas had tried to warp his mind. Tom, while completely insane, had never once told Lucius that being with a man would bring shame to his name and make him an outcast. Such things simply do not matter because it has nothing to do with magical power or intelligence. So, after a while, Lucius had stopped listening to his father and started listening to the Dark Lord.

Sirius is always trying to touch him, and each time he is denied, something sad flashes across his face. It is fleeting and he masks it with a smile, but it is there. He experiences a small fraction of rejection each time his touches are rebuffed. And it’s not some casual thing that just is; no, Sirius needs it. Touch-starved as he was all those years, he seeks them constantly. It reassures him.

Tom and Harry bickering right next to them brings Lucius out of his thoughts. The Dark Lord mumbles something akin to a goodbye and Disapparates with Harry.

“And he called us rude,” Sirius mutters with a frown. “Harry looked properly pissed, too. Like an angry kitten.”

“Siri—” Lucius sighs, already forgetting about the Dark Lord and his spouse. “I know I am not as open…as free with showing my affection. But that does not, in any way, make me less fond of you. All my life, I’ve maintained a certain aloofness. For years, I had to please my father, show him that I was not the failure he always believed me to be just because I did not covet the same things he did. Just because he thought I was unnatural and a deviant.”

“Luce, I know. I know, all right. Of course, I would love to be able to touch you and kiss you in public without you tensing up as if I’m diseased. But I get it. I don’t want to force you into anything.”

Lucius shakes his head. “You are not forcing me, Siri. Just—give me time. I am rather new to this.”

Sirius smirks, “Yeah, I remember. You were as tight as a virgin.”

Whether the Animagus deserves the hex is up for debate but he knows why Lucius looks like a seething cat in his arms. Thankfully, no one heard Sirius but it is exactly the sort of private business Lucius is afraid will end up reaching a wrong pair of ears. Sirius isn’t known for delicacy or tact.

“Come on, Luce. I’m sorry. Don’t look so angry; it’s making me really hard. Makes me want to strip you naked right the fuck now. I can’t resist you when you glower at me like you want to curse me.”
“I have no idea why I love you.”

“I’m charming, smart, rich, funny; irresistible really.” Sirius lists with a smile. But he is franker when he says, “I don’t know either, but I won’t question it. Just count my lucky stars.”

*****

Fenrir stalks towards Lupin’s cabin, his mood perfectly sour already. He sees a handful of cubs shuffling about, peering inside through the window. They like to snoop and Lupin is a good study subject.

“All right, away with you!”

The children flinch a little but no because Fenrir scares them. It is mostly because they got caught spying on the strange new resident. One by one, the young ones flee, giggling amongst themselves. Fenrir has no patience to deal with the brats, especially with the full moon so close.

He raps roughly against the door and waits. Lupin has no other choice than to let him in, so he just has to wait for the unruly cub to open the damn door. But Lupin doesn’t come to answer. Fenrir pummels the door some more and growls under his breath.

After a moment, the door is yanked open. A rather ruffled Remus appears, face tight with disapproval. “What?”

Fenrir swallows a rush of indignation. The young one is disrespectful and rude. But Fenrir cannot kill him. He wants to, but he has to hold his anger deep inside.

“I’m here for your lesson, cub.”

Remus pulls his jumper tighter against himself and bristles. “I’m not interested. And don’t call me cub!”

“I don’t give a toss if you are interested or not,” Fenrir says, pushing his way inside. He can force the man into submission if he has to. Although he would rather not. Too much hassle. “You crawled to my doorstep and I got saddled with you because the Dark Lord’s little husband wants me to look after you. Teach you the ropes.”

Remus frowns, eyes narrowing. “And I just told you that I don’t care.”

Fenrir gets comfortable on the sofa, kicking his feet up. He grins. “Yeah. I can tell. But I don’t care about your wishes, cub. I don’t care for a scrawny, pathetic wolf in my pack, but I’ve got no choice. Soon, you’ll either adapt and survive, or die. Simple as that.”

Remus slams the door shut, knowing that the older wolf will not leave him alone. He is already feeling the strain of the moon. His bones ache and his skin feels too tight; he wants to tear it and scratch it. His mouth feels dry, eyes prickle with something bitter and a hammering pain demolishes what’s left of his mind. It actually feels like death.

And now the werewolf he loathes is sitting before him with a cursed grin. He infuriates Remus with his taunts and cruel existence.
“Now, I don’t know what sort of crap you’ve been told, but I can tell that you don’t know anything about your own kind. You smell like a human, and you’re weak like one.” Fenrir says, his lips curling into a sneer. “I can smell it on you.”

“Well, I can smell that you haven’t taken a shower in a while. What’s the point of all this,” Remus mutters, crossing his arms a little too petulantly. He’s trying to mask his discomfort and fear. But the bastard can probably smell it as well.

Fenrir chuckles coarsely. “The point, Lupin, is that you will not survive the full moon if you do not learn our ways. You and the inner wolf…they make a whole. They are not two separate beings like you seem to believe.”

“Why do you even care?” Remus asks. “You hate me, right? So why bother with all this?”

Fenrir barks out another laugh. “I’m just following orders, cub.”

“Whatever,” Remus turns away, walking to the kitchenette. He needs a drink. He mutters as he comes back with a mug of steaming hot chocolate. “Let’s get it over with.”

Fenrir pushes down a surge of anger; Lupin’s indifference is infuriating. He treats it as a joke, even though his life may depend on it. Then again, Fenrir doesn’t really care what becomes of the weak wolf. He can’t make him do anything and he isn’t responsible for Lupin’s failure. He asks, “Do you feel the wolf?”

Remus takes a seat, wrapping a patched quilt around his shoulders. He can name at least fifty other things he would rather do at the moment, but he knows that he can’t get out of it. And he doesn’t want to disappoint Harry. He’ll do it for Harry even though he hates it.

“Lupin, answer the fucking question.” Fenrir barks. “Do you feel the wolf or not?”

“I don’t understand what that means! Feel the wolf how?”

Fenrir gets to his feet and smirks as he sees Remus flinch and pull away from him. He wants to smack the man for his ignorance but refrains from attacking the other werewolf. “Do you feel like there’s two of you; like there is another set of thoughts, urges, desires?”

Remus shakes his head, but he isn’t sure and says, “I don’t know, maybe.”

“It’s like having another inside your mind. Once you accept it, the feeling will pass. Your senses will be even more heightened. The transformation will become less painful. It will no longer feel like a violation. Part of your human mind will still be there after the transformation and you will have some awareness.”

“Will I still hurt innocent people?” Remus asks with a sneer. “I will still be just an animal.”

“Look, you can keep shovelling this shit down your throat; I don’t care whether you do it or not. You think being a werewolf is a death sentence. There are worse conditions than turning into a beast every now and then. Trust me, I’ve seen a lot worse. Being a werewolf isn’t a fucking walk in the park, but we manage it just fine. All you have to do is open your bloody eyes and look around you. My pack has a comfortable existence. We’re not monsters. You’ve seen the children.”

“Children you probably infected.”

Fenrir growls an almost inhuman sound. His eyes flash dangerously. “I’ve given them a home here. I don’t know who infected them but I do know that all of them were unwanted by their parents. Here
they have a chance to survive. And for the record, you are the only child I have ever purposely infected. You can thank your old man for that.”

“I find it hard to believe. Everyone knows what you are, Greyback.” Remus laughs a little too cruelly.

The older werewolf scoffs. “Yeah, they all know why they should fear me. Instinct is a powerful thing, Lupin. And for a while, my only instinct was to hurt those who wanted to hurt me. You’ve had a fairly comfortable life. You don’t know what it’s like to be hunted, to be bound by silver chains…you think being shunned is the worst of it, but it’s really nothing compared to running for your life, knowing that you will be put down like a sick dog once they catch you. You think you’ve had it rough?”

“I was a child when you did this to me!”

“So was I, but that didn’t stop your father from condemning me to death. Fucking hell, Lupin—how old do you think I am? I was thirteen when your father took one look at me and labelled me a monster. I was homeless, living in the woods near smaller towns. I wasn’t a Death Eater, just a scrawny kid trying to survive. I was angry and alone.”

“That’s not true. You—”

Fenrir snorts. “I really don’t care what you believe. I found my way to the Dark Lord years after running into your father. I don’t know what your daddy told you, Lupin, but I wasn’t some child-eating beast killing Muggles.”

Remus looks away, unsure what to think. It is true that Greyback looks a bit younger than he should but that might not mean anything. Then again, the werewolf has no reason to defend himself, unless he really feels that he is being misjudged.

Fenrir stalks to the door and yanks it open. “This is never going to work.”

“So you’re letting me face the full moon unprepared?”

Fenrir smirks. “It would please me greatly to get rid of you, but I can’t go against the Dark Lord’s orders. If I can’t teach you, I’ll find someone who can. We have a few elders in the pack. They might be able to help you connect to the inner wolf.”

And then he’s gone, the door slamming shut after him. Remus lets out a deep sigh. He’s relieved but also terrified and confused. He’s not feeling well and he is emotionally drained, but death suddenly seems like something dreadful and unnecessary. He needs to learn how to survive. He has a chance to make things right with Harry and Sirius and he desperately wants it.

*****

“Why in Merlin’s name did I think this would be a good idea?”

Harry smirks and glances to his left. Neville looks seriously haggard and a bit peaky. “Nev, you need this. Not to be rude or anything, but your grandmother is a bitter old bitch. She doesn’t care about your independence. Never will.”
“I get letters every sodding day, Harry. Offers of marriage and betrothal contracts to people I haven’t even heard of. I had to ban Gran from leaving her room because she’s a manipulative nosy-parker who won’t accept the fact that I am not my father. It’s horrible!”

“Who gives a fuck about any of that, Nev? *You* decide what you want to do with your life. Claiming the title of Lord Longbottom makes you a valuable and prestigious player and you should use this to further your own ideas and plans. This is your chance to make a difference.” Harry smiles, adding, “I mean, I have big plans.”

Neville frowns. “What sort of plans?”

Harry shifts in his seat, his expression changing a bit. “Oh, you know…reforms and stuff. I’ve been thinking about Hogwarts a lot. Tom’s not interested in segregation but he wants Muggle-borns and Muggle-raised kids to know what they are getting themselves into. There are self-updating records of magical children born in Britain, so we know where they are. It would be really easy to pay those families a visit before the age of eleven. Like Muggles with their social workers, only the Ministry would be monitoring magical children. Someone will regularly visit and observe the family, and if there are signs of abuse, the Department of Magical Welfare will intervene and re-home the children in need of help.”

“Never heard of that department.”

Harry grins. “That’s because it’s new. I just invented it. Tom will get the ball rolling.”

“So where would these kids go? An orphanage?”

Harry shakes his head. “No, definitely not. We’ll open a children’s home; a big house somewhere nice, with lots of room outside for the kids, so they would all feel at home and happy. Sirius says that the Black Family has loads of properties just sitting empty, so it shouldn’t be hard to convert something into a home. I want mistreated kids to feel safe. I want magical children to know that they are loved and that they are not freaks or unwanted. I never had that, you know. I want to make it better for those who can still be saved.”

“That’s a great idea, mate.”

“What about you, Nev? What’s the big dream, eh?”

Neville shrugs, although there is a small smile on his face. “I haven’t really thought about it. I thought about asking Sprout to be my mentor, but I’m not sure I want to teach. It would be too limiting for me. I want to discover new species of plants, trek through some jungle or climb a mountain in search for some magnificent unknown flora. I can’t do that if I’m teaching.”

“And Pansy?” Harry asks.

Neville shrugs. “I don’t know. We’re good together and it’s fun, but we haven’t talked about anything beyond fun. We haven’t made plans. Hell, I don’t even know if there is a future for us. We’re interested in the here and now.”

“You’ll figure it out, Nev.” Harry pats the other’s leg and says, “I’m having lunch with Fred and George in a bit, and I know they’d be happy to see you.”

Neville gives Harry a nod. “Yeah, haven’t seen much of them.”

“Oh, that’s because they’re actually trying to get a hang of being real businessmen. They have a second shop lined up and all. New products and innovative pranks, new staff—new attitude really.”
The green-eyed teen smirks. “Lucius has been helping them. I’m sure Siri put him up to it but it’s nice, you know. Those wankers need a babysitter or they’ll blow something up.”

A voice from behind says, “Now, Pup…make sure Luce doesn’t hear you. He’ll deny it and curse me for something I didn’t even do.”

Harry cranes his neck and sees Sirius. “What? It’s true. I’m not sure I believe that Lucius willingly decided to help Fred and George because he’s such a good person.”

Sirius slumps next to Harry, a bark of laughter coming from his mouth. “This isn’t charity, Harry. Luce can see that the twins are sitting on a mountain of gold. You should have seen him when he realised that those morons don’t even know what they have. I swear he seemed ready to weep. Besides, I’m helping out, too.”

“Well, I don’t really care why he’s doing it.” Harry shrugs. “I’m glad Fred and George are not on their own. Lucius won’t let their business sink.”

“Neither would I, Pup. They’re good kids. Brilliant pranksters. And they obviously never received any encouragement from their parents.”

Harry says, “I imagine Molly never cared for pranks and a bit of fun, and Arthur likely never stood up for his sons because he didn’t want to rock the boat.”

Neville interjects, “But it could be worse, right? It’s not like Fred and George are selling illegal potions in some seedy corner of Knockturn Alley. They’re pretty clever and well-adjusted.”


“Luce wants to see them later,” Sirius tells Harry, “so tell them to get their arses over to Malfoy Manor afterwards. Something about finances and something else I didn’t bother to remember.” Then he’s getting up and asks, “Are we going to check on Remus?”

Harry seems to think about it and says, “I think so. Tomorrow he’s either going to suck up his pride and connect with Moony or he’s going to be a wet puddle on the ground. Either way, I feel like I should see him before one of those things happens.”

“So Remus isn’t a bad guy? I’m a bit confused here.” Neville frowns, looking back and forth between Sirius and Harry. “When did this happen?”

“Oh, sorry…” Harry smiles sheepishly, “I forgot to tell you. Remus is being converted.”

Sirius snorts. “You didn’t give him a chance to decline.”

“Yeah, because I don’t really care about that. I want him to stop being so damn pitiable. Mum and Dad would both give him a swift kick up the arse for it. He’s such a strong person and Dumbledore used him and twisted his mind. It’s time for him to take back his life.”

“Well, I mean…he was a great teacher, wasn’t he? I don’t have anything against him personally. I just thought he was siding with the Order.”

“Definitely not. Moody hated him. Tried to poison him, too. Remus didn’t exactly shed any tears when I told him about Moody’s death. He just seemed really done with everything. I can understand that. But I don’t want him to mope for the rest of his life, so I’m forcing him to accept things that cannot be changed.”
Sirius nods. “You’re annoying like that, Pup.”

“Exactly.”

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Sitting in his study, Lucius tries to concentrate on getting some work done but it’s definitely not going well for the man. He’s distracted and oddly weary; even though he has not done much to feel like a ninety-year-old. Sirius had tried to entice him earlier but he didn’t go along with the man’s plans to shag in the bathtub, so he really has nothing to blame his tiredness on. Just paperwork.

The documents in front of him all blur together and there’s a weird sensation of queasiness which seems highly odd. Lucius pushes the papers aside, spotting a newly-filled carafe of wine on the cabinet. But the idea of a drink makes his stomach roll even more. In fact, the thought of some quality red makes him sick.

When he tries to summon a rather thick volume of laws from the bookcase, a simple wandless Accio proves to be a massive problem. Instead of flying straight to the man, the book does a few backflips and shoots straight for the opposite direction. It collides with the door and falls to the ground with a heavy thump. Since something like this has never happened to Lucius, he stares at the book with a bit of anger. Then he tries again only to shatter an unsuspecting glass into dust particles. It happens again with the rather boring edition of Households Charms; poor book gets shredded.

Lucius tries again but none of the objects he summons actually reach him. Frustrated and reasonably alarmed, the wizard grabs the wand sitting on top of the dossiers and flicks it. But nothing interesting happens at first. Just as he’s about to hurl the useless piece of wood across the room, an entire row of books tumble to the floor, four or five of them wiggling on the carpet as if they are unsure which way to go.

With his study in a mess, Lucius steadily takes a seat and attempts to gather himself. Although he’s more close to hyperventilating than calming down. A fearful thought slips into his mind—a thought that closely resembles terror and powerlessness. If he can’t perform a simple smell, if he can’t even summon a fucking book…

Before the panic can set in properly, an elf pops into the room and informs him of visitors. Then the little creature frowns and starts tidying up, placing the books back with a snap of its fingers. Lucius takes what he needs from the study and flees.

Fred and George are slouching in the drawing room, but both straighten up when Lucius arrives. He knows that he looks properly petrified but neither Fred or George will likely comment because they like their heads where they are.

“I trust you have completed your home assignment?”

Fred nods, although he doesn’t look very happy. “We did the incredibly mind-numbing math and now know how much income we are bringing in with the latest line of products.”

“Good.” Lucius hums. He tries to put the incident out of his mind and says, “We are going to Gringotts then.”

George looks at Fred with a narrowed gaze. “Sorry, I’m really not following.”

“You have a business account, correct?” Lucius asks.
Fred blinks and opens his mouth, but he snaps it shut. Only to open it again. “We have an account. But it’s the one George and I use.”

Lucius mentally counts to ten and says, “I see. So you do not have a business account?”

“No,” George shrugs. “I mean, we haven’t really been to Gringotts in a while. All the money we make, we just keep in the shop. Like, in a totally locked box and all.”

“Seeing as you are so woefully uneducated, I will instruct you on how to manage a business account.”

Fred smirks. “We’re idiots. We told you this already. This is nothing new.”

“And yet you keep surprising me with your increasing level of stupidity,” Lucius comments and turns to leave. Sirius appears out of nowhere and slides next to Lucius.

He spots the redheads and greets them. But he really wants to kiss Lucius and doesn’t care that there are Weasleys present. And to his shock, Lucius lets him. But the moment is short-lived because Lucius gives him a small shove and says, “I need to take those two to Gringotts.”

“What’s wrong?” Sirius asks. There is just something about Lucius that seems off. So he’s sure that something is not quite right. He senses some sort of distress. “You look upset. And I can feel how tense you are. So spill.”

Lucius shakes his head. “Nothing is wrong. I am merely tired.”

“Yeah...that sounds like crap, Luce. I know something’s up with you.” Sirius frowns. He says, “How about this—I’ll take them to Gringotts and help them with whatever they need. And you stay home and relax. Maybe have a nice soak, with that new bath salt you are so obsessed with.”

“I am perfectly capable—”

“Yes, I know. But I don’t care, Luce. Let me do this for you. Just accept that I’m doing something nice for you and stop making such an offended face.” Sirius nips at the blond’s lips one last time and smirks. “Besides, they’ll drive you insane within the hour. I can handle it.”

Lucius, too exhausted and upset to argue, just gives the man a quick nod and slips away. Sirius watches him climbing the staircase with a frown marring his brow. Something is going on. Lately, he’s seen Lucius tire out more easily. He’s not eating properly either, always skipping meals. It could all be due to the fact that he almost died and that he is simply getting his strength back, but Sirius feels like that’s just a comforting lie that he tells himself. He feels that something is not right; not right at all.

He turns to the Weasley boys and grins. He has to put all the troublesome thoughts away for now and focus on Fred and George who are in need of help.

*****

“Are you sure we should be here now, so close to the full moon…with, you know, a bunch of werewolves?”
Harry gives George a narrowed look. The twins, having spent a few mindless hours in Gringotts, had wanted to tag along while he and Sirius visit Remus. Now they are acting all skittish and whiny, which does not spell good things for the redheads. Fenrir is meeting them and he can likely smell the unease.

Sirius gives the redhead a friendly slap on the back and says, “You’ll be fine. Hardly any meat on you anyway.”

Then he’s gone, barking out a laugh.

Harry has nothing to add but he still says, “You’ll be fine. Fenrir knows we’re coming. I mean, he knows I’m coming with Sirius, but I’m sure you’ll be all right.”

They reach Fenrir, who’s sitting on a log near the large bonfire site. Harry sets down the small bag in his hand and enlarges it.

Fenrir asks in a gruff tone, “What’s that?”

“Books.” Harry hums, sticking his hand into the bag. He pulls one out and says, “Children’s books, schoolbooks, any sort of books really. For the kids and anyone else interested in reading. This is part of my plan to educate the kids.”

Fenrir has nothing against it. He just knows that one wizard cannot change the way werewolves are seen by society. But teaching the young ones might not be such a bad idea after all. However, he sees something far more interesting than books. Two identical redheads stand behind Harry, shuffling their feet like misbehaving puppies. He can tell that one of them smells a bit like fear, while the other is simply curious.

Harry sees the glint in the werewolf’s eyes and says, “No, you cannot eat my friends.”

Fenrir snorts, getting to his feet. He gives a nod towards the house Remus dwells in and says, “He’s stubborn; very pigheaded for such a weak wolf. Wanted nothing to do with me. He has an attitude problem.”

“Well, he’ll just have to suck it up. I want him to teach these kids.”

“Figured you’d say that, so I asked Queenie to talk to him. She’s one of the elders here. The pack respects her and they might respect Lupin too if he’s under her tutelage.”

Harry nods. He motions Fred and George to follow him. But George stays where he is and asks, “I’d like to meet the kids if you don’t mind? I brought loads of awesome stuff with me, and I want to give them to the children.”

Fenrir shrugs. “Go for it, kid. Just know that I’ll rip you to shred if they end up pranking me. I know what sort of stuff you deal in, Weasley.”

“You know, I am deeply hurt that you think that. I only have the best of intentions.” George grins. He waves to his brother and Harry, already walking towards the clearing where the children are playing. Harry shares a look with the werewolf, and Fenrir understands. He has to babysit. He’s the pack’s Alpha, the big bad wolf in charge, and he still has to watch over some redhead menace.

Fred sighs. “I better go with him. Come and find us when you’re ready to leave, mate.”

Then he’s jogging after George, with a disgruntled Fenrir stalking after him.
Inside the cabin, Harry finds Sirius sitting on the weathered sofa with his feet kicked up. Remus is in the kitchen making tea, but he looks up from the pot when he hears the door creak. Actually, he could hear steps outside the cabin, but he doesn’t want to think about his super senses right now.

Harry smiles and asks, “How’s your training going? With Queenie.”

To be perfectly honest, Remus hates every minute of it. Queenie is old, incredibly wise, and candid. She does not wish to help Remus but she doesn’t want to see her pack kill him either. But Remus finds it so hard to follow her instructions. Not because she’s explaining it in a bad way, but because he just can’t stomach the idea of connecting with the one thing he hates most in the world. He can feel Moony all the damn time; the beast is scraping at the inside of his skin, breathing through his nose, lurking behind his eyes, pummelling in his blood with rage.

“Remus?”

Harry’s concerned voice makes Remus stop thinking about it for a moment. He doesn’t want to upset Harry by telling him that he has no intention of surviving. He’ll be glad to die. It goes against everything he has been taught but the pain of having a beast inside him makes it unbearable. Instead of snapping at the young man, Remus sighs and tries to smile. “It’s not as horrible as I thought it would be.”

“You’re such a shit liar, Remus.” Sirius laughs.

Harry seems to agree, only he's not all that amused. “Why aren’t you taking this seriously?”

Lupin steps out of the kitchenette, a frown starting to appear. He feels like he’s going around in circles. “Harry, it’s not as easy as you think. I can’t—”

“Can’t turn into a massive wolf? Remus, this is a part of you that can’t be ignored or changed. It happens whether you want it or not, but your transformation doesn’t have to hurt. You don’t have to be in pain.”

“But I’m in pain all the fucking time!” Remus snaps, his voice going a bit shrill. He pulls his temper in immediately, realising that he had yelled at Harry. He says in a much quieter voice, “I can smell every little thing. My ears hurt from all the noise, even if there are no voices or sounds. My skin feels raw from all the scratching but I haven’t even touched it. My bones ache, twisting inside my body with some sort of sick anticipation.”

“Remus...you’re making it worse for yourself by denying Moony. By denying your own nature. Just let go. You won't hurt anyone, I promise.”

Remus crumples into the armchair, face buried in his hands.

Harry takes a seat on the little table and pries Remus’ hands away from his face. “You’ve spent a lot of years hating yourself for something that you are not responsible for. It happened to you, but you didn’t ask for it to happen. Sometimes life deals you a really bad hand. But you make the most of it, Remus. You move on. You don’t try to change what can’t be changed; you move past it. You make it work.”

“Do you think I didn’t consider offing myself when I was locked in Azkaban for murdering my best friends? I thought about dying every single day. But I didn’t. Instead, I decided to survive that hellhole. I decided that even if I had to crawl on my hands and knees through a sodding sea, I would make it home to Harry. Life throws shit at us every fucking day, but you make it work in your favour.”
Harry nods. “Siri’s right, you know. You’re a survivor, Remus; always have been. You can’t change what happened to you but you can stop letting it ruin you.”

“I’m sorry…it’s just that tomorrow’s the big day—or rather the big night—and I’m not feeling very well at the moment. Everything hurts. And I can smell every little thing; it’s annoying and overwhelming.”

“What—like you can smell what I had for breakfast?” Harry smirks.

Remus gathers himself and relaxes against the back of the armchair. He says, “If more of it ended up outside than inside, yes. Or if you didn’t wash your hands after eating all that toast with blackcurrant jam.”

Harry did, in fact, eat a large amount of toast with blackcurrant jam. He flicks a thumb at Sirius and says, “What does Siri smell like?”

“Well?” Harry interrupts, seeing that Remus is acting rather odd.

The werewolf stammers a bit and swallows. “He smells like…like he’s not alone.”

As in he’s shagging someone?” Harry takes it further, enjoying the way Remus cringes and avoids eye contact.

Remus sees that Harry’s trying to bait him and says, “Yes, as in he has a lover. I can smell it, to put it simply.”

“Well, you’re not wrong,” Sirius laughs, face beaming.

Harry senses Remus’ slight surprise and decides to add to it. “Actually, Siri’s getting married.”

There is a small delay but once it reaches Lupin’s brain, he’s entire face slackens with astonishment. Well, not exactly that, but he is baffled and a bit alarmed. He needs tea and goes to fetch some from the kitchen.

“I need someone to remove those ginger hellions before I skewer them!”

But then Fenrir appears behind the door and shouts. “I should probably help with that.” He looks over to a stunned Remus and says, “I will be very displeased to come back here and discover your mangled body parts scattered in the woods. Remember what I said, Remus. You’re in charge of your life now; so make it count.”
Harry leaves Sirius alone with Remus as he goes to deal with the twins and a rather angry-looking werewolf.

Remus starts to clean the mess in silence. Sirius sits up and says, “You’re not going to say anything?”

“What do you want me to say?” Remus harks back. He has no idea what to think, let alone say. “It’s not something you just spring on a bloke.”

Sirius barks out a laugh. “At least you’re not questioning my sanity.”

Remus snorts. “Oh, I am...just not out loud.” The man stands up and throws the towel on the counter. There is a glint of annoyance in his eyes as he says, “Are you kidding me? Lucius Malfoy? You mean that silver-spoon-up-his-conceited-arse ponce you used to curse every single time you saw even a glimpse of his hair? Let’s see if I remember correctly. Pure blood, old money, dark magic, probably barmy underneath all that refined, polished exterior. I mean...fucking hell!”

“You literally just described me, Remus. Although there’s nothing polished about me. I only wear these fancy robes because Luce keeps bitching about my standing and the etiquette and a million other boring things that I don’t really care about. But I make an effort to look nice.”

“Merlin’s balls…” Remus mutters.

Sirius doesn’t care what Remus thinks. He doesn’t have to care. Even though he knows Remus was not involved, he still wants to say his piece. “You know, Mad-Eye, Shacklebolt and Molly hatched out this plan to kidnap a Death Eater to interrogate them. It was just bad timing, but they managed to capture Lucius. They tortured him of course; really went for it, you know.”

Remus looks a bit peaky. “Sirius, I didn’t—”

“Didn’t know about it. Yeah, I know. But I want you to hear it.” Sirius doesn’t want to think about it but he needs Remus to understand what happens to those who fuck with him and his family; in case Remus decides to run again. “He almost died. And I thought I’d die too. What’s the point in living if the man I love isn’t there. But he lived. And I tore out Moody’s throat for laying one bloody finger on him. I had Shacklebolt executed by the goblins because he hurt my heart. I made sure Molly died for what she did to Lucius. They tortured him of course; really went for it, you know.”

Remus looks a bit peaky. “Sirius, I didn’t—”

“Sirius, I get it. You don’t need to threaten me.” Remus lets out a deep breath and says, “Look, I don’t particularly like Malfoy. But I don’t have to like him. It’s none of my business. I’m just a little traumatised by the fact that you’re currently having sex with the one wizard you once claimed to despise quite a lot.”

“Of course I hated him! He’s a right prat. But I fancied him from the moment I figured out how shagging works. Never told any of you because I knew you’d try to have my head checked. I forgot about him when I didn’t have to see him around Hogwarts, but then he married my favourite cousin, and I felt weird about fancying him because he was married to Cissy. But now...he’s all mine.”

Remus raises his hand and says, “Please stop talking. I have no desire to hear about it. I’m having trouble understanding it as it is.”

“There’s actually a lesson in this for you, Remus. I never thought I’d have any sort of normal life after spending twelve long years rotting away in prison, but I was wrong. I’m marrying the man I love with my entire being. I have Harry. I found a way out of this vicious cycle of self-hate and
misery. You have the rest of your life ahead of you now. Dumbledore is dead and the Dark Lord is finally in power and trying to change the lives of countless shunned creatures. You can choose to survive, Remus. Choose not to hurt anymore. Think about it.”

Sirius stands and moves to leave. With his hand on the door handle, he smirks. “Don’t you want to see me get hitched to that infuriatingly gorgeous prat? The event of a lifetime, mate.”

Remus can’t help but grin. There is a tiny part of him that wants to see it because it’s just too surreal to understand without the visual. But he has no idea how to find the inner strength in order to face his fears.

*****

“You know, when you said you wanted to become the Minister, I didn’t actually mind the idea but I did not sign up for this shit, Tom,” Harry grumbles, pulling the covers up to his chin, a petulant frown on his face.

The Dark Lord only smiles to himself. He’s busy fixing himself up in front of the mirror. He needs to look good on his first day.

The shit Harry had not signed up for is, of course, the early morning wakeup calls, and the fact that his husband has to leave to actually work. And possibly the very rude neglect on Tom’s part which means no morning sex.

“I will need to make an effort on the first day, at the very least.”

“Fine, whatever. I’ll just have a wank in the shower.”

Tom turns to Harry, a smirk on his face. “You’re being childish.”

“What of it? I am allowed to, considering that my husband is leaving for work, even though you have no reason to actually work or even show up. Everyone knows that the Minister doesn’t do anything.”

“I am trying to change that misconception. I am not some moronic fop like Fudge, only interested in stuffing his pockets with bribes and sitting on his wrinkly arse all day, every day.”

Harry huffs, but he does say, “Yeah, I get it. But that does not mean I have to like it.”

“I know you don’t like it, Harry.” Tom sighs, pulling the drawer open to look for his cufflinks. He knows that being in the public eye is something Harry hates, but he will have to get over his dislike eventually. “There’s going to be a gathering later this evening.”

“A gathering?” Harry perks up a bit. “You mean like a Death Eater meeting?”

Tom shakes his head. “No...although many Death Eaters will attend it. But no, not a gathering in the sense you are thinking. It is for Ministry officials and department heads; frankly, everyone working for the Ministry ought to attend if they like their job.”

Harry flops back against the pillows with a groan. “A fucking party! Great...”

“And you, my dear, have to attend as well. It is only proper for my loving husband to show his
support."

“No way, Tom. No fucking way! I hate stuff like this. People will gawk at me and stick their noses into my business, and I can’t stand it.”

Confident that he is looking his best, Tom walks around the bed and takes a seat. He runs his finger down Harry’s cheek. “There will be no reporters, I promise. And if anyone attempts to bother you, I will sack them on the spot. I will not let anyone harass you, Harry. You know perfectly well that you cannot remain in hiding for the rest of your life. The Order is no more, so there really is no reason for you to hide.”

“Yeah, says the bloke who is using a fake name to rule the world. I’m still Harry Potter, the poor sod who got saddled with defeating Voldemort. They will not leave me alone.”

Tom really has no patience to argue and simple stands. He takes his wand and stalks out of the room without another word.

*****

As a rule, Sirius hates the Ministry. He has plenty of bad memories. But if the Dark Lord wants you to attend some stupid party in his honour, you just do it without kicking up a fuss. Unless you are Harry. He gets away with a lot of shite.

But there are perks to this, Sirius muses to himself. The biggest perk is that Lucius always looks stunning when there’s a social soirée. And this is the first time he gets to attend a public party as Lucius’ partner. Hell, his fiancé.

They arrive together, with Sirius wearing the smuggest smile anyone can conjure on their face. He’s not overly excited but this moment means a lot to him. And something is different now. Lucius lets him get away with small touches, which is nothing new, but the blond doesn’t seem to mind the more frisky touches. Not that Sirius feels the need to ask about it; he just enjoys it and thanks the gods.

“Tommy has a fan club already.”

Lucius looks over to where the Dark Lord is surrounded by various people and hums. It is true that the Dark Lord can be appealing when he needs to be.

“I guess he’s properly pissed that Harry didn’t want to come. I understand why he’d rather stay out of the spotlight, but Pup’s being stubborn out of spite. Gets that from James, I reckon.”

Even though Sirius had said that he never fancied James Potter, Lucius still feels somewhat irked whenever he hears that git’s name. He’s not entirely certain why and he most certainly doesn’t care to find out; it’s just one of those unexplainable things in life. Thankfully, he does not have to say anything, seeing as Narcissa comes up to them with a flute of champagne in her hand.

“Where did you leave your slippery boyfriend?” Sirius asks, hoping to spot Severus in the room. He’d love to poke fun at the man.

Narcissa clears her throat. She, too, looks a bit miffed. “Do not mock him, Cousin. Severus is otherwise occupied, I’m afraid.”
“Playing with his potions again?” Sirius smirks.

“Most likely.” Narcissa sighs. She knows that getting Severus to socialise is not a trouble-free task. The man hates crowds and people. It is an unfortunate trait of the man that Narcissa loves and she has no desire to change it. Although, it would be nice to go out with her lover every once in a while. She and Lucius had attended many parties during their marriage; her sociable nature had perfectly matched Lucius’ vanity. Regrettably, she will not have such luxuries with Severus Snape.

The witch smiles, feeling content even without Severus. She gives Lucius a small smile. “I was just speaking to Madam Lowry. She was quite eager to introduce her youngest daughter to you, but I think she has had a change of heart.”

Elsbeth Lowry is a pure-blooded witch with a talent for finding rich husbands for her six daughters. Her husband is a dedicated Ministry worker and tends to avoid his scheming wife. Even if he was completely single and looking for someone—not to mention interested in the female anatomy—Lucius would not go near any of the Lowry girls.

“Well, she and her daughter can bugger right off,” Sirius states, a certain gleam entering his eyes. He has no reason to be jealous, but it annoys him still. One of the reasons why he wants to publically stake his claim like some sort of untamed animal is to make it clear that there is no need for desperate women to fawn over Lucius. It’s just not happening. Ever.

To make his point absolutely clear, Sirius smoothly slips his arm around the blond and pulls Lucius tightly against his body. He doesn’t care who sees them; it’s actually the best possible outcome if everyone sees. He expects Lucius to pull away, but shockingly enough, the man doesn’t move an inch and he doesn’t try to reason with Sirius.

Sirius is actually so surprised that he can’t stop himself and asks, “You’re not going to snipe at me?”

“Do you want me to?”

Sirius smiles widely. “No thank you. How about a drink?”

Narcissa titters and says, “I am so proud of you, my lovely boys. Which reminds me—have you established a date yet? I simply cannot plan the reception if I do not know any details. Do you even know how many things need organising? Of course you do not, you silly wizards.”

Sirius shares a look with Lucius and an idea forms in his head. He grins. “Let’s settle on…May, I think.” Lucius doesn’t protest so Sirius goes on, “A Beltane wedding. It would be perfect for the bonding ceremony.”

Narcissa very much approves and says with an almost fanatic shine in her eyes. “Oh, it will be magnificent. I will give you the wedding of your dreams.”

Then she’s gone, masterfully gliding across the room. She is instantly accepted into a fold of ladies.

“You don’t mind, right?” Sirius asks the blond. “Because we can pick another date. I just think May is a nice month and Beltane is the perfect time for a strong magical blessing.”

Lucius has no objections. Having been raised to respect the seasonal festivals, he knows that Beltane is an extremely fertile time of the year. The blessing would be abundant. Many families no longer celebrate the old ways, likely due to Muggle influence but wild magic is older than tradition. Beltane was once widely celebrated in the wizarding world; a time of fertility and renewal. Wizards and witches celebrated the gods of the hunt and the forest, and goddesses of passion and motherhood.
So, in truth, Lucius really does not mind.

“Besides.” Sirius leans closer with a smirk. “It will be warm enough for me to strip you naked and make sweet, sweet love to you under the night sky.”

Perhaps it is the anticipation of what’s to come or maybe it’s the husky tone of Sirius’ voice, but Lucius feels a delicious shiver run down his spine.

“I’ll be right back,” Sirius hums, disappearing from the blond’s side.

He makes his way over to the men’s room and slips inside. When he returns from his business and stands before the gaudy golden sinks, another wizard appears and turns on the tap. Sirius doesn’t really notice the other man at first, but he looks up when the wizard clears his throat. During the years before his incarceration, Sirius had visited a lot of Muggle pubs. So he has a fairly good idea what it looks like when someone is trying to get into his pants. He thinks this is one such time and is about to leave, but the other man looks particularly smarmy. He looks like he wants to share some rather juicy gossip.

“Look, if you have something to say…” Sirius barks, his temper spiking a bit.

The other man looks up and just gives Sirius a sort of weird half-smile. “I saw you with Lucius Malfoy.”

Sirius doesn’t say anything but his expression clearly states that he’s not about to let some stranger comment on it.

“How did you do it, eh? What did you do to get a delectable piece of arse like that?”

Now, Sirius isn’t the sort who enjoys pointless violence. He doesn’t have a lust for it like some do. But seeing such a leeching grin on some idiot’s stupid face makes his blood sing with it. He craves this aggression that’s boiling inside.

“I mean, he seems like a frigid bitch, but I bet he’s a lot less prickly when you get him on his knees.”

It’s not even a thought. It’s just a wild instinct. Sirius grabs the man by his collar and yanks him around, only to pull back his fist with the sole intent of smashing it in the bloke’s face. In an instant, he hits the other one with little fanfare. As soon as he hears the crunch of bone—he feels it move under his fist—Sirius feels a lot better. He drops the man on the floor like a piece of trash, enjoying the sight of blood trickling down the man’s chin and his wide, fearful eyes.

“You don’t look at him or even think about him. Got that?”

“I’ll go to the Aurors, I’ll file a—” The man splutters, holding his face. But he does not finish. His eyes glaze over a bit and he looks disorientated in a flash.

Sirius pockets his wand and leaves. On second thought, he really doesn’t need to get caught up with Aurors and lawsuits. Thank fuck for memory charms.

*****

While the Dark Lord is busy chatting with his new minions, Lucius thinks it best not to interrupt. He
has no need to bribe anyone. He has no need to even talk to anyone because he does not have to manipulate or coerce. In fact, he feels ready to go home. He can see Tom some other time and discuss whatever the new Minister deems a worthy cause.

No one questions the presence of non-Ministry workers. Most of the people present are Death Eaters. The few who are not Death Eaters have no idea anyway. Lucius spots one of the Weasleys. He has seen this one around the Ministry before. In truth, no one is all that bothered by the change in politics.

With Sirius missing from his side, the blond walks over to the refreshments and plucks a canapé from one of the trays. He’s not particularly hungry; everything seems to make him nauseous these days, much to his displeasure. He does not dare say anything because then Sirius will be an insufferable nag, but he isn’t feeling very well. He is physically uncomfortable. But the biggest tragedy, the one he is not willing to admit to anyone, including himself, is the magical instability. On some days, he has no trouble with it but on occasion, he can’t even perform the simplest of spells. Blaming it on the recent events is a good plan and Lucius sticks to it, even though deep down he knows that he is just deluding himself. The truth is that there is an issue with his magical core, but admitting it would make it far too real.

He pushes such thoughts into a small box and shoves it to a back corner of his mind. He has perfect timing because Sirius is stalking straight towards him with a very annoyed look twisting his handsome face into a grimace.

“Do we have to stay here for another bloody minute?”

Lucius is a bit puzzled by his lover’s sudden irritation, but he also knows Sirius won’t talk about it with so many other people around him. The wizard’s frown can be seen around the room.

“Wait for me by the Floo. I have to let Narcissa know that we are leaving or she will be furious with us later.”

Sirius nods and sneaks in a quick kiss. “Thank Merlin. I thought I would have to shag you in a broom cupboard or something.”

Lucius thinks that he should feel at least a bit scandalised by that declaration but he only feels heat pooling downwards. Sirius is in a mood. One that stresses the feeling of urgency and longing. And he happens to enjoy it when Sirius is struck by one of his more amorous moods.

*****

When Remus opens his eyes late in the evening—the dreaded night of the big day—he lets out an annoyed sigh. He throws the covers aside and stretches, bones popping and cracking. There is a terrible ache inside him, but he doesn’t let it trouble him too much. He brews some tea and nibbles on a biscuit, feeling his skin prickle with anticipation.

Moony is twitchy. But he’s been like that for the past few weeks. Actually, Moony has been agitated ever since leaving the Order but Remus, like a proper idiot, is just now noticing it. His instincts and senses are sharper now.

He can feel the moon rising. Moony is almost taunting him, shaking his coat under Remus’ human skin, ready to tear its way out.
“All right. You want out, you mangy arsehole? I’ll let you out.” Remus mutters to himself, flexing his shaking hands into fists.

He knows the theoretical part of it; at least he thinks he understands. There really is no textbook for him to flick through. He just has to rely on the elder’s words. She had explained it to him in detail, even though it is very hard to put into words.

But he will try. He will try his hardest to survive this. The frustration had not allowed him to see past the pain and hatred, but he feels a lot calmer now; calm enough to realise that he really doesn’t want to die.

It’s already dark inside but he still has a few hours to gather his courage and face the biggest challenge of his life. He can hear children shrieking outside, laughing as they run past his cabin. And he feels that while he can blame Fenrir for infecting him, he shouldn’t blame him. Fenrir had been so young and stupid, just a scared teenager lashing out with his teeth. He’s a massive twat and Remus certainly dislikes the werewolf, but he feels that it is pointless to quarrel and to hate. He has had enough of hate and pain. Now he just wants to move on.

He prepares another cup of tea, adding a few drops of whiskey to it. He is too fidgety to eat and besides, he is craving something other than stale biscuits and marmalade. Just thinking about some rare and succulent steak makes his mouth water. Perhaps he’ll catch a rabbit tonight. Remus shakes his head. He feels weird with such intrusive thoughts invading his mind. He knows that the wolf is responding to the call of the moon. Moony is slowly taking charge of his body and mind. But he has to let it happen. He can’t fight it.

And oddly enough, he lets it happen without even thinking about it too much. These intrusive thoughts are not foreign to him because the wolf is part of the human.

Remus spends the next dreadfully dull hours just trying to relax. He attempts to allow Moony to come out without interference. Which is not an easy task because he has never actually done it before. All his life, Wolfsbane has numb him to it. Wolfsbane had shut Moony in and Remus never had to worry about connecting with the wolf. They had been two separate beings who never had to connect on any level.

So it’s understandably hard for the man to just let it all out. But he has no choice and must obey his nature. He feels like a clumsy toddler learning to walk, bumping into things as he totters around. He has never been a feral animal by choice but he has to be one now or risk losing his life. Just when his life has the potential to be more than a curse.

Driven by some unknown impulse, Remus shed his clothes and sits with the quilt around his bare shoulders. He wants to go outside but he fears the others.

Pack

Remus winces as the thought imposes on his every sense, pushing out of him with force. Never before has he felt such a strong desire to be a part of a pack. But he is still Remus, despite feeling Moony’s yearning for companions.

Pack

The word rings in his mind over and over. The wolf growls, sending a shiver down his back. Everything prickles with expectancy; every hair on his body stands up like spikes on an animal.

He hears noises outside. But he doesn’t want to look out of the small window to see what it is. The
others are likely gathering on the clearing, ready to transform.

“Lupin, it’s time.”

Remus jumps a little, terrified of the idea. Fenrir is waiting for him, most likely waiting to see if he will become the night’s entertainment for other wolves. He isn’t a member of the pack. The others treat him with trepidation and no one really talks to him. Well, he hardly ever leaves the cabin, so it’s mostly his own fault that the other wolves haven’t socialised with him.

A terrible pain paralyses the man but it soon smoothes out and becomes an ache in his bones. Remus takes a deep, shaky breath and steps outside. He sees at least thirty or more people, including the small group of children. Fenrir walks up to him, completely naked. “It shouldn’t be long now. You feel the change, Lupin?”

Remus attempts to avert his eyes. He really doesn’t want to stare at Greyback’s rather sizeable cock. Transforming into a giant wolf while wearing a tweed jacket really is a bother, but Remus has never transformed with other wolves in sight. Other naked men, to be more exact. Not that he hasn’t seen naked men before but he’s already experiencing a traumatic event, and he can do without the additional mortification of eyeing someone’s naked arse. Fenrir Greyback’s arse, in fact.

But as the minutes tick away, Remus can feel the human side of him falling away as well. It’s like shedding skin. His thoughts become less human as the animal takes charge of him. Instincts kick in and Remus lets them overpower him completely. He doesn’t even notice his bones cracking and rearranging themselves, popping into their new place. The pale human skin changes into a course pelt of mixed brown and grey.

But it’s not painless. It hurts and burns his lungs; his heart hammering in his chest with wild abandon. Everything narrows down into a cluster of new smells and sensations. In the past, Remus had never been present during the full moon and he had never remembered anything from the ordeal. But he is present now. Not fully, but still...a tiny part of the human remains, nested inside the wolf.

As Remus fades into a small but not insignificant thought, Moony grows bigger. Until the wolf stands on his own and feels a ripple tear through him. He stands on his hind legs, hunched forward as he pants with fatigue.

Numerous howls ring out as the moon shines bright pale in the sky, perfectly round and perfectly cruel.

Moony is too excited to move. But he is instantly pulled into a situation where many of the wolves attempt to attack him. They circle him with vicious snaps of their jaws, tails whipping in agitation. Moony isn’t very big or brawny, but he isn’t as weak as many believe him to be. He snarls with the same viciousness and bares his teeth with a low growl.

Fenrir keeps a distance, observing the new wolf. He doesn’t regard him as a threat, but he does feel something curious. He recognises the new wolf as one of his own, but not a member of his pack.

After a while, the wolves leave the newcomer alone. Most of them dash into the forest to hunt. Only a few female wolves remain behind with the cubs. Fenrir, however, feels a strong and strange urge to make the other wolf submit to him. He doesn’t give it a chance to run and with a powerful leap, Fenrir forces the weaker wolf to the ground. He pins Moony down and keeps him subdued for a moment, waiting for the other wolf to accept the show of dominance. Greyback pulls away as Moony lets out a low whimper; a sign of his understanding.

As pack leader, Fenrir soon disappears into the forest to lead the hunt, leaving Moony alone. As an
outsider, he does not dare to do much. But he is terribly hungry. However, he does not get a chance to find a rabbit for himself. The cubs tumble towards him, with the slightly older ones approaching more slowly, attempting to look bored and uninterested.

The three smaller ones try to nip at him, their little snouts scrunched up into an adorable snarl which is meant to intimidate but rather looks like a puppy’s grimace. They swarm around Moony, bumping into him and trying to tackle the larger wolf.

Moony is hesitant at first, but the cubs just want to play with him. They are curious. So he lets them bite and scratch; he even lets them scale him and yanks at his tail. After a while, the smaller ones tire themselves out and they snuggle up to the strange wolf. The older cubs keep an eye on the proceedings, but they, too, huddle close after a moment.

That’s how Fenrir finds them after the hunt—Moony’s personal space invaded by the cubs. He huffs and lets out a low rumble, which rouses the other werewolf. Fenrir turns to leave, sensing that it is nearly time for the moon to slip under.

Moony eyes him warily but doesn’t move; mostly because he’s under a pile of kipping cubs. He is, however, a bit alarmed when Fenrir stalks back to him. He plops a few dead rabbits on the ground in front of Moony’s nose and leaves. All the cubs scramble awake when the smell of the rabbits starts to tickle their sensitive noses. Moony watches as the downy-looking pups tear into the rabbits, knocking into each other as they dive in.

Moony places his head back on his paws and lets out a puff of hot air. He keeps his eyes on the cubs for a while, but he soon drifts off. The moon is finally pulling back its cursed rays.

When Remus opens his eyes, it’s already morning. Everything aches and he has a terrible, almost rancid taste in his mouth, but he is alive. He has both of his legs, two arms and all of his fingers and toes. But most importantly, his head is still attached to his neck. There is a heavy, woollen quilt draped over him. And there is a small child sleeping next to him, bundled up in a similar blanket. A moment later, a small army of children approach him in a not so gentle manner and they all pile on top of him with smiles and giggles.

Waking up after a transformation has never been so bizarre, Remus thinks. And the strange thing about it is that he actually remembers bits and pieces of it. Another nice bonus is that he is unharmed and fairly sane.

He sounds a bit insane as he starts to laugh, staring up at the sky. He blinks as a face appears.

“You might want to get up now, Lupin.”

Remus sighs, “Why? Are you going to kill me? Like some sort of sick, delayed afterthought?”

Fenrir sneers, “Just get your skinny arse to the cabin. In case you haven’t noticed, Lupin, you are lying in the dirt. Naked. In January.”

The kids cackle and disappear, all of them running off. Fenrir huffs out, “There’s food if you’re hungry.”

Remus sits up, bemused. “You’re asking me if I want something to eat?”

“In my pack, we all share the meat from the hunt. If you want to know what that’s like, you can join us.”

“I thought the whole point was that you didn’t want me in your pack.”
Fenrir makes a face and turns to leave. He gets a few steps in but then he halts and turns. “Look, I still think you’re a massive pain in my arse. You feel the same about me. But the cubs like you and I’d be a right wanker to kill you now that the cubs have accepted you. So eat, don’t eat—I don’t give a toss.”

Remus watches in stunned silence as Fenrir walks off. He feels the cold starting to seep through the ground and bite at his naked arse. He gathers the quilt and hurries inside his cabin. A cleaning charm will have to do for now. He puts on a fresh pair of socks, throws on an old bathrobe and puts the kettle on. He feels like an old man, with his jammy biscuits and steaming tea and aching knees. But he is rather pleased with himself. He knows that Moony is happy too.

After a while, when Remus is ready to have a little nap, there’s a knock on the door. Thinking that it’s Fenrir again, Remus is ready to tell the wolf to bugger off, but he doesn’t hear Greyback’s rough voice. He opens the door, only to find one of the younger children on his doorstep; the boy holds out a plate for Remus. The roasted meat smells heavenly, just on the right side of raw and it even has a heap of cooked vegetables on the side.

Remus takes the plate but before he can say anything, the kid gives him a wave and dashes off. The meal looks tasty and Remus is famished, so he accepts the offering. The kids have no real idea who he is and so they are curious about him; not to mention, they don’t treat Remus as if he’s someone to be feared. They have no need to fear him. Remus is the same as them; infected, unwanted, inexperienced. It’s such a strange and baffling thought that it forces Remus to take a seat; his legs feel a bit shaky, just as his heart gives a jolting flutter. For the first time in his life, Remus Lupin does not feel like a reject. He is not an outcast among his own kind. A smile spreads over Remus’ thin lips; perhaps the first genuine smile after a very long time.
Chapter Notes

A/N : Sorry for the wait, dearies ...

Also, I feel like I need to stress this again. This story contains MPREG. Because magic, that's why. If you don't like it ... well, I figure that's your business.

Chapter Twenty-One

Shade of gold

Harry waits for a week before sticking his nose into Remus’ business. He knows from Greyback that Remus is alive and not a pile of shredded fur somewhere in the woods. But Tom’s being a tight-arse about letting Harry visit the colony. So Remus has to come to Harry. Or rather Fenrir has to escort Lupin to Harry because he is might still do a runner.

Harry has tea and scones waiting as Fenrir pushes Remus into the room with a light shove to his back. He grunts something and disappears.

Harry is in a good mood and says, “You look lively, all things considered.”

Remus takes a seat and smiles. “Well, I survived my first full moon without a potion.”

“How was it? Or is that too rude of me?” Harry sits down and serves them both tea.

“No, it’s fine. I haven’t been asked before, but I think the short answer is that it was different. Unexpected. Frankly, I was scared witless. But once I actually allowed Moony to take over . . . it felt very different from what I have known before. It didn’t hurt me as much and I remember it happening.”

Harry is pleased to hear it. “You just had to trust yourself, Remus.”

“I . . . yeah, I think that trust was always missing. I feel like Moony and I reached some sort of truce for now. I’m not fully there yet; just accepting the circumstances and trying to make the best of it.”

“That’s good thought, isn’t it? You are making progress. So that is a good thing.”

Remus sips his tea, nodding. They sit in silence for a moment, but Remus speaks up, “Queenie told me that you had some books sent over for the children in Greyback’s pack.”

Harry nods and says, “I want those kids to have an education. I want them to have things other children have. It shouldn’t matter that they’re werewolves. All children deserve a childhood. Fred and George delivered some toys and games as well, and of course they added some of their own creations to the lot.”

Remus smirks, “Oh, I know. Greyback is pretty mad.”
“As if the twins give a shit,” Harry hums with a smile. “The kids deserve a bit of fun.”

“If it’s all right with you, I would like to teach them. I’m bored out of my mind and I don’t like sitting on my arse all day.”

“I was actually going to ask you to do it, but you just saved me the trouble. Ideally, I would like the children to learn the same things Hogwarts teaches, but I’ll leave that up to you, Remus. Just help them understand our world a bit better. As I understand, all of them are magical.”

“The youngest is a Squib, but he also a part of magical society. He will learn everything in theory.”

Harry nods. He changes the subject and asks with a poorly hidden smirk, “So . . . how do you feel about Siri’s news. I didn’t get to see your reaction. I bet it was hilarious.”

Remus still thinks it’s completely absurd but he is happy for Sirius. It’s not like he has to marry Malfoy, so he has no business complaining about it. It doesn’t concern him.

“Siri’s really happy with Lucius.” Harry goes on saying, "I mean, I don’t expect you to understand, but if you take into account what he has been through over the years, I think you can at least be glad that he’s no longer alone.”

“I am happy for him, truly. We are not best mates anymore, but it is important to me that he has a chance to settle down with someone. He is not someone who should be alone. The fact that it’s Malfoy—well, I reckon that’s Sirius’ private business. I am not overly fond of the man myself, but I’m not the one marrying him, so . . .”

Harry says, “They fit. You wouldn’t think that at first, but they are pretty perfect for each other. Siri is hot-headed, loud and a bit unstable. Lucius is more level-headed and composed, so he’s a calming presence for Siri, but he’s a bit vain and Siri’s always moaning about how high-maintenance he is and how much time it takes him to get ready for something. Mostly he just complains about not being allowed to use the bathroom when Lucius is in there moisturising or something.”

Remus snorts to himself.

“Siri isn’t very good with personal space, I think.” Harry takes a sip of his cooling tea.

“He’s always been like that, even when we were students and sharing a dorm.”

“Has anyone told you about Hogwarts? I mean Tom’s plans for it?”

Remus shakes his head and Harry proceeds to tell him everything he knows of the plans. A few hours later, Greyback appears in the doorway, looking sour and pretty much orders Remus to come along. There is a nasty reply on the tip of Lupin’s tongue, but he lets it rest for now; he wants it to gather some flavour before he lets the other werewolf know what he thinks. He’s not a bloody child.

*****

A while later . . .

Narcissa, sitting in her preferred armchair with a book and a cup of tea, looks over at the three elves
fidgeting before her. She places the book aside and waves her hand for them to speak. It is a bit alarming to suddenly find so many house-elves eager for her attention, all of them looking nervous and clutching the edges of their pristine black uniforms. Even though Narcissa is no longer a Malfoy, she is still trusted by the elves and they don’t consider it a betrayal to share their concerns with her.

Tilly, the head of the little gang, steps forward. She looks anxious but determined. “Mistress Narcissa, Tilly not mean to be rude but there be something important.”

“What exactly is this something?” Narcissa raises a sculpted brow.

Another elf pushes Tilly aside and looks at her with a pointed expression. She whispers furiously, “Not our business!”

Tilly, defiant and anxious, pushes the other elf behind her. She looks up at the witch and says, “Master Lucius be feeling ill. All the elves be very worried. He does not eat, feels sick all the time. Master not come out of bed.”

The third elf makes a noise and shoves her way up front. She’s the oldest of them and says, “Mistress Narcissa, forgive Wilky for forgetting her place, but Master Lucius is having a little one.”

Narcissa splutters into her tea and her eyes widen. It is no secret that elves can sense such things. Her pregnancy had been first discovered by an elf as well. Furthermore, elves never lie to their family. They may hide information but never outright lie.

“Wilky cans feel the little one,” the elf nods eagerly and shares a small smile with the others. All elves like children and are very happy about the news. “The little one is making Master Lucius feel so unwell. But he not know about it yet . . . Wilky not think he does.”

Narcissa cannot even find the proper words. She tells the elves. “Do not inform your Master of this. Not yet. I will handle the situation myself. I will prepare Master Lucius for such significant news. Tend to his every need without causing suspicion.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

As the reassured elves pop out of the room, Narcissa sags into her seat and tries to make sense of the news. It takes her a few moments to compose her thoughts and she lets out an indignant noise and covers her mouth with her hand. The thought is startling and just a tiny bit amusing. Her cousin’s child carried by her ex-husband. It’s positively side-splitting. First, she will have to speak to Lucius.

Of course, it fills her with happiness. Oh, how she loves the idea of a baby. She will spoil it and protect it with her entire being. Setting her cup aside, she stands and decides to check on her dear friend. A few moments later, Narcissa knocks on the door but hears no reply. She pushes down the handle and slips inside. The bedroom is dark and silent. She sees the wizard huddled under the covers like a small child. The sudden signs of weariness she has observed in the man now all make sense. She recalls her own discomforts during her pregnancy—the fatigue and light-headedness, the discomforts of queasiness and headaches. She certainly doesn’t envy Lucius.

The woman sits on the edge of the bed and strokes her hand down the wizard’s arm. "Lucius dear."

The blond shifts and lets out an annoyed sigh. "What can I do for you, Cissy?"

"The elves tell me that you are not feeling well."

"Tattling pests," the man mutters to himself. He waits a moment and inquires with a sigh, "What of it?"
Narcissa clucks her tongue. "Do not snipe at me, Lucius. I am only trying to provide assistance."

"I do not wish to sound rude, Cissy, but I would prefer to have a nap right now. Without you."

"Oh, pish-posh." Narcissa looks over at the window and wandlessly spells the drapes open to let some light inside. She also flicks the window open to let some fresh air into the stifling room. "I will have the elves prepare you some tea." She doesn’t expect Lucius to agree with her and snaps her fingers. The elf who pops into the room is wide-eyed and overly excited. "Prepare some tea for Master Lucius."

The elf nods. "Yes, tea is very good for Master. Tilly will make peppermint tea for Master right away."

Narcissa understands the obvious eagerness but still motions the elf to go away without blurting out any details.

"I don’t want tea. I want to be left alone."

Narcissa sits down on the bed once more and pats the wizard’s leg under the blanket. "Luce, ill-mannered is not a word I would use when you are concerned. You are feeling unwell, so I will forgive you for it."

"Cissy," Lucius hauls himself upright, although it makes him feel sick again. "When one is feeling unwell, they tend to want peace and quiet."

Narcissa has spent around two months in the company of a very worried wizard who is close to tearing his hair out because the man he loves keeps having strange episodes of dizziness and odd bouts of nausea. Now she knows the cause. Or she thinks she knows, for she cannot be certain yet. However, she feels like it is not entirely her place to just blurt it out.

"I really think you ought to see a Healer. These dizzy spells cannot be anything good, Lucius."

Silently seething, Lucius remains quiet. Narcissa is a notoriously nosey witch and will not stop until she has what she wants. "Cissy, leave me be. Please."

"Sirius is close to the brink of madness. He worries, you know. He feels helpless and hurt because you will not see a Healer about these strange symptoms. He fears that it is something serious. I know you have been hiding it from him as well, fooling him into thinking that it is not as severe as it actually is."

Of course, Lucius has not ignored it. But he, too, is afraid. After having his magic almost depleted, these unpleasant episodes of weakness and magical instability seem like constant occurrences. For a wizard, magic is sacred, powerful, life-giving. He can’t abide the thought of losing it. But he has trouble with it—has been having trouble with it since he arrived home from St.Mungo’s months ago. It feels like he’s being drained.

"A Healer will—" Narcissa starts to say, but Lucius doesn’t want to hear it.

"A Healer will tell me that my magical core has been damaged beyond repair; that I will be a Squib by the end of next month. I can’t even manage the most common of spells. It’s fading, I can feel it."

Narcissa is slightly taken aback. Firstly, because she has never seen such distress and misery flash across the man’s face. Secondly, because Lucius is an intelligent wizard. Unless . . .

Unless he didn’t actually take the pregnancy potion deliberately. If that is the case, he will likely be
shocked unconscious by the news. Then again, one doesn’t take such a potion for a lark or by accident. Severus makes all the potions they use and he would never give anyone an unfamiliar potion.

"Lucius, darling . . . one doesn’t simply lose their magic without a very specific reason."

"A magical core can be damaged by the excessive use of magic."

"This is true, but you have not used an excessive amount of magic of late, have you? Besides, core damage does not occur over two month’s time. It happens in an instant." Narcissa explains with a small smile. She can understand the man’s fear, but seeing him so worried pulls at her heart and she cannot let him think that he’s about to become a Squib. "Lucius, you are not losing your magic."

"Just dying then," the man groans wretchedly.

Narcissa actually laughs. Wizards can be very dramatic at times. "Oh, darling, you amuse me to no end." The witch looks positively gleeful and says, "You are not losing your magic and you are certainly not dying. In fact, you are far from it."

"Are you a clairvoyant now as well as my mother?" Lucius sneers and takes the cup from the tray. He feels like having some warm tea. It always makes him feel better.

"No, but I am a woman." Narcissa tries to hide her amusement. "And you, my lovely man, are pregnant."

Lucius chokes on his drink, spluttering like a small child would upon inhaling tea. He looks perfectly stupefied, but also very much confused.

"Cissy, you do not have a talent for comedy." There is a moment of stillness and unsettling quiet, and then Lucius starts laughing. He seems genuinely amused by the witch’s words. But soon enough the amused expression on the man’s face wanes. Actually, it sours quite a bit and fear enters his eyes when Narcissa’s expression remains the same. She even glares at him rather pointedly.

"I do not joke, Lucius. Wilky confirmed it. Elves can sense such things early on. They came to me and told me because you feel ill and they are worried."

"The blasted elf is mistaken." Lucius seethes.

Narcissa comments. "They do not lie, Lucius. The simple truth is that you are going to be a father again. Or rather a mother for the first time."

Nearing a panic-stricken state, Lucius lets the cup clatter back on the tray. "Cissy, I cannot be . . . I have not taken the potion. You know that wizards cannot conceive without it and I am not an exception."

"I know this, Lucius. But I also know that house elves do not lie to the family they serve. You are displaying the correct symptoms as well. The reason why your magic is so unstable is because it is mostly channelled into the magical womb and the survival of your child. You know that wizards depend solely on their magic when it comes to sustaining a healthy pregnancy."

"I didn’t take the fucking potion." Lucius hisses. Now he’s panicking and he’s in denial and ready to scream.

Narcissa has an excellent memory and she can connect the dots. "I suspect that you did take a potion you believed to be a pain remedy. Severus does not slip up. It simply does not happen. But when he
made you your special potions, he was working on a million other things and I believe that there was an unfortunate mix-up with the orders. You do remember what happened with one of the potions you consumed? You felt sick after and you had terrible nausea and very odd stomach cramps. You must have taken the potion that morning and it worked accordingly. Stomach cramps and queasiness are both signs of the potion creating a magical womb. I believe Sirius did the rest."

Lucius remembers the potion having a different taste but he had not considered it to be important. Severus, after all, an excellent brewer. But he had experienced unpleasant cramps that men usually never have. Of course, it does all fit. And to top it all off, Sirius had fucked him nice and proper that night. "But . . . I can’t be." There is a desperate sort of hope in his chest that maybe he’s actually dying and not pregnant at all.

"You are carrying a child, Lucius. A child you created with Sirius." Narcissa smiles softly. She can see that Lucius is upset and confused and in complete disbelief, but she is certain that he will be able to see that it is a blessing. "Do you wish to see a Healer now?"

Lucius gives a numb nod. He stares down, eyes filled with apprehension but also wonder. A child that’s his and Sirius’s; the idea of it is startling and so very frightening. But it doesn’t grip him with paralysing terror. In fact, it fills him with a strange and sudden spike of warmth that spreads through him; like a full-body blush. The core of it reaches out and travels around, but the most prominent feeling is affection. It bubbles like a secret thought.

"You know Sirius will be over the moon," Narcissa assures the man. "He loves you. His eyes gleam with it when he looks at you, and he will love this child just as much."

Lucius doesn’t doubt it. Sirius would be a dedicated and affectionate father. But still the thought of having a baby is daunting. They have not talked about the possibility of children. Yes, there is a very lovely and stunning ring on his finger that signifies Sirius’ commitment and his wish to bind their lives into one, but a child is a rather massive step. They are not even married yet.

"Do not worry. I will send for a Healer specialising in this field; I know just the witch for the job. You just relax and try to calm yourself. Stress and volatile emotions are not good for the baby."

"Cissy—" Lucius calls out for her when she’s about to leave. "Don’t tell Sirius. I—I’ll tell him, but not right now. I need to process all this."

The witch understands. Lucius is terrified and that rarely happens. He fears everything about it; the actual pregnancy, being able to cope with it, telling Sirius. She gives a nod and goes to find a competent elf who can be sent to fetch the Healer.

The wizard settles back on the bed and sags into the pillows. He is still as scared but there is a comforting edge to his emotions. A reassuring wave of warmth and peace spreads out from the inside. The feeling of affection pulses in his chest without any underlying thought or demand; it just is. Uncomplicated and light as a feather, as if magical energy could take the form a lullaby.

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The Healer Narcissa manages to locate is an older witch, with an almost stern look about her. That of course has nothing to do with her patients or her mood; she simply has sterns facial features. In truth, she quite enjoys her work.
"Healer Mayweather," Narcissa addresses the woman with a smile as she enters the parlour.

Healer Maisie Mayweather is an older woman but she is skilful; she is one of the few Healers in the country who has dedicated herself to working with wizards instead of expecting witches. She is, in fact, a true pioneer in the field, having made adjustments to the pregnancy potion and worked with many renowned specialists around the world.

Mayweather is also known for being a candid woman. There isn’t a dilly-dallying bone in her body. "I believe you have a patient waiting for me, Mrs Malfoy."

Narcissa tilts her head in amusement. "I am once again a Black by name; Mister Malfoy and I are divorced."

"My apologies." The witch gives an awkward smile. She doesn’t follow gossip all that much.

"No apology is needed, Healer Mayweather. Please, I’ll take you to your patient." Narcissa says but stops before they can go upstairs. "You come highly recommended, Healer Mayweather. Please do not be offended but I must ask your utmost discretion. This is a very delicate matter."

For a moment, Maisie feels a surge of something unpleasant. "Discretion is the foundation of any patient-healer relationship."

"I am aware of the meaning of patient-healer secrecy bindings, but at the current moment, it is imperative that nothing leaves the safety of this manor."

Now the Healer is intrigued as well. "Let us get right to it then, Ms Black."

Narcissa takes the witch upstairs and knocks on the door. She hopes that Lucius is still in his bedroom. After all, a number of hours have passed and he may be having a meltdown somewhere, but thankfully, Lucius is still rather overwhelmed by everything and hasn’t moved. He’s still tucked away under a coverlet, pillows propping him up. It is fortunate that Sirius is away from the manor for the time being, having agreed to accompany Luna to Knockturn Alley.

Healer Mayweather is a professional and she doesn’t even bat an eye when she is guided into a spacious bedroom and she sees her patient. Of course, she knows the Malfoy family. She’s not that ignorant, even if she hasn’t heard of the Malfoys divorcing.

"Lucius, this is Healer Mayweather." Narcissa makes the introduction and ignores the scowl she gets for her troubles. Then she turns to the other woman. "He may be a bit skittish but that is understandable because he just found out. The pregnancy potion was not intentionally used; I suspect a simple mistake was made by the brewer who supplies us with all the needed potions."

"Cissy dear," Lucius gives the witch a mighty glare, "there is no need to divulge everything."

"As far as we know, the potion was ingested two months ago. He has been experiencing faintness and nausea, as well as unusual weariness. But again, we are not completely sure." Narcissa ignores the wizard’s tetchy expression and tells the Healer what she needs to know.

The Healer nods. "Wizards feel such symptoms more acutely because it puts a rather large strain on their magical core. Magic can sometimes heighten everything, including some of the more unpleasant sensations, such as fatigue, light-headedness and headaches... all sorts of aches and pains really."

"Perhaps I should leave so that you ladies can discuss my private business in further detail?" Lucius asks impatiently.
"Hormonal imbalance is also very common, even more so for some wizards," Healer Mayweather comments with a hidden smile. "All right, I would first like to check your general health—blood pressure and a blood sample to detect any sort of vitamin deficiency—and then I will concentrate on the rest."

Narcissa smiles and says, "Wonderful. I shall leave you to your examination then. I'll have some more tea brought up."

Lucius only allows the witch to poke and prod away at him because she seems proficient and has yet to give him some sort of silly smile. She’s not gushing about cute babies either. In fact, she looks to be an older witch, perhaps in her sixties, and Lucius likes that she’s not some young chit fresh out of a training course.

She diligently measures his blood pressure and deems it a bit high but she’s not overly worried. Then she collects a phial of his blood and carefully labels it before sticking it into her Healer’s case—something Severus should have done before giving him a fucking pregnancy potion. Lucius realises that it is likely an accident and Severus himself has no idea, but he’s still annoyed. He’s going to look terrible in his own wedding and that also means ordering different robes than what he has in mind and possibly bringing the wedding forward a bit because there will be pictures and he really can’t look like he’s swallowed a small planet. It will completely ruin him. He remembers Narcissa, ordering the elves to deliver all sorts of fatty foods to her somewhere around four in the morning—every morning.

Healer Mayweather gives the man a piercing look, orders him to lie down and then proceeds with the examination. Her wand swishes and flicks while a hovering quill jots everything down into her journal. She seems completely engrosses and hums every now and then between different spells. It’s slightly unnerving for Lucius but the witch seems like someone who wouldn’t mind giving her patients a thorough trashing. The ten minutes of silence ends when Mayweather tucks her wand back into her Healer’s bag and pushes her glasses up her nose a bit. "The magical womb has formed perfectly. I can detect no deformities and the flow of magic is steady and abundant. A combination of a first-rate potion and a very potent magical core. Sometimes weaker cores combined with the potion produce defective wombs but this is definitely not the case with you."

"And you are certain that I am—" Lucius snaps his mouth shut. He can’t even say the word ‘pregnant’ yet. Mostly because he’s in shock. It is, after all, most unexpected.

"Yes, absolutely, pet. Eight weeks along." Mayweather smiles because it is rare to see such gobsmacked faces when dealing with expecting wizards. Almost all of them are prepared for the news, for it is always planned and there can’t really be any shock if one considers the deliberation that goes into the decision to procreate. This, however, is completely unintentional and this wizard has had no time to get used to the idea or even consent to it. She feels that she has to inform her new patient of his options. "Strictly speaking, termination is not encouraged but there are mitigating circumstances for both wizards and witches. Health risks outweigh any Ministry policies regarding such matters and forceful conception—"

Lucius shakes his head, feeling slightly ill. "Madam, I assure you that I was not tricked into anything and I was most certainly not forced. Having an oblivious idiot for a Potion Master is not exactly a mitigating circumstance," says the man. "And in any case, I have no wish to terminate anything. While unexpected, this child will have loving parents."

"Good," Maisie says and the matter is closed, never to be revisited again. "The magic flows as it should, as I said before. The womb is very much like a natural one, only it is sustained by your magic and that requires quite a lot of magical energy. This will slow down after the first trimester and
the instability of your core will settle down into its normal patterns. The first three months will be the most taxing period, magically speaking, and it is recommended to limit your use of magic. I personally advise to abstain altogether to ensure a period of healthy development for the child."

‘No magic’ sounds a lot like ‘welcome to hell’ to Lucius, but it’s not like he has been casting any complex spells recently. Another month does not sound all that terrible. "What sort of restrictions does this entail?"

"No smoking—this means no wizard tobacco or those nasty Muggle cigarettes. No alcohol, no strenuous activities like running or heavy lifting, and definitely no dieting. Everything that you put into your body affects your child, so no raw meats or fish. In fact, raw foods should be avoided altogether, unless it is fruits and vegetables. No caffeinated drinks—that means coffee, green tea, Muggle fizzy drinks. But do not worry, pet, I will give you a list of limitations and acceptable activities and foods."

There is a knock on the door. Narcissa steps inside. "Sirius is due to return soon."

An anxious look enters the blond’s eyes and he wishes he could shove the Healer into a closet and hide her because he is not ready to tell Sirius about the baby. He needs more time to fully come to terms with it and to feel comfortable with the idea. It is too early for involving Sirius—this is something he wants to experience by himself for a little while.

"Is something the matter?" Mayweather quirks her brow.

"No." Lucius sighs. "I merely want to keep this to myself for a bit to get used to the situation."

Healer Mayweather nods. "I will need to check you over regularly for the next ten weeks; after that it will be twice a month. When you are ready, we will discuss things in detail." She stands and gathers her bag. "I will send you all the necessary books and make a list of restrictions. Once I have examined your blood sample, I will send over the correct nutrition potions and supplements that you will need to stay healthy. I expect you to take them."

It is definitely a strange moment for the wizard. The Healer gives him a stern look; it is almost burning. She takes good care of her patients and she is not above implementing strict rules to make them obey.

Narcissa accompanies her downstairs and as they reach the Floo, the younger witch says, "Thank you for coming on such short notice, Healer Mayweather. You’ll not have an easy time with him but I am sure you can handle it."

"I’ve been doing this close to thirty years and I have yet to encounter a patient I cannot wrangle into compliance. It takes a particular touch." The witch smirks to herself. "Now, I must be off. You can expect a delivery from me in a few days time. If there are any problems, contact me immediately. Purely magical pregnancies are delicate and require close monitoring."

Narcissa offers the witch a firm nod and sends the Healer on her way. It is a close call, for Sirius Apparates into the parlour a moment later and the wizard shakes off his robe. There is a heavy dusting of snow covering his shoulders and fur lapels. It is the beginning of March but it is still awfully cold.

"How was your outing with Luna?" Narcissa asks, conjuring a smile on her face.

Sirius looks properly pissed. "Parts of my body are ready to fall off. I can’t even feel my face."

"There are charms for this, Sirius."
"Bloody forgot, didn’t I . . ." Sirius mutters. Narcissa takes pity on the man and casts a wandless heating charm that swathes Sirius in a warm embrace. He lets out a pleased sigh. "Where’s Luce?"

"Having a rest. You will not disturb him, Cousin." Narcissa warns. "And you will not worry either. I have everything under control."

Sirius doesn’t feel like it’s under control and says, "I’m dragging that uppity bastard to a Healer even if it costs me my bollocks. I can’t stand to see him so sick all the time. He says it fine and that it’s nothing, but I’m not a blithering idiot. I can bloody well hear him retching in the bathroom."

Narcissa takes a firm hold of the man’s shoulders and says again, "I have everything under control, Sirius."

"I can’t lose him." Sirius gives a pained reply. "I can’t."

"And you won’t. Have a little faith in your cousin Cissy. Now, how about a hot drink to warm your blood?"

There isn’t anything else to say and Sirius offers the witch a small nod. He’s in a constant state of worry. The past two months have been filled with it and he feels like he’s losing the man he loves.

Lucius spends the rest of the day alone and deep in thought. Usually when one is alone with their thoughts there is a chance that they might be overwhelmed by them, but Lucius doesn’t feel like he’s alone. Not anymore at least.

He has a wonderful son. Draco has grown into a strong-minded and capable wizard and Lucius is immensely proud of him. Seeing one’s child grow and mature from a curious child to an accomplished young adult is something that fills any parent with gratitude and joy.

Draco had been a demanding baby; a true attention-seeker from an early age. They could not leave him alone for even a moment, for the whole manor would then shake with his angry screams and pitiable blubbering. A clingy child who had needed a lot of comfort and close contact as a toddler. After a few years, he had turned into a nosy and curious child getting into everything and running around like an unstoppable whirlwind. Now he’s a young man, ready to carry the responsibility and high expectations that come with the Malfoy name.

And Lucius would not mind doing it again. It is intimidating for him because this time he has to do all the heavy lifting—both literally and symbolically. It is an experience that he can’t compare to anything but it is already happening and he can’t back out. He knows that he will forever regret it should he terminate the child. The thought alone sickens him. He could never find enough brutality in himself in order to do it. It is such an easy thought, and yet utterly defeating. Deep down, he knows that he has already chosen to have this child.

When the door opens, Lucius expects Sirius to come bounding in, but it’s Luna. The young witch moves into the room and sits on the bed without saying a word.

Of course, Lucius finds it incredibly odd. Luna is a lovely girl; a bit peculiar, but she fits into their family rather nicely. They all consider her part of it already and she is very comfortable with them as well.
"Oh, you poor thing," Luna mutters to herself. "You need to eat something, Lucius."

The thought of food makes him ill all over again. But the girl is once again being cryptic. Lucius suspects that Narcissa might have told her about his predicament, never mind his feelings on the matter.

Luna only smiles and hums. She feels a rush of emotions radiating from the man—worry, elation, a bit of fear. But it all washes over her as she feels something entirely different. It is like a soft wave of affection; a trill of untainted energy. Soft yet so very vicious. Luna closes her eyes and blurts out, "What a magnificent thing you are, dove. Warm and giving, nothing at all like your mother—but wild, too."

"How do you know that? How—" Lucius asks with an alarmed intake of breath. He looks completely baffled.

"My mother had a strange gift, you see. She could feel the magic all around her. Like a stream of air, like wind chuckling. She would touch it with her fingertips, creating tiny waves in a big ocean."

"I remember Pandora; she was always walking somewhere above the clouds," Lucius recalls the girl’s mother; a witch of unusual talents and ethereal beauty.

"I’m a bit like her, you see. I am in tune with the magic around me, but I also feel currents of emotion; like a flowing river," Luna explains. "Your magic is very bright; sharp and cold and remote like a star. Sirius’ magic is like a smouldering flame, like amber; purposeful but also very pliable. I can feel a new magic forming, a combination of you and Sirius. I have not felt it before, but perhaps you are now more connected to it."

Lucius looks at her and sees her in a different light. He says with marvel. "You are exceptionally unusual, Miss Lovegood. And I do mean that as a compliment."

Luna has little reservations. She would pet a dragon just as she would pet a cat. She would stick her hand into a dark hole and cradle a viper. She takes Lucius’ hand and places it over his stomach and asks, "Would you like to feel her?"

The wizard is too startled by Luna’s statement to agree. He is sure that he has heard correctly. "How do you know it is a girl? It is too early to tell."

"Because I can feel her magic. I just know," Luna replies with a small smile. She brings her hand closer and leaves it hovering over the wizard’s middle just above the man’s own hand. "The magic is soft but splendid. The palm of my hand tingles; it is like touching a kitten’s fur. Her magic tickles; like a touch of a feather. Compared to you, she’s like the sun—bountiful and golden. You’re like the moon—distant and cold. But her magic weaves around your magic naturally, without timidity or reserve."

It makes Lucius feel a spread of warmth inside. The witch smiles brightly and places her hand against the wizard’s hand without even asking. She hums a little, a pleased sound leaving her lips, and says, "Hello, dove."

Magic prickles around them as well as inside, but it is not insistent and makes no demands. It is rather like a lulling sensation.

Luna says, "She truly is magnificent; filled with endless joy and life. She is still very small, a cluster of magic, but already filled with so much adoration. Unrestricted affection and trust. Can you feel it?"
A small burst of magic extends from the wizard’s midsection and travels around until a feeling of warm happiness enfolds his mind. It doesn’t last long, a moment or two, but it leaves behind traces of contentment. Lucius is enthralled as he whispers, "Yes."

"When she gets stronger, you will be able to feel her more and without any assistance from me,” Luna explains, her face bright and happy. But she does say with a more commanding tone. "You must let Sirius know as soon as possible. He can help balance your magic, for the child will drain much of it. Only you and Sirius are able to provide the compatible magic."

"And how is it that you know of such things?” Lucius just has to ask because she’s a very young woman and has no idea what she’s talking about because she has no children of her own.

Luna usually just smiles and gives a cryptic answer, but she isn’t planning to be mysterious now. After all, she loves Draco very much and this child will be Draco’s sister—as well her sister. She already considers the baby to be her family. "During my travels, my father and I have encountered many wonderful witches and wizards. I have discovered much about magic, as well as my unusual gift for sensing it. I am even able to sense emotions though a person’s magic. Magic speaks to me; it sings under my touch and I experience the flow of it. I understand it."

If she is to become Draco’s wife, the future Lady Malfoy, Lucius will not have anything other than warm words and praise ready for her. Of course, he did not think much of her at first but she is very hard to ignore and even harder to dislike. One cannot help but to admire her. Some of her ideas may be a bit implausible and some even downright bizarre, but there is something about the girl which gives her a sort of wisdom. It is uncanny but welcome.

"You ought to rest now." Luna stands. She can sense the man’s tiredness and she can see it when she looks upon him.

"Thank you," Lucius is quick to say, "for showing me."

Luna stops by the door, a brilliant smile on her lips. "Take good care of your little dove, Lucius."

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Sirius crawls into bed some time after midnight, careful not to bounce on the bed too much. There is a terrible feeling in his chest; it is as if his heart is encased in a steel trap. Nothing is wrong but everything feels wrong. He can’t help himself; the strange emotions swirling around inside cause him a great deal of agony.

He slips his arm around Lucius, pulling him closer. The wizard makes a soft noise and turns into Sirius, his body pressed tightly against the wizard’s.

Sirius isn’t an idiot, although he is often accused of idiocy. He knows that something is happening with Lucius. He just doesn’t have a clue as to what might be the cause of his illness. Not that Lucius himself admits to being ill. He likes to pretend that nothing is wrong.

Sirius drifts into an uneasy sleep. When he opens his eyes again, Lucius is missing from his side and it’s already morning. It’s quiet, but the fluttering curtains alert Sirius of the open balcony doors. He throws on a robe, sticks his feet into warm slippers and shuffles towards the open doors. It’s surprisingly sunny outside and yesterday’s sheen of snow has melted away. Sirius spots Lucius standing by the white marble balustrade. The man looks odd; deep in thought, with his eyes shut,
hair spilling down his back. Tantalising but very unusual.

"Everything all right, love?"

Lucius hears but doesn’t move or open his eyes. The sun is warm and Lucius enjoys it. Waking up, he had felt an incredible sense of tenderness swaddling him like a blanket. Then he had realised that it was something he had never experienced before. It was the unmistakable spark of life within him; his unborn child. The heavy weight of it had driven him outside, seeking some fresh air and a sense of calm. Heavy but in no way a burden. It was never about acknowledge the startling fact but rather about accepting it, embracing it, feeling it.

When Sirius slinks his arms around his lover, Lucius melts into the wizard’s touch. Sirius definitely doesn’t want to ruin the peaceful moment by asking stupid questions, so he stays silent. After a while, he sighs. "I think we should put a party tent right there by the blooming wisterias; have an outdoor wedding reception." Sirius muses, nosing the blond’s neck.

"We are not paupers, Siri. A tent is what commoners use when they are having a party in the backyard."

"You’re such a snob, Luce." Sirius laughs and then nips at the man’s ear. "Let’s just elope. I’ll fuck you out in the open, on a beach somewhere warm. Under the stars."

Lucius pulls away to glare at the man. "Absolutely not."

"Relax . . . I’m only joking. I think I want a big fucking party with good music, lots of food and alcohol, friends and family. Even Snape. He’ll be so uncomfortable the whole time. I can’t wait to see it. I want Harry to be my best man." Sirius lets out a deep breath. "Gods, I can’t believe I’m actually here and not dead somewhere in a ditch, and I’m marrying the most gorgeous, sexiest bloke in the whole bloody world. I must have done something really good to deserve all this."

The blond hums in response, allowing Sirius to wrap his arms around him. Lucius decides to talk to the wizard in a few days; he wishes to savour the secret a bit longer. Once the man finds out, he’ll be insufferable. There is no harm in securing a few peaceful days for himself before letting Sirius know of his child.

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Severus stalks into the dining room, face set in a puckered glower. He takes a seat, ignoring Narcissa’s greeting. He is in no mood to talk.

"Darling, you look positively cantankerous. It is unbecoming."

Severus stabs his fork into an unsuspecting piece of sausage. He’s mood is darker than the coffee in his special double-sized mug.

"You fouled another potion, didn’t you? I’m terribly sorry."

"Me, foul a potion? Never in my life—" Severus snaps his mouth shut, thinning it into an angry line. He takes a deep breath. "I received a letter from St. Mungo’s, and in this unbecoming letter, I was delicately told that one of my potions—a potion requested a few months back—did not seem to be correct. They claim that I have made a mistake."
Narcissa raises her brow. "Oh? That’s horrible."

"As if I’m some first-year Gryffindor who can’t tell his arse from a cauldron." Snape sneers and gulps down half of his bitter morning drink. He doesn’t look any better after drinking it. "I can brew a pregnancy potion with my hands tied behind my back. And those idiots dare to send me a letter, telling me that it didn’t work, that it was not effective! It is clear that some nitwit is responsible for some unfortunate mix-up. Apparently, the couple wishes to file a complaint against St. Mungo’s for causing them unnecessary emotional distress. What sort of rubbish is that? Emotional distress... well, emotionally unstable wizards should not procreate in the first place. Idiots!"

Narcissa wants to laugh, desperately so, but she has to keep her face neutral. Perhaps a hint of understanding, some consideration. Maybe a bit of indignation on the man’s behalf. Anything to keep her amusement hidden. She knows exactly what Severus is talking about, but it is not her place to say anything. "Indeed, darling. A very unfortunate incident."

"St. Mungo’s wants me to brew another one—for free! Because they feel that I am to be blamed for this mess. As if I have nothing better to do than help moronic people reproduce."

"Perhaps it is time for you to end your working relationship with St. Mungo’s? You have always wanted to start your own Apothecary; there is nothing stopping you now, Severus. The Dark Lord has secured his victory. You know longer have to spend so much of your time teaching."

Severus nods. "It was a dream of mine when I was younger and less jaded. However, brewing is more than just something I am good at; it is a passion of mine."

"Then it is settled. St. Mungo’s does not deserve a Potion Master of your talent. Only the best can afford your potions. Why not take advantage of it?"

Severus does not get a chance to reply before they are joined by Luna and a moment later Lucius. Seeing no sign of Black, Snape relaxes a bit. It is a built-in mechanism; seeing Sirius Black will always make him tense up. The ‘flight or fight’ mentality will never disappear from a Slytherin’s internal structure.

Luna smiles, greeting both Narcissa and Severus before taking a seat. She asks an elf to bring her grape juice and peppermint tea for Lucius. Snape raises a brow at that but since no one mentions the girl’s oddness, he dismisses it. He needs to leave anyway, having left a potion simmering for an hour. He finishes his coffee and excuses himself from the breakfast table.

As the man disappears, Narcissa smiles. "How are you feeling today, Lucius?"

Lucius drinks a bit of tea and hums in delight. He is unsure how much enjoyment he is going to have during the next months, but he does love a cup of hot tea. "Content."

It is an answer that makes Narcissa’s smile turn even fonder. She remembers her own pregnancy, and although it had not been purely magical, she had shared her magic with Draco. It is an elating feeling. She sees that same sort of elation developing in her friend. She also sees another type of development. Miss Lovegood is at times a very odd girl, but she’s lovely and quite unique. It is hard not to like her. Draco is completely besotted; bringing the witch into their family is just a matter of making it official. She is already part of it. Narcissa notices the way Luna seems to fuss over Lucius and she is pleasantly shocked to see that Lucius allows it. It is entirely possible that the girl knows of the child.

Luna pours more tea into Lucius’ cup and says, "In time, you will know her likes and dislikes, but tea is good for you."
"I might go insane otherwise," says the wizard.

Narcissa clears her throat. "Luna, dear—you know?"

"Oh, yes. It is very hard not to know, Cissy. Especially now that Lucius is conscious of it himself. It creates an incredibly strong bond between the two. His awareness and acceptance of her forms a connection that cannot be broken. It is the strongest of bonds known to us—a mother’s love. It really is quite marvellous. Once she grows, Lucius will sense her needs and her moods."

The older woman does not feel the need to ask how Luna Lovegood knows all that. She’s just knows and that itself is a perfectly valid point when Luna is involved. Of course, Luna’s mother had been gifted with many abilities. It is likely that her child carries the same gifts. However, Narcissa’s keen ears catch something far more interesting. "You believe that the child is a girl?"

"Yes. I sense it. Her magic speaks to me. I feel her contentment even now."

"Oh, how wonderful! A girl, Lucius—is that not delightful news? The Malfoy line is infamous for producing nothing but sons." Narcissa lets out an amused titter. "You and Sirius will manage, I’m sure."

Lucius scoffs. "If you are implying that I cannot handle raising a girl—"

"Darling, I imply nothing. I am merely pointing to the fact that it will not be the same as raising a boy."

"Yes, yes . . ." Lucius sneers behind his cup of tea, "It’s tea-parties and frilly dresses and unicorns and flower crowns."

Narcissa smiles a bit too sweetly. "Yes, Lucius. You must get in touch with your inner witch."

"I beg your pardon!" Lucius splutters, his tea cup coming down with a brutal clink. He ignores Luna’s attempt to hide her giggling, preferring to glare at Narcissa.

"No need to look so offended. This baby will not be like Draco, looking to you for fatherly advice. That will fall on Sirius. Your daughter has two fathers, but she will see a mother in you. It is quite different from what you shared with Draco, seeing as he did not share a bond with you as he did with me."

Luna pipes in, "It is an unique bond, unmatched by any other magical bond. Sparked from magic and blood, creating a link that cannot be severed."

It is all overwhelming the wizard and he feels slightly uncomfortable. Just because he has accepted it and the idea is growing on him, does not necessarily mean that everything has fully settled. A certain panic is beginning to set in. He stands and excuses himself, leaving without a word.

Seeing that Narcissa wants to go after the man, Luna shakes her head. "Let him be. Everything will fall into place; all in good time. At the moment, Lucius needs to be alone and clear his mind."

"You are correct, Luna," Narcissa sighs, sitting back down. "I will not badger him. This has unsettled him greatly and he must remain calm; the child will be affected by any unstable emotions."

*****
About a week later, Sirius finally snaps. He has been suspicious for a while now, feeling that something is not right, and he knows that Lucius is aware of his suspicions. He’s not a fucking idiot. Lucius is ill. Just how ill, Sirius doesn’t know.

Narcissa keeps telling him that it’s all fine. It’s not bloody fine!

And another thing is the collection of potions in the bathroom. He’s sure that Lucius probably forgot to hide them away, but he can’t get it out of his head. He’s freaking out.

So he snaps. Quite thoroughly, in fact.

It’s barely light outside when he wakes up to noises coming from the bathroom. He has heard the noises before so he knows that Lucius is throwing up again. He casts a Tempus. It’s a little over six in the morning. It’s not like Lucius to be up so early in the morning—before the sun-up even.

It all boils over. The man he is about to marry—bond for life—is keeping secrets from him. Big secrets. Because being ill is something that one usually shares with their partner. Lucius hasn’t said a word, and what’s more, he’s actually denying it. Poncy bastard.

Sirius throws the covers aside and stumbles out of bed. He’s going to confront Lucius and get to the bottom of this. He rips the door open and finds the blond slumped over the toilet, his hair twisted around his hand as he holds it up. He’s not puking anymore, just heaving. He does notice Sirius and it’s entirely humiliating to be found like this, but he doesn’t care. He waves towards the counter at the potion bottles.

Sirius whips his head around. "The brown one?"

Lucius nods and grabs it right out of the wizard’s hands. The heaving stops a few moments later; he just takes a deep breath and wipes his lips.

"Right," Sirius mutters. "You’re seeing a Healer. I don’t want to hear one fucking word from you. Do you think I’m an idiot? Clearly, you do."

Lucius moves to the sink to wash out his mouth. He doesn’t look at Sirius but says, voice hoarse, "I do not need to see a Healer."

"Yeah, you do! I can see that you’re not feeling well. I can hear you puking your guts out. You’re bloody lying to me, Lucius. Don’t you fucking get it, you prat? I’m scared, all right. I’m afraid for you because I know something is going on. I know."

"Sirius—"

"No, don’t you fucking dare, Luce. You’re lying to me. I can’t take it anymore." Sirius rages, his eyes going a bit wild. He knows he’s yelling and possibly looks mad, but he’s fucking done. "If you don’t see a Healer right now, I’m fucking divorcing you before I even get to marry you. Do not test me, Luce. I will tie you to the bed and force you to deal with a hundred Healers—"

Lucius turns off the tap, places the glass down and turns to the man. Keeping secrets is taking a toll on him as well and he needs to calm the man down before he has a stroke. "Sirius, listen to me—"

The Animagus isn’t in the mood and curls his hand around Lucius’ arm, fully intending to pull him out of the bathroom. He is going to physically drag the wizard to St.Mungo’s.
"Sirius!" Lucius hisses. He’s feeling like shit and all he wants is to go back to sleep. And Sirius is making it worse by jostling him around. "Let go of my arm."

Sirius drops it immediately. He’s so close to the edge but Lucius is getting angry and he’s too tired to fight. "Please . . . just tell me! I feel so helpless and scared. I want to have that bonding we talked about but I’m fucking terrified that I’m never going to have any of it because I don’t know what’s going on with you. Is it some magical illness? Something we can cure? Am I going to lose you? Fuck, I need to know."

Sirius looks miserable. Lucius blurs it out without any sort of thought. "I’m pregnant."

"I can’t lose you, Luce—" Sirius stops, mouth snapping shut. "What?"

"I am not ill or dying." Lucius sighs. "I’m pregnant."

"What—"

Lucius frowns. "Expecting a child."

"Hang on, what—" Sirius stumbles a little, sitting his arse down on the bed. His brain is literally frozen. He can’t think or speak. The word pregnant plays in a loop. Him—a father! It’s making all the blood rush into his head.

Lucius feels worried. Sirius does look shades paler. "Siri?"

"Pregnant . . ." Sirius mutters, stating wide-eyed at Lucius. His future. Husband-to-be. Then he lowers his gaze. There is not much to see yet, but the thought itself is like nothing else. While his mind tries to catch up with everything, he just opens his mouth and closes it again. He knows he must look like a complete fool but he can’t believe it. "There’s a baby . . . you’re pregnant?"

By now, Lucius is experiencing doubt. A lot of it. Sirius doesn’t look very happy. Granted, he just looks stunned. A classic victim of petrifaction. But it comes rushing at him—this cold unease. This horrible dread.

Sirius gets most of his functions back and he starts to really process the news. They’re having a baby. It fills him with pure bliss. It makes him so warm and happy. A huge smile breaks out on his face. He jumps up and falls to his knees before Lucius. His voice is full of awe. "You’re pregnant . . . Luce."

"Nine weeks."

Sirius smiles a silly smile, nosing the blond’s stomach. "We’re having a baby! Shit . . . I—fucking hell, Luce! Our kid."

The tension eases out of Lucius and he relaxes. Sirius gets to his feet and wraps his arms around the wizard, pulling him close. He coaxes Lucius into a kiss. The thought sinks deeper and he smiles into the kiss, whispering against the blond’s lips, "I love you, so much . . . want you."

Lucius gives Sirius a gentle shove and says, "Not now, Siri. We need to talk about this."

Sirius reluctantly releases the man but he pulls him towards the bed and waits until Lucius settles under the covers, before following him. "So all this . . . . Sirius waves his hand over Lucius. " . . . is just morning sickness?"

"Yes."
Sirius sits against the headboard and waits for Lucius to come closer. Like a hesitant cat, Lucius cuddles up to Sirius’ side, allowing the man to drape his arm around him.

"Wait . . ." Sirius looks at the blond, eyes narrowing into slits. "Just how long have you known about this, Luce?"

"A week. I did not keep you in suspense for two months. I thought my magical core was damaged; I could not perform even the easiest of spells. I did not want to accept the fact that I might be left a Squib. So I decided to ignore it; just disregard everything and suffer in silence."

"You’re a massive twat, Luce. You could have told me, you know. Instead you let me think that you were deathly sick. Wanker." Sirius mutters. "And you could have told me that you took the potion."

Lucius sneers. "I didn’t take it."

Sirius snorts and says with a grin. "You’re not a girl, Luce. I’ve checked. A lot." He makes a point in sliding his hand under the covers to check again.

But Lucius catches his wrists and twists it. "I’ll rephrase. I did not take the potion knowingly," Lucius pauses for a moment and goes on, "I ingested the potion by accident. It is possible that Severus mixed up his potions. Cissy is sure of it; apparently, St. Mungo’s had ordered one such potion from him. Overworked, he accidently switched my pain-relieving potion with the pregnancy potion."

Sirius lets out a small laugh. "Does that mean I have to send Snivelly a thank-you note? That’s a first." The thought itself is hilarious. "So, Cissy knows?"

"The elves told her. They can sense such things."

"Fuck," Sirius mumbles to himself. "We’re having a baby. This is really happening." He starts laughing and buries his face in his hands. He’s overjoyed and dead scared. "But why’d you wait a whole week to tell me?" Sirius asks, suddenly curious.

Lucius wets his lips; a nervous gesture that betrays his discomfort.

"Lucius—did you think I wouldn’t be happy about it?" Sirius hedges, facing the wizard.

"What part of pregnant don’t you understand, you oaf?" Lucius hisses, his eyes fiercely burning. There is a panicky look on his face, so indignant and insecure at the same time. Sirius keeps staring at him like a wounded puppy and he can’t deal with his anxieties on top of his own. "I needed a whole week just to come to terms with the fact that there is another human being growing inside of me! So forgive me for needing a fucking moment, Siri."

"Stop looking so annoyingly smug."

The Animagus just stares at the fuming wizard and a smile breaks free. He can’t stop himself and lets the giddy smile widen.

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"Stop looking so annoyingly smug."

Sirius raises his hands in a placating manner and lies down. He edges closer, careful not to agitate the wizard, and slips an arm around him. He doesn’t even want to talk; just stay in the pleasant haze that’s swathing him at the moment. He’s not the sort of man that worries all that much about his legacy or making sure his bloodline continues. He wants to know that he has done something that matters. Something pure and good; untainted by the sins of his past. Something he can look upon and say that it is his greatest accomplishment in this life. A child will be just that—a reason for him to try harder, to be the sort of person one can be proud of. He already has that with Harry but to be a father for real—he can’t even explain the feelings that it evokes in him.
"I am happy, Luce, in case I didn’t make it abundantly clear before. I figured I’d wait a few years before bringing up the subject of children. Enjoy being married to you first, you know. But this is like getting my presents all at once without having to wait for it." Sirius muses.

Lucius, with his agitation already dissipating, tells the wizard, "We have to move up the wedding."

"Whatever you decide, Luce. I’d marry you tomorrow, but you were the one who wanted a proper wedding."

"My first marriage was nothing more than a business deal between my father and Cygnus Black." Lucius reminds the man.

"I know," Sirius sighs. "We’re not marrying under a contract. We’re getting bonded."

Lucius hums. Sirius sits up, a grin on his face.

"What?" the blond questions, noticing the dreamy look on Sirius’ face.

"You’re pregnant!"

"Yes, we already established that I am, in fact, carrying your child." Lucius dryly states.

Sirius nods. "Yeah, I know. But—bloody hell, it sort of takes a while to sink in, doesn’t it? It’s a lot to take in. We’re having a kid—a real child that’s yours and mine."

Lucius smiles; one of those brilliant, genuine smiles. "Luna believes the baby to be a girl. I am inclined to trust her on this." Sirius’ gobsmacked expression is amusing and it looks like he’s actually shocked. "Give me your hand, Siri."

Wordlessly, the wizard lets Lucius place his hand over the lower part of his abdomen. At first, Sirius feels nothing. But he spreads his fingers wide and waits. The palm of his hand is warm and starts to tingle a bit. Tiny licks of magic burst forth like needle pricks. It’s not a strong sensation but overwhelming all the same.

Sirius mouths some words that seem a lot like curses. He is, in truth, gawking.

"Still sinking in?"

Sirius nods, snapping his mouth shut. He looks ready to say something but remains silent. A speechless Sirius is a rare treat. But the Animagus doesn’t have the words to express his wonder. The man crawls on top of Lucius, mindful of their baby, and nips at the blond’s lips to gain entrance, which Lucius grants him without much resistance. Sirius is eager to plunder the other’s mouth, slipping his tongue inside, but he’s too tired to properly show Lucius how much he wants him.

"Siri," Lucius hums between kisses, "I’m exhausted."

Sirius gets one last kiss from the man and smiles. "Sorry . . . got a bit carried away." Lucius doesn’t berate him for it; he just waits for the man to settle down next to him. Sirius sees the sun rising behind the dark curtains. After a while, he sneaks his hand down the blond’s body; gently pressing his palm over the spot his little one is growing. He can’t wait to see visible proof of their child.

*****
The next day, Sirius soars above the clouds. He still can’t believe it—he’s getting married and they’re having a child. He’s going to have a busy year; a busy life actually.

Narcissa hugs him after breakfast, sharing his joy. The witch is glad to see that there is no more worry in Sirius’ eyes; they are gleaming with contentment and clear bliss.

The Healer comes to check on Lucius six days later. Too tired to move, Lucius slouches on the chaise lounge in his study, looking through some papers the Dark Lord had given him about some project he is interested in. Sirius brings the Healer and ushers her inside.

Lucius is momentarily surprised to see Healer Mayweather but then he remembers that she was supposed to come for a check-up. It seems that he’s already absent-minded; Narcissa had experienced a similar symptom during her pregnancy.

Sirius is like an overly excited child; he can’t sit still, hands fidgeting in his lap. Frankly, he’s annoying Lucius already, but it makes him happy to see Sirius so elated and full of life. The Healer goes through her routine—she checks Lucius’ blood pressure and performs a series of magical scans. She checks the womb itself and the flow of magic. Everything is perfect and she also gives Lucius a clean bill of health.

"My only recommendation for you is to eat more. You are eating for two, Lucius."

It’s a bit hard to keep food down, but it’s not the Healer’s fault and Lucius just nods, instead of snapping something that could be considered rude.

Then she moves on to measure the fetus and checks vital signs and development. The spells are harmless and neither Lucius or Sirius comment, but the baby has something to say. Mayweather’s eyes widen as her spell gets blocked.

"Ah, yes. That can happen with magical children; not often, but it does happen. I must ask something of you," The Healer turns to Sirius. "The spells are fairly easy, Mister Black. I will take notes."

Sirius doesn’t mind; in fact, he’s happy to do it. Over the past week, Sirius has been testing it out. Baby likes his magic; perhaps not as much as she loves Lucius’ magic, but Sirius can get away with touching Lucius and performing magic around him seems to be acceptable as well.

The spells help measure the fetus and gain information about the strength of vital signs and development. Healer Mayweather jots down everything the spells say and she hums. "At ten weeks, everything is as it should be. I am very pleased to see such strong magical response to my spells. It means that the flow of magic is strong and the risk of spontaneous miscarriage is almost non-existent. However, miscarriage can still occur as a result of physical circumstance. I believe I do not have to remind you to stick to the list of approved activities."

Lucius gives a curt nod.

Before the Healer can leave, Sirius asks, "Can we still go through with a traditional bonding ritual?"

"It is not recommended during the earlier stages of pregnancy. Any type of foreign magic can interrupt the normal flow of magic which keeps the womb in a functioning condition, but it should not be a problem in the later stages. If you wish to conduct the ritual, I strongly advise you to wait for another twenty or so weeks."

Afraid that they might have to postpone the bonding, Sirius is pleased to hear that they can still have it. Both he and Lucius were ready to call it off because of the baby because it’s not worth their child’s life, but it’s good to know that it’s not harmful.
Sirius bombards the Healer with more questions, until Lucius sends him a glare across the room. She will be back in a week for another check-up. After sending her away, Sirius saunters back into the study with a beaming smile.

"Can I tell everyone now, Luce? You wanted to wait until you knew for sure that everything is fine and now you know."

It is amazing that the Animagus has managed to stay silent for a week. Only Luna and Cissy know, but Sirius wants to tell Harry and share his joy with the twins and maybe rub Snape’s nose in it. He just wants to be able to tell the world that he’s going to be a father.

Lucius gets up and allows Sirius to pull him against his body. He feels like Sirius deserves a reward for keeping his mouth shut for so long. "Fine, yes. We’ll start with Harry and the Dark Lord. But I do not wish to announce it to everyone. Let us keep it a private matter until it becomes obvious."

Sirius places a kiss on his lover’s lips and smiles. "Love you."

Telling the Dark Lord is bound to be an interesting event. The blond relaxes in the man’s arms, letting Sirius hold him for a while. Sometimes it all seems a bit too good to be true, but Lucius is not a wizard who likes to contemplate over his fortunes. He has Sirius and they will soon become a family. Perhaps it is selfish of him but Lucius chooses not to think about whether he deserves it or not. He just knows that he will lay waste to all should anyone try to take it away.

*****

When Sirius saunters into Riddle Manor and announces the news, Tom spits out his coffee. Harry wander in a moment later, curious about Tom’s reaction. He usually doesn’t react to Sirius in such a way, although Sirius does seem to irk the man still.

"Sirius, did you say something nice to Tom?" Harry asks. He takes a seat next to Lucius, greeting the man.

Sirius’ grin widens and he looks excited as he says, "Nothing nice about him that’s for sure. Just told him that Luce is pregnant."

Harry butters his toast, but he stops as soon as the message reaches him. He snaps his eyes over to Lucius, looking very much confused. Then back to Sirius. Then to Tom, who is dabbing his mouth with a napkin.

"Are you telling me that’s a thing in the wizarding world?" Harry frowns, feeling terribly ignorant.

"The potion was first developed in the fifteenth century," Tom says, being the most academically inclined person there.

"Siri—" Harry whispers, a huge smile spreading over his face. "You’re going to be a dad! That is seriously awesome, guys."

After giving Lucius a spontaneous hug which startles the blond wizard for a moment, Harry goes to sit next to Sirius to hug him too.

Tom has a problem with digesting such big news in the mornings, but this one just leaves him a bit
light-headed. He has no idea what to say to Lucius, who looks equally uncomfortable. The things Tom should say feel wrong on his tongue and the things he wants to say feel too personal. He is fairly sure that he won’t be laughed at so he takes a deep breath and mentally arranges the words to form something that won’t sound too idiotic.

Lucius can see that the Dark Lord is trying to speak, but he rather look like a moron. So he decides to help the man out a little by pointedly clearing his throat.

"I'm likely going to say something insensitive, so I won’t say anything."

Lucius is not surprised and nods. "That is very diplomatic of you."

Harry glares at the man, “Can’t you be like a normal person for once?”

Tom, however, feels like he is being normal. "I do not like small children. Why anyone would have them is something I have never understood." Tom says, but he isn’t a total jerk and adds, "Still . . . as long as you are happy with your predicament, Lucius."

"Interesting choice of words." Lucius points out with a small smile. He does not expect the Dark Lord to say something nice. He is not a nice man.

Harry doesn’t say anything but he keeps glaring hot daggers at his husband. Tom is being rude and insensitive, but that’s really nothing new. Tom can see Harry’s annoyed looks but he doesn’t care. He’s being a git and he knows it, but no one can expect him to act like a giddy Gryffindor so early in the morning and with an audience. He needs to process the news before he can give a reply that doesn’t sound like utter poppycock.

“I was going to offer you the position of Senior Undersecretary, but seeing as you are indisposed for the next eighteen years . . . well, I’m sure I will find a suitable replacement.”

Lucius looks ready to protest. In fact, he looks most offended by the notion that he cannot care for a child and do a perfectly efficient job in the Ministry. The Dark Lord seems genuine in his completely rubbish assessment and Lucius just has to correct it. “I assure you, I am perfectly capable.”

“Did you really just imply that Lucius wouldn’t be totally awesome at this job because he’s having a baby?” Harry pins Tom with another, more frosty glare. “Are you one of those men who think you can either have a career or a child because having both is completely inconceivable for some stupid reason?”

The Dark Lord splutters, barely believing that his husband is actually spewing such nonsense. “The Ministry is not a playpen for screaming toddlers.”

“So open a fucking day-care or something.” Harry points out. Then he laughs, “Your face, though. Hilarious. I was just messing with you, love. But don’t be such a misogynist.”

“I am not a misogynist, you brat! I just don’t want to be near bawling babies, that’s all. Why are we even having this discussion.” Tom throws his napkin on the table, looking pissed off.

“So Lucius can have the job he’s so obviously perfect for?” Harry asks his sulking husband but he doesn’t get an answer. Tom’s lips are pressed thin, his eyes slightly narrowed as he fumes in silence.

Lucius, although immensely enjoying it, says, “As I said, I see no reason why I cannot take the position. Being pregnant does not make me stupid.”

“I bloody well disagree with this,” Sirius states, looking at Lucius. “You’re supposed to be taking it
“I do not require your permission, Sirius.” Lucius sneers, “If you think I’m going to be your little housewife—”

Sirius quickly raises his hands in a placating manner and says, “Keeping my mouth shut starting now. Do whatever you want, dearest.”

“Perhaps I was a bit hasty in my decision,” Tom sighs and motions Lucius to follow him. “We’ll discuss it in my study—without interfering Gryffindors.”

Harry smirks as Tom briskly walks out. “I’m sure he’s very happy for you, Lucius. He’s just completely shit with emotional stuff and I think he’s a bit stunned because it’s you. Not ready to be a grandfather, you know.”

Sirius barks out a laugh.

Lucius isn’t all that surprised but he understands the Dark Lord’s discomfort with the entire thing. He gives a parting nod to Harry, leaving Sirius behind for a bit.

Harry smiles. “This is a big deal, Siri.”

“I still haven’t really wrapped my head around it, to be honest. Me—a father? Merlin, it’s insane, isn’t it? But I’m so fucking happy, Pup. I can’t wait to meet my daughter.”

“Wait—you already know it’s a girl?”

Sirius nods. “Yeah, well . . . Luna said so. She says that she can magically sense that we’re having a girl. I mean, I trust her on this because Lucius seems to believe her, so I believe her.”

Harry gives Sirius another hug and says, “I’m really happy for you, Siri. For Lucius, too.”

“I can still remember Azkaban. Sometimes I feel so cold and I don’t warm up until I have Luce in my arms. I look at him and there’s a tightness in my heart because he’s my reason for getting up every morning, and now he’s going to marry me and he’s giving me a child. Fuck . . . I think I’m in a dream.”

“Maybe the universe is finally giving you back everything you are owed.”

“Fucking finally.” Sirius lets out a relieved sigh and says, “I still don’t like the idea of Luce taking up the position of Senior Undersecretary. He shouldn’t be dealing with all that crap right now.”

Harry gives him an amused look. “He doesn’t have an illness, Siri. Women have babies all the time while still keeping their careers. I’m pretty sure wizards are not that different in that area. Besides, he’ll be working with Tom and he won’t let anything happen to Lucius. Tom whines about his baby hate, but he’s just being a dick. Lucius is like his favourite kid, so I’m pretty sure Tom will make sure he takes it easy and that he’s comfortable.”

“I just worry, all right; I can fuss over my expecting husband-to-be.”

Harry squeezes the man’s arm. “I know.”

“Hey, do you want to come with me to the joke-shop? I want to tell Fred and George about the baby.”

“Are you even allowed?”
Sirius gives a slight shrug. “Not really, but I don’t give a shit. Luce will bitch at me later and probably won’t let me touch him tonight, but I’m sure he’ll thank me later for delivering the news without him. I’m not sure how many spontaneous hugs you can spring on a bloke before pissing him off.”

Harry snorts to himself and takes a bite of his forgotten toast. Something entirely new pops into his head and he asks, “Can I be there when you tell Severus? I want to see him having a meltdown. Make it super public, too. He’ll never leave the dungeons again.”

Sirius grins. “Oh, I can already see it in my head. It’s beautiful, Pup.”

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