Summary

As the wizarding world is forced to face the reality of Voldemort’s return, a new focus sharpens the efforts of the Order. Trust grows between Regulus and “the vigilantes,” granted to (and by) some members more freely than others. The shadowed chaos of the previous year billows to new heights of aggression, setting aflame the spread of an escalating war, but as the attacks grow more frequent, the quickened hunt for the horcruxes resumes with more pointed aims.

Family, allegiance, and ideology are put to the test as conflicting sides yank and clash, push
and pull, calling into question what it means to stand for one side or another - or what it means to try to stand somewhere in between.
Welcome to the sequel to From the Ashes! If you haven't read that story yet, we recommend doing so as several plot points will make very little sense without it. It's the first one in the series tag. Please note that the huge chunks in italics are spoken French, as neither of your authors are fluent enough to write it out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Though days might turn to weeks, to months, to a rapid-hurtling year, for all the changes Regulus Black had experienced back in London, it seemed just as many had stayed the same in the quiet French village of Belétang. The sweltering mid-afternoon sun was not dimmed by Dementor fogs; no panicked flyers littered the streets; and the milling people he had shared his days with for a decade and a half still looked far more curious than anxious about the plight across the Channel, if their lax appearances were anything to judge by.

In his chest, familiarity twinged with a gentle sort of tightness, and as the Black brothers strode away from the nearest designated apparation point, Regulus raked his eyes along the cobblestone paths, the shops, and just beyond the grassy park further down, he pictured the nearest patch of cottages where he had spent the majority of his adult life. Bundling inside of him was something between anticipation and dread, tingling with the knowledge that he was unlikely to go unnoticed for long. Such a strange experience it had been, to be known and unknown at the same time, to be seen by all at arm's length but considered no one of particular interest, beyond the fact that, upon his arrival, his French had still been a noticeable cry from native fluency.

They were nearly to the apothecary where Regulus presumed Julien to be - and although Sirius had already been made aware of the nature of their visit, he did not want to start that conversation with his brother present, lest Sirius or Julien start slipping isolated information into conversation.

With a soft huff, Regulus eyed the quaint little book and antique shop and thought of Emile - a grousy old man who had helped pull him to his feet with that job (demeaning as it might have felt), and who was undoubtedly grumpy about being left without word or warning. Rude though it was, perhaps he could avoid that conversation entirely if he focused on Julien and the basilisk venom waiting for him at the apothecary. With a centering shift, Regulus turned forward again.

“You do know where you're going, right?” Sirius asked him, in quiet English rather than apparently even trying in French.

Leveling a look back at his brother, Regulus responded with a little huff to his tone, “I lived here for fifteen years. Of course I do.”

"It does seem your sort of place," Sirius replied. He'd stopped walking, and was now eyeing up the buildings with curiosity. "Looks traditional. Small, but you're small, so you wouldn't notice that. Quiet, but you like that - most of the time."

Rolling his eyes, Regulus adjusted the bag slung over his shoulder. “I'm really not that ‘small,’” he
countered, though his annoyance was mild. “But overall, it suited well, yes.”

Before Sirius could quip anything back, the abrupt call of a familiar voice - a familiar little girl, to be specific - grabbed Regulus's attention: “Mssr Rian!”

From across the path, a blonde and lilac flash was scampering out of the sweet shop, forming quickly into the daughter of one of his friends in the village - little Genevieve, though her brother and parents were yet to be seen. “You’re back!” she continued, and though the French language had been buzzing in the background side they had disembarked from the train, it was then that Regulus's mind seemed to shift back into its familiar patterns. Now only a few paces away, the girl was pulling something out of her pocket. “I finished a whole year at Beauxbatons - and I didn’t get to show you my wand before you had to go! It’s so pretty and has runes carved in it. Do Maman and Jean know you’re here? Or Mssr Julien?”

Suspecting that she would chatter forth if he waited for a lulling moment, he cut in as she was thrusting the wand into his hand. (It was quite pretty - white in colouring, most likely aspen, assuming the wood wasn’t dyed.) “Not yet,” he responded as he, too, slipped into French. “I’m about to go see Mssr Julien just now. Is your Papa not here?”

“He’s in Switzerland hunting down something for Mssr Julien. He’ll be gone for whole week,” she continued, “Are you staying?”

Regulus shook his head, handing her wand back. “We return tomorrow.”

Genevieve huffed. “He’ll be mad he was gone,” she said, though she seemed to recover from the thought quickly, locking now onto Sirius, as if just noticing he was standing there too. “Who are you? I’ve never seen you before.”

Regulus hesitated for a moment. The name Sirius had chosen for himself during the train ride was a bit on the nose, but he supposed his own had been, as well. “This is my brother, Leo.”

Her skepticism faded to a smile, the words once again tumbling out all at once. “Hi! It’s good to meet you, Mssr Leo. Are you taking a vacation? Do you live in England?”

Sirius, unfortunately, frowned in response. Perhaps he’d been trying to follow the conversation, but the young girl spoke swiftly. After a moment, he looked to Regulus with a pained expression. ”I caught about half of that,” he admitted. He hadn't had much of a problem up until now, but it had been all travel and minimal conversational to this point. He managed to respond with a clunky, if technically accurate, “Thank you. I have not been to France since I was small. Just a small - break?”

“Paris, right? When you were small,” the little girl said with a look of curiosity on her face, “I remember Mssr Rian mentioned Paris. Do you not remember French very well?”

“He hasn’t had much opportunity to practice,” Regulus cut in before Sirius could answer, “We must be on our way, but pass along my visit to your Maman, and perhaps we can find a moment for you to tell your tales of Beauxbatons. Neither of us have ever seen it,” he added, tipping his head towards Sirius.

The little girl nodded, and in another flash, they were two, once again. Regulus could see the apothecary just a few shops down, and he let out a sigh. “You can wander the shops. I should only be a moment.”
"Assuming you don't run into any more errant children in the meantime," Sirius replied, obvious amusement colouring his voice. Nevertheless, he clearly wanted to go explore and have a look around for himself and this was ample opportunity, providing he didn’t get into too much trouble.

“The probability is low,” Regulus admitted. Her little brother Jean was most likely in the same shop she had been in, and Regulus had no need for sweets at the moment.

Upon entering the apothecary, its smell washed forth like a wave of nostalgia - different than the one in Diagon Alley, though it was difficult to pin down how - and when Julien looked over from inside the cabinet he was re-stocking, Regulus lifted a hand in greeting.

“Hello, stranger,” Julien remarked, shutting the cabinet down with a soft thud. “Not sure if you noticed, but it’s been a year. I was starting to wonder if England had swallowed you up.” There was dry jest in his tone, though Regulus thought there might be a little twinge of something more serious in there, as well.

“It has been quite a year - and a year of relative quiet,” Regulus answered, and although he would not say he had been exceedingly quiet on the whole, he certainly had been in the correspondence sense, which was truth enough.

“You completely dropped off,” Julien persisted, eyeing Regulus with an arched brow even as he slipped behind the counter. “What were you doing that was so urgent?”

For a moment, Regulus hesitated- and then- “Family business,” he settled uncomfortably.

“Really?” Julien brow arched higher, though he sounded more baffled than upset. “You could have just said, ‘Julien, it’s family business, I’ll come back when I’m able, or when I need a regulated substance.’”

“It sounds bad when you say it like that.”

“You’re lucky I don’t hold a grudge.” Suddenly, Julien disappeared under the counter, his voice muffling a little. “I had to talk Gerard down when you ran off. He’s going to be so annoyed he wasn’t here.”

“Gen said something similar,” Regulus said, shaking his head.

“You saw them already?” Julien peeked up just briefly before ducking down again.

“She was at the sweet shop a moment ago,” Regulus clarified as Julien rose again, this time with a brown pouch he placed on the counter. “I expect Emilie and Jean are out there in the shops, too, though I did not see them.”

Julien shook his head, holding out the pouch. “Consider this an early birthday gift, in combination with what would have been last year’s if you weren’t so difficult to get ahold of.”

Regulus lifted a shoulder, feeling a little sheepish at the silence, though he wasn’t sure if the feeling had made it to his face. “I supposed I got a bit carried away.”

“No kidding. It took you long enough to poke your head up.”
Crinkling his nose, Regulus let out a little huff. “It has been...complicated...”

Without warning, and without any attempt at discretion, Sirius walked in.

"I think I've walked literally from one side to of this place to the next! It’s that small." Sirius announced, looking back outward again then back in.. Upon noticing that Regulus was not alone, he winced and switched languages again. "Sorry, I think you were done."

Rolling his eyes, Regulus picked up the pouch, remarking dryly in English: “It cannot have been more than five minutes.”

“Who is that?” Julien asked, brow lifting again as he leaned against the counter.

“My brother,” Regulus answered, switching back to French in turn.

Julien made some sort of surprised, snorting sound. “You have a brother?”

"Yes, it is a cruel trick of-,” Sirius promptly swore, which was at least something he knew how to get right. "I've forgotten the word for fate, if I ever knew it. And it was closer to ten."

Julien sniggered, and Regulus shook his head, peering in the pouch for a visual confirmation before stuffing it in his pocket. “Cruel, indeed.”

“Part of the ‘family business’ you were mentioning?” Julien asked lightly as he strode back over to the cabinet he had been stocking a moment before.

“Something like that.” Crinkling his face just slightly, Regulus let out another little huff, finding it was more difficult to decide where to draw the line in truth and fiction when both were present. Creating that fiction for himself had not been so difficult when first he came - and it was a fiction he had relayed to Sirius on the train ride, which his brother mostly seemed to be sticking to - but somehow, the situation only felt more complicated, now.

“It sounded so dramatic and questionable when you left.” (Privately, Regulus thought that both of those descriptions could probably be applied to the state of his family situation, but he said nothing as Julien continued, this time facing Sirius.) “What’s your name, then?”

“Leo,” Sirius replied, in a distracted tone. He looked at Regulus with clear amusement. “Did he just call you dramatic?”

Flattening his mouth, Regulus responded in a lofty tone, "My choice of phrasing upon departure, technically.” (Of course, ‘dramatique’ would be the word his brother would notice - there were times when language overlap was a burden.) “I prefer ‘vague.’”

“It's almost like you know him,” Sirius grinned at Julien, but thankfully did not elaborate onwards. “Should I go do another circle around the place while you finish up?”

“That should not be necessary,” Regulus responded with a headtip towards Sirius, then looked back to Julien. “My brother and I are going to go settle in. We can catch up later.”

Julien granted a nod, and as they exchanged their goodbyes, dug back into the cabinet to resume restocking.
Sirius was already outside when Regulus stepped back onto the cobblestone path, and with a gesture toward the park and its glittering pond, he spoke again: “Just past the park is a small neighborhood; that is our destination.”

"Was that your friend?" Sirius asked, once they had begun along the path. "From the letter?"

Regulus nodded, eyeing the pond as they approached - then veered to the side, towards the cottages ahead. “Yes. Julien.”

Sirius nodded, accepting it without posing a further question to identity. “You get what you needed?”

Reaching in his pocket, Regulus briefly pulled out the dark brown pouch, held it for a few seconds, then put it in his pocket again. "Simple enough."

"You still have interesting taste in friends," Sirius replied, though there was no particular malice to the words for once. "Step up on the personal grooming, if older than I’d thought."

“I consider them to be interesting, yes,” Regulus said wryly, shaking his head, and though the insult to Severus was obvious, it was casual enough to almost be considered something of an improvement, however far from civil it might be. (Severus had room for improvement on that front, too.) At least his brother wasn’t looking for criticisms to lay upon Julien - something Regulus might have expected, when he was younger. In that sense, at least, he could relax somewhat.

"It's not what I imagined," Sirius admitted, a small crease of a frown forming as he fell into step.

Lifting an eyebrow, Regulus glanced over. “What did you expect?”

"Not...this," Sirius said, with a huff. "Somewhere you wouldn't have to deal with people, or be paid any mind to."

“People are not all terrible,” Regulus said, lifting his shoulder in a half-shrug, “It depends on the people, I suppose.”

Sirius gave him a look, then snorted. "It's like I don't know you at all."

“Did you think I hated everyone?” Regulus asked, though even as the question passed his lips, he wasn’t sure if he necessarily wanted a direct answer.

"Not everyone," Sirius said, after a beat. "Just...most people. They seem to get on your nerves, or cause you nerves."

Not so terrible an assumption - better than Regulus had expected, in light of his adolescent history as a Death Eater - and something in his stride relaxed just a little bit more. “Accurate enough,” he said, tipping his head to the side and glancing over at his brother. “Though I would adjust slightly to specify I feel neutral about most people; I reserve my hatred and irritation for those who have properly earned it.”

"Depends," Sirius added, "Sometimes, you don’t even hate people when they’ve more than earned it."

With a prickle of discomfort, Regulus thumbed the strap of his bag, keeping his eyes forward this
time. “It does depend, yes.”

For a moment, it looked as if Sirius might breach the subject.

The moment passed.

"Luckily for you, I can hate people enough for two people.” He said. “Maybe even three. It's a natural talent."

At that, the barest hint of a smile pulled at the corner of Regulus’s mouth, and he felt no small amount of relief that Sirius had permitted the accusation to pass unspoken. More than likely, it was Bellatrix that his brother was referring to, and Regulus still did not know how to speak about her in a manner that made sense. “That is terribly lucky,” he said, and the lift of his mouth tugged a little more. “I try to hate specific people enough to make up for the ones who are being pardoned, but the numbers do not always match quite right. How fortunate that your well of ire has capacity to spare.”

"I'm just a deeply generous person," Sirius said, likely fully aware that the unspoken question was there and being passed over. "I like to spread my irritation around, not get too bound up in a single person." Though he did raise a finger, "Though exceptions have to be made, for people so utterly and completely worth all the bloody hatred in the world that they require more attention in the area."

“Of course,” Regulus said with a nod, “It’s important to have a functioning tier system when dealing with such things.”

Sirius smiled, and shook his head. "You realise if anyone were listening into this, we both sound like we need our heads examined, right? Trying to assign a functional system to emotions and feelings like they make sense."

“We are not trying to assign a system,” Regulus corrected, looking over with an arched brow, “I would argue that we have implemented it quite thoroughly.”

"Would it not come out skewed?” Sirius asked, taking a few faster steps even though he didn't know where they were going well enough to be trying to take a lead. "There's plenty of people we both despise. Or at least, dislike. I'd argue the list is even growing."

“There are also quite a few that we both do like - a list that is also growing. By this logic, it may well balance. Or at least approximate a balance,” Regulus countered. “In the end, I suppose it depends upon what you are balancing against. Are we balancing those we like against those we dislike, or just those I dislike against those you dislike? The pool in these two instance is going to be different, and will undoubtedly affect the skew in question.”

"We have to like people now?” Sirius said, feigning distaste at the concept. "I didn't know that had to be part of it. I thought we were just going with levels of hate."

Regulus sniggered, shaking his head. “My apologies for bringing such a thing into this matter of hatred and its designated categorisations. If we are speaking in terms of hatred alone, I do not think our synchronised anger is any more problematic than our synchronised neutrality, so long as the supplementary ire compensates for the pardons.”

Sirius scoffed in a comedically loud way, "Have you ever known me to be neutral about a person?"
“You should work on that. You’re upsetting my equilibrium,” Regulus responded, his tone jestingly cross.

Sirius gave his shoulder a shove as they wandered. "Your wide-spread neutrality is making me think you were adopted."

“I was not adopted,” Regulus argued, his tone a little more sincerely cross.

"I wasn't serious," Sirius said, making a face at his own accidental pun.

“Out of the goodness of my heart, I am not going to make that pun worse,” Regulus quipped, a little more lightly this time as he watched his brother’s souring expression. When again he looked forward, he locked his gaze on the cottage ahead - his long-time home, here in France, and as modest as it had ever been. Perhaps it was not the sort of place he had ever imagined he might live, growing up - even before Sirius had given up his heirdom, there were more than enough sizable properties Regulus had assumed he might someday move into - but he felt a bit fond of the little house, all the same.

With a subtle gesture forward, he added, “And with that, we have arrived.”

The place was smaller than Sirius had expected. On some logical level, he knew that Regulus would only have had only what he had on him and that someone would have noticed if he'd gone to Gringotts, and as such, he'd have had to make his way in a limited fund capacity. It'd been something he'd planned to do himself before their uncle had rendered the issue moot. Somehow, when he thought of Regulus, he still couldn't disentangle him from the religiously upkept ancestral junk and photographs that he clung to.

It was modest, but it was comfortable. It was warmer than he expected, in tone as well as in temperature. The money had obviously gone on the seating and books, neither of which surprised Sirius an iota, but it didn't look particularly personal unless you were looking for touches of Regulus himself. The very specific way he organised himself, the usual colour scheme, some trinkets - which meant that even without legacy, he was unable to kick the junk-hoarding tendencies.

This was Regulus without the weight of the House on him.

This is what home looked like for him without the crushing need to keep up appearances, to reproduce, to maintain the status quo. A quiet, comfortable existence where he made friends with the shopkeepers, where he could be friendly enough with the local kids to know about their families and where he could scope out the best spot to sit and read in a village untouched by the war.

Sirius felt a sudden pang of guilt. He knew that he had nothing to do with Regulus’s choice to come back; he'd done that off his own back and obviously, Sirius was proud of that fact. Still, the idea of being wrenched from a life that seemed to suit him so well left an unpleasant churning in Sirius' gut at the thought of it. As much as he didn't want him to leave again, if this was what made him happy, it would be an act of profound selfishness to throw a fit over it.
(He never claimed he wasn’t selfish.)

But with that in mind, Sirius wandered around a little, mostly just looking at things, grazing them and trying to discern something of their meaning. That Regulus the person existed beyond the concept of legacy should have been reassuring, and it was; it was just also confusing and conflicting because he hadn’t been there to see that transition happen. It was possible it was a transition that would never have happened if he had stuck around, but it didn’t make it feel any easier.

He tried to snap down the thought. He’d been in better spirits, off on an adventure, being able to give Regulus a little bit of trouble but only enough that he looked a bit cross in that hilarious way he always had rather than actually angry. He didn’t want to slip into melancholy here, no matter how off-footed he felt.

"It's..." Sirius struggled to find the right word. "Comfortable."

Shifting slightly on his feet, Regulus glanced over briefly to assess his face for mockery before setting his bag on the desk pushed flush against the far wall. “It is.”

Again, Sirius was ready to repeat himself; to say this wasn’t what he’d imagined or expected. That born into their house, with its wealth and its privilege, he would choose comfort over ostentatious display. Appearances had always been everything.

But the thought didn’t leave, because again, he realised that this too could simply be a part of the legacy. Number Twelve was large, yes, but large for a purpose: it held a ridiculous amount of objects, dangerous mostly, but all linked to family members long past or gifts. It held so many pictures that it was a wonder he could remember who half of them were. It had, at one point, been a brimming family home. Phineas and his wife had six children in that house, and somehow the house had seemed more alive when they’d had Ginny, Ron, Harry, Fred, George, and Hermione making use of it. It had felt noisy, just the right side of crowded then. It was a display, yes, but it wasn’t completely for the sake of being a display.

The more he thought of it, the more he thought of their Aunt Druella and her home. That was ostentatious to the extreme. You could probably see that place lit up from space at the holidays. Famous artwork, commissioned portraits, high ceilings, renovations that seemed to go on forever. They’d never had any of that. There was a reverence to it, from their mother especially, but it occurred to him that their parents had never liked large displays. They made use of the house in their respective corners. He wondered if they had lived in a different house, if his Uncle had ended up getting married properly and having children and ended up in that house instead of them, if it would have been more like this. An emphasis on need, well-crafted and comfortable but hardly a display. Something less suffocating than a thousand year old tree bearing down and choking you with the pressure, reminders at every wall, table and pictures of the demands of being the last to hold your name and the expectation that you absolutely must not be the last overall.

"I like it better," Sirius announced aloud, after the long pause. "You can tell you live here."

For a moment, Regulus hesitated awkwardly, then settled into one of the cushioned chairs, olive green in colour and nestled between a window and a bookcase lining the outer wall. “I’m surprised you would consider that a point in its favour,” he said with a wry lift to his tone, though there was a brush of awkwardness to his shift.
Sirius scowled at that. "What's that meant to mean?"

"There’s no need to look so offended. You’ve called me boring enough times that it is reasonable assumption that you would find this boring too," Regulus pointed out, lifting his brow.

"It is boring. I'd lose my mind - whatever may be left of it - in a place like this." That wasn't the point at all. It reflected him, simply as he was. Someone who spends too much time studying, looking at books, wanting soft furnishings and not to intrude upon the world too much. There was even venom, a controlled substance ready for smuggling, to show his (often hidden) adventurous side. It didn't remind Sirius of anything but him; perhaps their father, but he couldn't imagine his father having an adventurous bone in his body. "But it's your home, not mine."

"That is fair," Regulus granted, "Hopefully you will not lose the remainder of your mind before we return to London."

"After Azkaban - or worse, a non-stop Grimmauld Place for a year, I have every confidence my mind will survive a little quiet." A little, not too much.

Besides, Sirius didn't want to lose the chance to look at the big secret that was his brother's private existence here. There were other secrets weighing on him, but for now, he wanted to experience the trust placed upon him fully and enjoy it. He had things they had to talk about, and he supposed that in the context of life outside of the insular society that was pureblood elitists, this was a Regulus that existed. Until now, he hadn't been sure a version of him would exist outside of those constraints. The Death Eaters, sure, perhaps even the society, but his surname? It asked more questions than it answered.

He tried to think of a way to put it. "It was always just you here?"

For a beat, Regulus took on a thoughtful expression, then nodded. "Just me."

Taking a deep breath before the plunge, Sirius placed his hands on his knees and sat down with the exhale. It needed to be talked about, he reminded himself. He liked that Regulus got on with the Order swots; he liked that he'd formed his own friendships and had a level of comfort with them that Sirius had not expected; but it was threatened by encroachment of a personal boundary on the brink of being crossed that Regulus (self-confessed to be terrible at knowing the difference between a thing and a capital T Thing) did not realise was even happening. "I know it's been a long day," Sirius started, "but there's a difficult talk I didn't want to have at the house. It can wait, if you want it to, but not before we go back."

Regulus paused the start of his reach towards a book, instead resting the hand on the arm of his chair and turning his attention to Sirius with a subtly furrowed brow. "I suppose now is as good a time as any - but what difficult talk did you have in mind?"

"The one about Emmeline Vance," Sirius let that sit for a beat before he continued. This could so easily be a sticky and badly done conversation, and he'd like whoever was to blame for it falling on him to give this talk to meet a painful end. "I think you need to set down some better boundaries, before she gets hurt."

Regulus furrowed his brow a little bit more, shifting his weight in the chair. "What do you mean?"

Shifting uncomfortably, Sirius tried to buy himself a moment to think about how to phrase it without it being completely humiliating.
Then he gave up, because the direct approach was going to be better when you couldn't really save face at all. "She likes you," he said, feeling the sudden need to go to class for how teenage it all felt. "But I know how you feel about her blood, even if I wish you could wake up and smell the bullshit about it. You need to find a way to tell her that's just not something you're okay with and try not to insult her in the process if you want to keep her friendship."

Sighing heavily, Regulus propped an elbow and secured his face in it. "I changed my mind. I don’t want to talk about this."

"Me either," Sirius said, rocking forward a little in another fidget. Truer words had never been spoken, but he pressed on regardless. "It's going to be worse if you let her keep flirting, and with it being in the house, let alone the Order, the quicker it's addressed, the better. Otherwise, she's just humiliating herself."

For an uncomfortable moment, Regulus simply frowned into his hand, singling out a spot on the floor to stare at. "We are friends, and we talk. I don’t know what is humiliating about that."

"If that was all it was, I wouldn't be having the most awkward conversation right now," Sirius huffed. He could see the telltale signs of both avoidance and a threatening shut down, but still felt completely ill equipped to stop it. So he took a run at it full steam in the hopes of getting it out and out of the way. "If you just want a mate, tell her that. Or that you're just not that into girls, if it's true. Look, crushes fade, but if you don't tell her and something more develops, it's going to be worse."

Regulus closed his eyes, face still planted in his hand and mouth pressed in a silent line. As much as Sirius joked Regulus was the baby, pretending to still believe in objects disappearing when you shut your eyes at thirty was a little much.

"Unless you do like her, and the problem is not with her crush, but with you thinking she's tainted."

“I’m developing a headache,” Regulus said tightly, pushing himself up from the chair, and with a mutter, started to stride past his brother’s seat: “Must be that long day you were talking about. I’m going to lie down.”

Sirius huffed a sigh, but figured forcing it out was going to do more harm the good. He'd said his piece. It was up to Regulus to do something about it. "If you decide you actually do want to talk about it instead of having a headache, you know where I am."

Regulus paused with a half-twist, though his hand found his face once again in a sobered press. “I don’t know what there is to talk about, or what you want me to say."

For all of the awkwardness of it, one thing was becoming increasingly clear. He was disturbed at the thought of it, or perhaps upset. Maybe he feared saying something would wreck the tenuous friendship and his place in the Order, but Sirius didn't believe Vance'd be that petty about it. "If you don't like her, letting her know quickly is the best chance of preserving what you have. I saw you together; you're comfortable not only in presence, but physically. It's something worth preserving. But if I'm reading that wrong and you do feel something friend related, and the reason you're upset is her bloodline, you might try talking to one of the few people you know who's had to combat similar thoughts before and knows it's not easy. I'm not here to give you shit about it, but I don't want anyone to get hurt."
Folding his arms across his chest with another uncomfortable shift, Regulus shook his head. “I know,” he responded with a touch of ambiguity.

"It's the best time for you to think about it. There's no one else here to hear any of it. No chance of being overheard while you try and figure out what you truly think." Sirius gestured to the room, quiet besides themselves. "Ask stupid or shitty questions. Decide what you want, even if what you want is things to remain as they are. That's what I want."

Again, Regulus paused, then shifted towards the bedroom door. “I just - need a moment,” he muttered, finishing the beeline to his room with his head ducked, and this time, did not take pause before slipping inside.

Sirius huffed a sigh. He supposed it could have gone worse, he didn't actually just jump out of the window and head for the hills, but it didn't exactly go well either.

He could wait it out, Sirius reminded himself. They had time.

With the door clicked shut behind him, Regulus had pressed his back against it, hands rubbing the stress away, but no pressure to the temple was proving effective in blotting out his brother’s line of questioning. The prospect of Emmeline having feelings of the friend variety - and the way his own mood kept pleasantly in his chest when she was present - were trails his mind preferred not to tread. He did not like where those trails were likely to end.

Regulus could not say exactly how many minutes had passed since he slipped into the room, instead counting the passage of time by positions as he slid to the floor, sat on the bed, and folded his arms moodily on the back of the chair by the window - and in his mind, he turned over the idea of turning over the idea. On some level, he knew Sirius was right: that pain and embarrassment could easily escalate, and the question of purism was not one that went away when you closed your eyes… at least not out in Society, where eyes were never closed to blood.

He liked Emmeline - he liked Emmeline quite a lot more than felt appropriate for his situation, if he was honest, but he did not much like being honest about such things. Guilt gnawed at his insides for enjoying the growing closeness, and guilt gnawed at him for feeling guilty when his surroundings became rooted less and less in the purist expectations of his childhood, caught in some endless loop, and however simple ‘deciding what he wanted’ might sound, Regulus did not how to grasp either emotion, much less stop them.

Sirius spoke of ‘deciding,’ yet it pressed like a thick fog, intangible ideas that slipped through his fingers, even as he tried to hold them up for consideration. He did not know what he wanted from Emmeline, just that he loved talking to her more than anyone, that she was bright and lovely, sharp and witty; he knew he liked the way she found his eyes right away when he walked in, the muted playfulness and the way she loved Grimmauld Place for the ancient tell of family history that it was; it was a quiet sort of affection, and one he found that he did not want to sabotage, be it from action or inaction. He felt comfortable, felt the threads of trust weaving, but it was a new feeling, a new situation, and he did not know what he wanted or how he felt. Relationships could spiral away at the slightest shift, could withdraw from rejections (no matter how carefully phrased), and the thought of upsetting the present balance struck a gutting dread, however reasonable his brother’s argument might be. (And if Sirius was right about Emmeline’s feelings on the matter, it
truly was quite reasonable, from a damage control perspective…He was not sure that he would ever grow accustomed to using ‘Sirius’ and ‘reasonable’ in the same sentence, but it was as it was.

Night had long since spread its blanket of darkness over the village by the time Regulus stirred himself to leave his room again, uncertainty still lodged in his throat as he scanned the living area and spotted Sirius by the bookshelf, peering at the titles but not seeming to tug any from the shelves for more than a few seconds at a time.

"I wasn't sure I'd see you 'til morning," Sirius said, not turning around and instead placing a book down to look at the first few pages of the next one.

“Most of the books are out here,” Regulus said. It was not entirely true - there were plenty of books in his room too - but it seemed a better excuse than most.

Sirius looked around, seemingly just because he wanted to be seen giving an eye roll, as he immediately looked away again. "You still look like you want to make a break for it," Sirius observed. "I'm guessing thinking about it didn't help."

“Not in any significant way, no.” Regulus shook his head.

“This is why I don’t think about things. Since I don't think getting a few drinks in you would help, and would probably make you sick, I don't know what to suggest.” Sirius replaced the book again. “Other than just being honest.”

“Being honest sounds like it ought to be simple enough,” Regulus began with a huff, crossing over to the bookshelf to scan the titles himself, in search of some tangible distraction for when the mood became unbearably uncomfortable again, as he suspected it would. “I suppose it would be easier if I was, myself, more clear on an answer.”

“At the risk of sounding like a teenager,” Sirius said, “Do you like her?”

Regulus sighed heavily. “That does make it sound like an adolescent concern,” he said, rubbing at his face, and upon eyeing the shelf, plucked a text on advanced protective wards. (A duplicate at Grimmauld Place, but good for review in light of the chaos mounting at home. He paused an awkward moment longer before retreating to the chair with his book. They had talked about it at St. Mungo’s, he and his brother - and as much as it stung to have Barty flicker into his thoughts again, the feeling was no altogether dissimilar. Attraction - desire for proximity - a kickstart to the chest, comfort, and a distinction from others- “By your potion-addled definition, I suppose I do.”

“Then how I see it, you've got only a couple of options,” Sirius said, mirroring the action without looking at what he was taking. “You can lie, and tell a version of the truth that is that you don't want anything more than you have for fear of ruining it or it causing friction in the war effort. She’s not stupid, though. She'll probably guess your issues are with her blood. That is the perceived problem, right? Or you can try to figure out why a part of you is deciding she’ll give you muggle germs.”

“It is not a matter of muggle germs,” Regulus countered uncomfortably, though he knew it probably sounded like a lie. To his mind sprung the stunning array of photographs taken from space with their unreal splashes of colour, and however convenient it would be if it was not so, he knew well that they were muggle. The Mars exhibit had been muggle, too, but even if he knew Sirius would not disapprove of such an outing, it felt embarrassing to say, so instead he shifted. “There are just… implications, I suppose.”
"The implication that she's somehow inferior because her ancestors didn't exclusively shack up with magical people?" Sirius said, an edge slipping into his tone. "Or the implication that it'd be a relationship you wouldn't want to work out, because if it did, you'd have to deal with wanting a future that might downgrade your social status from ex-Death Eater to blood traitor?"

Stiffening, Regulus leveled a sharp look of his own. "I don't think she is inferior. If we are to talk about this, you need to stop reducing me to assumptions based on when I was a teenager."

Leaning back in his chair, he opened the book in his lap (more from annoyance than an intention to read), but the cringing feeling lingered in his chest. The accusation did not feel completely right, but it did not feel completely wrong either, and he did not know how to articulate it properly when it was likely to sound the same to his brother's ears. "This isn't some self-sabotage mission. If I simply 'did not want it to work out,' then I am perfectly capable of intentionally sabotaging things I want no part of. I would have done so already, and we would not be having this incredibly uncomfortable conversation."

Sirius put both of his hands up, before shifting himself uncomfortably. "It's not the teenage assumption," he said, though he sounded more tentative than combative. "I don't think you believe she's inferior, or that it'd be some fool's errand to see what may happen. I only know what you have is a childlike terror at the idea of being branded a traitor, despite the fact that most of the old lines aren't exclusively screwing the same handful of families or they lie about it. If anything, I'd be warning her off because who in their right mind would want to risk falling in love and ending up with in-laws who think you're disgusting? Who would want to live in a place like Grimmauld Place, full of portraits ready to insult you at a moments notice?"

He shrugged hard. "But for some inexplicable reason, it doesn't bug her. Even the screeching remains of our dear mother doesn't seem to phase her. Which means if you actually like her, and for some weird reason, she continues to like you, you might get a shot at rebuilding a family that I think you truly, badly want. The only thing stopping you right now is you, and clinging to the belief that a pure bloodline and an ancient legacy are the same thing. I think you need to decide what kind of life you want, a kind you're willing to excuse or fight for depending on the choices you make and what kind of legacy you want to leave."

"I don't know what I want," Regulus said in strained tones, elbow propping on the arm of his chair once again, though some of the irritation had faded from his face and manner. "Or rather, the ideal situation is probably impossible, and I don't know how to feel about that... 'Toujours pur' - as opposed to 'parfois pur' - makes the intended legacy quite clear." Shaking his head, Regulus crinkled his nose, just slightly. "In truth, I don't really care so much about her blood, but the thought of being the one to break a near-millennium of recorded pureblood Blacks makes me feel a little sick to the stomach, considering there isn't anyone else for it to fall to," he said with a humorless huff, securing his chin in his hand. "Which I know you think is stupid, so you don't need to waste your breath."

"Nah, it's not stupid. It's exactly what you're supposed to feel." Sirius hunched forward, lowering his tone as if he were about to say something untoward. "I get why being part of this huge family is important to you. Just answer me this: why is blood 'purity' important to you? Not some person centuries ago, they don't really matter because if you'd stuck to their worldview, you'd be dead, and the line would already effectively be broken. Why in your House is blood purity important?"

Pausing for a moment in silence, Regulus glanced over at Sirius, supposing that he shouldn't be that surprised his brother was not tearing into him, in light of the previous year, but no matter how much time passed, he always expected the worst from such discussions. It had seemed to come
easy to Sirius, blood traitorism, throwing himself in with Potter and the other Gryffindors with seemingly immediate gusto, never stopping to waver, but he figured he oughtn't be surprised about that either. Sirius had never been much for wavering in general.

With a thoughtful expression, Regulus lifted a shoulder, more out of discomfort than uncertainty. “Because… extensive history and expectations aside, although the majority might be dead, not everyone is, and I'm tired of having to choose.” He paused for just a beat before adding, “I understand that Bellatrix is dangerous and not anything I should get my hopes up about convincing… But Cissa… I don't want to fight with you or Andromeda, but I don't want to fight with her either. Leaving the Death Eaters was bad enough.” He shook his head, mouth turning wryly. “In a way, it felt easier to leave a group I knew would immediately try to kill me than it does to even think about trying to explain something like that to Narcissa.”

"You didn't leave," Sirius corrected, quietly. "You went to what was supposed to be your death rather than try to face Mum, or Narcissa and everyone else, because you found certain death to be less horrifying than how they might react."

Regulus tensed, glancing up briefly before dropping his eyes again - and for the second time in the same conversation, his brother’s words felt true and untrue at the same time. “There were other factors,” he responded, his voice mirroring the quiet tones but sounding more like a recitation than he liked, considering it was true, too. “I could not ignore what I had discovered, and I was not going to force Kreacher to go through it again on purpose.” Something cold and awful trickled over him in streams, weighing his mouth down to a frown. In a mad sort of way, death truly had felt a less horrifying alternative - less horrifying than inflicting another disappointment on them - less horrifying than breaking his promises to never let them down. With an unsettling lurch in his chest, he added, “I was going to die anyway.”

"That you're so certain of that..." Sirios looked away, punctuating the statement with an irritated huff. "What is the point of having an ancient lineage if when push comes to shove, it doesn't protect its own? What is the point of a family at all if they demand loyalty from you, but give you none in return? I don't believe a legacy that demands compliance to a doctrine written before Hogwarts had its first graduates is worth preserving, if all it preserves is fear - of reprisal, of loss, of not measuring up, of having your identity ripped away from you for an act of compassion. That's not family, that's bloodlines, and if she's got even half an inch of sense, Narcissa should know the difference. Especially now, as one day sooner than she imagines, she may have her own child have to make the decision you did, whether to live with the truth and face her or die."

The frown on his face deepened, but for a moment, Regulus said nothing. He didn't like the way the words resonated in his head, echoing like some hollow cavern, didn't like that feeling like he was betraying something - or someone - by admitting, even to himself, that he agreed. It felt like a trap, though he knew it wasn't; there was no one lying in wait to spring their disapproval upon him, but he could not shake off the heavy weight on his shoulders.

“I know,” Regulus settled after a moment, and though it didn't feel like enough after a spiel of such conviction, he could not find the right words to verbalise - so instead he sighed heavily, fingers drumming lightly on the open book sitting ignored in his lap.

"There is every chance that any of us won't see the war through," Sirius said hoarsely, after a beat. "If you spend the whole time trying to get everyone else's approval, you'll forget to take your happiness where you can find it and there may not be time for it. It could be you, or I, or Emme, or even Narcissa, because she would not be the first sister Bellatrix has lost her mind with over the issue of family. If you think it's better not to risk it and keep things as they are, or if you decide to
say fuck it and see if you can feel strongly for someone else again, either way, just..." He swallowed audibly, not finishing the sentence. "You deserve to be happy, as much as you can for as long as you can be. Anyone says different's getting the shit kicked out of them."

The pang that struck was a more comforting one, laced with unpleasant truths but altogether reassuring on a level that superseded even the looming possibility of loss on both sides. With a subtle nod, Regulus flickered a muted smile, and however embarrassingly mushy the sentiment might be, it made him feel at ease - to hear it, and to trust it, chaotic though the war had become.

"Thank you." (For patience, for most-likely-sincere promises of retaliation, for caring-) As his frame started to relax, Regulus sat back in his chair, curling out of the rigid lean. "And whatever it may entail, you, too, deserve happiness. I know I was a bit dreadful about that, when we were growing up..." He shook his head. "...You could have given up on me at any time - back then, and even in the past year - but at the risk of more sentimentalism, I am grateful that you did not..."

Sirius made an exaggerated noise of frustration, contrasting the smile that was threatening to break out. "You must stop thanking me for giving a damn. Just because family and blood mean two different things me doesn't mean they're always mutually exclusive, nor do I go about giving up on people on a whim. I'm a very loyal person, long as you don't stab me in the back. Or the front, for that matter. Just don't stab me at all, that seems like a good rule."

Swallowing the remaining uncertainty, Regulus nodded, steeling instead a line of confidence through his bones and straightening his posture. "Indeed." Pressing his mouth to a wry line, he added, "Woe betide those who would betray that loyalty, yes?"

"My temper incites a lot worse than woe," Sirius told him, plainly. "But we're both total pricks when it comes to loyalties. That sixth year didn't end in a murder is a miracle. Bella will be your biggest problem. It’s her sister; she will cause the biggest rift, as Narcissa may go with what she says regardless of what she truly thinks. Luckily, you have some experience in this area."

"I'm mentally preparing for the possibility," Regulus said, shaking his head. "However much I might dislike it."

"How are you handling Lucius?" Sirius asked. "He did prey on children, but I imagine her being his wife means he has some priority for her."

"He stopped attacking me when he realised who I was at the Ministry - or at least when he started to suspect," Regulus answered, "I do not know how much of it was shock, but for now, I am just worrying about Narcissa, Draco, and Bellatrix."

"I doubt it will last." Sirius shrugged, accepting that. "It depends what Bellatrix decides to do next, and who knows what that will be? She's more cracked than ever."

"Yes," Regulus began with a frown. "I wish it was easier to tell what she's planning without directly interacting. Mulciber was saying she had 'dibs' - it sounded like a taunt, but it doesn't exactly sound untrue either, even if Cissa indicated nothing of the sort." His frown deepened as he crinkled his nose.

Sirius gave a bark of laughter. "Oh, that's very prestigious." He made a wave motion with his hand. "It just means that anyone who's scared of her retaliation won't try and hit you with lethal curses when you're fighting. It's probably helped more than it'll hurt."
“Prestigious wasn’t the word I was thinking,” Regulus said dryly, though the jolt of his brother’s unexpected laugh did help a little with the heavy feeling. It was easier to fend off one person than a swarm, even if it was the one person among their number that he most wanted to pacify - unlikely though it was. “I suppose it's a bit reassuring, in a terrible sort of way.”

“It's probably how Ted - Tonks’s dad - has survived this long. When it comes to her family tree, Bellatrix likes to do her own pruning.” Sirius grinned. “If dad had a single rebellious bone in his body, I'd have thought that was her as well. Stage an accident not to run the risk. But she doesn’t murder purebloods for fun, just everyone else.”

“You do realise it is a bit mad to be grinning about our cousin wanting to kill us,” Regulus remarked in deadpan tones, shaking his head.

"That's an improvement, I thought I'd gone more than a bit.” Sirius laughed at him unapologetically. "Besides, it could be a help more than a hindrance there too. Everyone knows she wants me and Andromeda dead; she's tried a decent amount, and I'm still here here, so's Andromeda. But you is more interesting. Bellatrix no longer cares for houses, or blood other than abstract. Her loyalties, when pushed, are not based in the bonds of blood, but in the machinations of a madman. Narcissa can't see that when it's just me and Andromeda; we made the first step, and she can justify it that way. You just legged it, and no longer wish to be part of the Death Eaters. It's a lot harder to justify that. If it helps Narcissa understand that Bellatrix truly has lost her heart and mind, and that if she was told to, she would likely kill her with little hesitation, then at least she's going into this with her eyes open. It’s your best shot at keeping her, if that’s your desire."

“It sounds good in theory,” Regulus agreed, though the subtle feeling of dread remained. “Or...I don’t think good is the right word for it, as I'd rather she not want to kill any of us, but if it could possibly sway Cissa, at least that is something.”

"If Bellatrix doesn't want to kill you, you're probably doing something wrong," Sirius reasoned, with a huff. "Besides, when it comes to liking half-bloods, Bellatrix can't say shit, can she? Look at who she's thrown her life away on. At least Emmeline is human, as human as any Unspeakable is."

For a moment, Regulus took pause, then nodded. “I suppose that is true. I actually forgot about that, for a moment - about the Dark Lord’s situation, that…” Tipping his head, he added, “One might argue it's a little different when the name is in question, but it really isn't particularly fair, if so.”

"The name really shouldn't be. It's a question of asking her out, Reg, not asking if she'd like to bear your children." Sirius laughed to himself, leaning back into a much more relaxed slouch. "I realise it's the only reason our parents got married, but that's not a high recommendation."

Flustered slightly with a brush off embarrassment, Regulus sat a little straighter. “You’re the one who brought up the necessity of taking that into consideration.”

"You're so easy to wind up.” Sirius looked entirely too pleased with himself. Still, something had shifted again and he looked down. "It's a concern for you. You don't seem to like people all that often, so this could be it, either the name lives on or it dies with you. But I don't know if she's going to say yes to going out yet; usually you go out with someone a few times before you start asking if they want to have children, and if they'd like to, with you. You just also have to think whether you'd think even an inch less of any kid because they might have a muggle someone on their family tree. You spent half your life trying desperately to live up to aristocratic expectations in case ours thought less of you, you're still struggling with it; you wouldn't want another child to
go through that. If I thought for an instant I'd make Harry feel like that, I wouldn't have said I'd take care of him."

"I know that." Some of the previous tension crept back in as Regulus thumbed a page of his book, and a little defensively, he added, "I'm not planning to sweep in and propose, and I'm not trying to ruin anyone's life, hypothetical or not."

"I don't think you'll ruin anyone's life on purpose. She's a big girl, you can sort out your own relationship. You've been doing fine so far, enough that there is a disgusting amount of flirting going on. Besides that, you've got your first vigilante meeting coming up, that should be enough drama for now. Destroy Voldemort, sort out whatever's left of the family, and potentially have a romantic entanglement," Sirius ticked them off on his fingers. "You really have filled up your social calendar for the year. You don't have time to get yourself killed, dibs or no dibs."

Regulus thought 'disgusting' was overstating it - he and Emmeline were really only talking - but he bit back the objection, knowing it would only make Sirius more delighted if he tried to defend the interactions further. "It's a bit exhausting, really. Surely Bella will understand if I am not up for adding yet another thing to the calendar."

"Speaking of calendar events," Sirius asked. "What do you want to do for your birthday?"

"I don't know," Regulus admitted, "I don't have anything particular in mind."

Sirius clarified, "You do want to do something for it?"

"It has been awhile since I've done anything in particular, but I'm not opposed to the idea," Regulus responded. "We were always at Iago for my birthday, but suffice to say that fell off some time ago."

Sirius raised his eyebrows, the beginnings of a smile indicating absolutely nothing good crossed his features. "So why don't you do that? You're not hiding from any of them anymore. I haven't been since after Uncle Alphard died."

Regulus looked over, prepared to tell Sirius that it was not just a little bit, but in fact completely mad to waltz into the summertime Porth Iago gathering. It could perhaps be considered a taunt - but it wasn't without merit in regards to opportunity, having everyone gathered.

He wanted to say it was a bad idea, because it probably was, but instead the corner of his mouth pulled up and he tipped his head. "How nostalgic."

"It's your right to be there as much as it's anyone's," Sirius said, as his smile grew. "It's always fun to make a bit of a statement. Dunno if it's the statement you want to make, but it would. Besides, can't see Voldemort taking the summer off to go catch a tan. Bella neither. It's probably as close to a safe territory as anywhere."

Regulus smiled a little in return. "That would be quite the image. I imagine they would find it confusing, to show up as if everything is normal, but there can be some value in stubbornly presenting something as acceptable until it is accepted as such."

"You are definitely stubborn," Sirius agreed. "It'll give you time to get your shit together and decide how you're doing about Emme, assuming you're not desperate to hash it out."
“Not desperate to do so, no,” Regulus responded wryly, shaking his head.

"Then we ought to go," Sirius said, decisively. "Just for a few days. You can cause your first society scandal, then possibly go back to London in time to commit to a second. I can even attempt to behave, in the name of getting a complexion that doesn't make me like the dead walking. Or worse, Snape."

“My first society scandal. How gripping.” Shaking his head with a brush of amusement, Regulus added in a loftier tone, “That settles it, then. If we die from our misestimation, at least we will die making a point.”

"I'm not allowed to die yet, I've missed every birthday Harry's had - I was neck deep in an Order job for his first - but damned if I'm missing this one as well." Sirius huffed, some of his amusement draining from him. "We can use it to either commiserate or celebrate his OWLs. I don't think they give extra credit for having to do it all with a psychotic mass murderer in your head, while a sadistic beaurocrat uses curses on you."

“I don't think they do, no.” Again, Regulus shook his head. “His birthday is shortly after mine, isn't it? If I'm recalling correctly from last year.”

"The 31st," Sirius clarified. "Born as the seventh month dies was a very poetic way of putting it."

“Poetic, indeed.” A twinge of curiosity coloured his voice as he added, “Is that from the prophecy?"

"What I remember of it," Sirius said, before frowning to himself. "It may have been paraphrased, but I doubt it. I've heard enough of James's poetry to know that it should be burned as a crime against literature. But I remember the parts about the criteria. Birthdate, parents, scar."

Regulus tipped his chin thoughtfully. Restricted though it had been this far, once again he wondered at the details and how they might related to the horcruxes. “I would like to hear it, if that is possible.”

"Neville gave it to Dumbledore," Sirius shrugged by way of an answer. "I'm not sure if Harry is required to activate it now it isn't in Ministry possession or not, but there's little harm in asking. Neville might be a special case. Regardless, I'd like a word with the headmaster myself, so I'm sure you'll have time to ask. I think it's time Mum's room got vacated."

“Ah, yes, Buckbeak,” Regulus began, tucking away the thought of prophecy in his mind. (With luck, Dumbledore would be obliging - and with more luck, it would be worth the listen.) “He will probably like being out in the world again. If we felt stifled in the house, I imagine he has grown tired of a single room.”

"With everyone involved either disgraced or in prison, it should be safe," Sirius agreed. "I wouldn't mind knowing what he wanted Harry for today either, but I imagine I'll hear that from him before I see Dumbledore. Maybe he decided to take him along on interviews, see if he can figure out how not to hire a Death Eater if Harry's right there. Get it out of the way before term starts."

With a subtle snigger, Regulus nodded. “Perhaps so.”
And that is the end of our first part!

This is a self contained chapter in France before we delve back into England and the war. This 'section' of the series will deviate much further from the book timeline than the previous one, as that one focused on the book timeline Order of the Phoenix and establishing a lot of what we want to do here and in the third installment. This one will have a few more POVs added in to make sure we can fully explore the story being told. The core is always going to be the Black family, but it's become a wider story too. Watch out for tag changes, as we'll add as we go and as things become darker, more will need to be added.

We both hope you'll enjoy the ride, and as always, questions and comments are encouraged.
Chapter 2

There had been no time to gather a meeting of the Ravenclaw rebellion in the absence of the Blacks, but that didn't mean Emmeline had not been busy. Once the headmaster had retrieved Harry for their secret mission, she had gotten to work. Unwilling to focus on the funeral on Saturday morning, she did what she always did when grief became difficult and threw herself into a puzzle. Thankfully, they had an exceptionally large one in Voldemort and Harry, so there was plenty to do.

Every now and then she saw a ghost of movement, but she assumed it to be the house-elf who was clearly avoiding her. Having run out of room in the study, she had moved the boards down into the dining room. She had marked each topic, and under each of the topics, she had done the best to shorthand her own evidence and that which she knew from others. The first few pages were half complete, written in neat text and set up so she could look at all of them with relative ease.

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<td>M. Gaunt (witch, desc. Of Slytherin) &amp; T. Riddle (muggle)</td>
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<td>Basilisk</td>
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Locations of Interest
Riddle Estate
Gaunt 'House' (ring)
Orphanage (Ldn, 12/26, unusual deaths/accidents, unless A.D. remembers? Check for living memory.)
Inferi?
Hogwarts
Slytherin Cmn Rm? (H.S.)
Azkaban

Prophecy
S.T. claims no memory
A.D. S.S. overheard?
N.L. still able to touch
3xD
'Marked' = Scar
Power Known Not to YKW
H.P. (Occls, Pars, Protection Charm, Wand)

Ongoing Surveillance
H.P.
MoM
G.G.
D.P.
G.B.
P
L.P. fam
N.F. fam

Explore
Orphanage
M. Gaunt
H.P. lack of connection
N.L. ability to touch
Dark Creature Recruitment
Possible 2nd Break out

As she had thought to place something under it that spoke of the murders, she found that listing those names brought more of an ache to her chest than she was currently able to bear. It could wait. For now, Emmeline knew she had to focus on the future. There would be time to mourn the losses later, assuming she lived long enough not to be one of them.

The walk from the train platform back to Grimmauld Place was not a terribly long one, and though they were still shouldering their few-day luggage, when Sirius suggested they walk it, Regulus did not argue the point. It was a muggy evening in London, a little too warm to be wholly comfortable, despite the setting sun, but cooler still than Belétang had been a few hours before. (In the village’s defense, London has likely been hotter a few hours before, too, but he was no less grateful for the hint of a breeze.)

Returning home meant returning to reality - back to questions he did not have answers to, and to a war that seemed to grow in complexity, the further he delved into it. Nothing seemed to fit into its proper little box anymore, congesting and piling at the neck like an ill-fit shape, or jutting out, or falling loosely within to jangle about without a wall to anchor against. Those questions would need
answers, however elusive those answers might be.

Thoughtfully, Regulus stared ahead, watching the sidewalk stretching out in front of them as they strolled leisurely along; but beside him, Sirius wasn’t as lost in thought. If anything, he was buzzing with energy.

“There’ll likely be a meeting this week,” he said, breaking the silence out of nowhere. “Ready to be on the other side of the door?”

Jostled from his thoughts, Regulus glanced over at his brother and nodded. “I am. I must admit I’ve been curious.”

"It's not been that exciting," Sirius said, with a snort. "Mostly listening to Snape go on and on. Hope Remus is back for it; he's gone undercover with some ferals."

“I, too, hope Remus will have returned,” Regulus began, and though it was not a question of which feral group was being referred to, he did wonder if much success was being made - and if he wasn't successful, what might happen with a group of wild and uncooperative werewolves. Shaking his head, he added, “But however much you might dislike Snape, it's still more valuable than nothing.”

“It's better than coming from Harry,” Sirius relented sourly. “I'd say I look forward to the school term meetings more, but that seems cruel to him. Did you plan on going up there again? The school?”

Regulus maintained his thoughtful expression. The previous attempt had been a disaster, and he had at least a small amount of venom at hand, but there were several more horcruxes to go, and he was not sure to what degree he could rely on the Gryffindor sword to be any more at hand for his own purposes than the chamber below the school. However much he wanted to retrieve it (and to see the basilisk for himself, curiosity that it was in its less aggressive state), he could admit it was probably wiser to leave it to the students if it could not be managed by the beginning of the next term.

“I don't know yet,” he admitted after a moment.

Sirius snorted, “There's a sentence that can applied to your life in general at the moment.”

A wry smile flickered at the corner of Regulus's mouth, and he shook his head. “Too true. I've found a bit of flexibility is needed in planning, lest things go awry. It seems to happen frequently, should I get too attached to a particular intention.”

“Life would be very boring if you knew everything.” Sirius smirked back, readjusting the bag he carried. “And the Ravenclaw rebellion would have nothing to do, let alone for its newest addition. Should I be expecting to lose you for a while to another pile of books and the research of mysterious things?”

“Yes,” Regulus responded without hesitation, dipping his chin in a small nod. “The chances are very high that you will. I am quite curious what information the Order has been working off of and how it compares to my own.”

"More in date, and more Ministry input." Sirius shrugged. "They hoard almost as much as you, so I think we've got a lot of the old evidence work stashed here and about. Someone might need to ask for Frank and Alice's, but given the name, I'm nominating someone else to do that. Frank's mother has always been hard as nails; dunno what she thinks of her grandson getting involved with all this
“I would not think she's particularly thrilled about it, if she knows. She was not one for any sort of vigilantism, from either side - nor was Great Aunt Callidora, for that matter,” Regulus remarked, lifting his brow, struck with a tinge of curiosity at the associate thought. “Speaking of, I wonder if she is still alive. The tree said so, but I assume no one has been updating it lately.”

"McGonagall said it was just me, but I don't think she's counting anyone that extended. I want to say it was Andromeda's father that kicked it last, but it might have been Cass. Either way, someone had to add them three years ago, so it's probably accurate to then." Sirius pondered aloud. "Arthur Weasley may know. His mother was, at least at one point, her younger sister. The other one was...what, Crouch?"

Regulus nodded, feeling a little twinge in his chest that he carefully kept from his face. “Great Aunt Charis, yes.” He and Barty had been second years when she passed, as he recalled. Barty had known her better, seeing as it was his immediate grandmother, and seemed to like her quite a lot - but Aunt Charis and Barty's father had quarreled often, from Barty’s report, which had always been a point in her favour. “I will try to remember to ask, should the opportunity arise.”

"Maybe Arthur's mother's still alive," Sirius considered, but there was irritation leaking into his tone. "That's the problem with taking a wand to the family tree as often as the tapestry: You start realising it's inaccurate. Arthur had a brother - two, maybe.” To that, Regulus lifted his brow with a mild brush of surprise, even as Sirius continued, “I don't think most of the younger kids are old enough to remember Molly's enough to comment on them. The twins and the one being a prick would have been toddlers."

“I have to admit a measure of curiosity about the older marks - and what exactly it is that they did,” Regulus said with a frown, “No one ever talked about them, of course, and there are only a few that could be figured it from context, like the Weasleys.”

"Besides me, Andromeda, and I'm guessing Uncle Alphard got it in the neck from Mum when she realised what he'd done," Sirius sighed to himself, slowing a little. "I think that's just Arthur's mum that’s recent, and the one between Aunt Cass and Dorea. Never understood why Dorea got a free pass after Henry, but I guess her husband made the right noises. Suppose she also had a boy, seems to be the main currency. There's probably still a bunch of junk belonging to half of them in different houses, at least if ours is anything to go by. A scorch mark only takes out a name, it can't fully remove a presence or their history."

“Probably,” Regulus assented thoughtfully, thinking back to the cluttered, dusty attic he and Sirius had climbed up to years and years ago - too young to care about looking for disowned ancestors, that much was certain, but perhaps there was some merit to the thought, whether in their own childhood home or the slew of other properties sitting vacant. It had always been a terrifying thought - complete erasure from the family's history - and as a child, that erasure had felt jarringly real and horrifyingly complete; but he had not thrown out his brother's photos. Perhaps sentiment had burdened others along the branches of the tree - or even apathy...

"There you go, first date planned," Sirius said, laughing to himself without much care for Regulus’s distant thoughts.

“You are unbearable,” Regulus muttered with a snap of attention, shaking his head.

Sirius, as expected, was entirely pleased by that. "I've seen more of Emmeline Vance's back end sticking out of various things in that house over the last year than I've seen her face. I'm a little afraid if you let her near that attic, she'll never leave."
Fighting a smile into some slanted form, Regulus shook his head again. It was charming, her persistent curiosity about the house when so many others - essentially everyone else in it - soured. “That's probably true,” he granted lightly.

“Assuming she hasn’t managed to find it on her own,” Sirius said. “I’m still finding things I didn’t know were there. Dunno what she’d manage to dredge up from the deeps.”

“She has not mentioned it,” Regulus said - and privately, he suspected she would have, given her ongoing quest for his nonexistent ‘embarrassing childhood photographs’ - then added, “though I cannot speak for the past few days, seeing as they have been unsupervised.”

"Untempered curiosity, the curse of Ravenclaw,” Sirius said, before bobbing his head in their direction. "Looks like the house hasn't reduced itself to ashes because someone else was living there by themselves for a bit."

“That's fortunate,” Regulus remarked as they neared the front door, and though Emmeline was not the destructive sort herself, he had to admit there was some part of him that would not have been entirely surprised if the house had some spell on it that might've pitched a fit in such circumstances, however unwise it seemed to say as much aloud.

“I figured we’d be okay if it hadn’t exploded at me,” Sirius reasoned. “If anyone was going to try and curse it, it’d probably be against traitors, or people who weren’t human like Remus. I don’t think he had any problems with the house.”

“Not as far as I am aware, either.” Just the ongoing objections of their mother’s portrait, though it went without saying - and when at last they had stepped inside shortly after, they were met with still silence, even from her.

Sirius shrugged in response; he was obviously not going to complain about not getting yelled at by the portrait of their mother.

Slowly, the door from the dining room opened and Emmeline’s head bobbed into view. “I see you made it back in one piece,” she said, looking them over. “Congratulations.”

A smile crept up the corners of Regulus's mouth, and he nodded. “A similar sentiment could be said for yourself. How was Grimmauld Place?”

“Opinionated,” Emmeline said, with a bob that may indicate she was shrugging out of sight or perhaps found the comment amusing. “But she’s an old girl and that’s hardly unusual in elderly relatives, portrait or otherwise. I’m afraid I haven’t seen your house-elf-”

“- that’s a relief-” Sirius muttered under his breath, and Regulus shoot him a sharp (if brief) look.

“- so I can’t inquire as to him, but Buckbeak, Harry, and I were fine,” Emmeline finished. “There’s some news, but perhaps you ought to come in here. I have a feeling it will induce something of a loud reaction, and this is never the hallway for loud noises.”

“News, you say?” Lifting his brow, Regulus followed her through the door, followed in turn by Sirius.

"It appears that a new Defense professor has been hired,” Emmeline said, clearing off a variety of parchment that was currently occupying the table.

"It's not another Death Eater, is it?” Sirius said as he shut the door behind them, clearly half-joking.
"I suppose that depends upon your definition," Emmeline said, in a way that could be described as shifty. "I'm never entirely sure how to categorise him."

Curiosity broadened Regulus's expression slightly, glancing first at his brother then back to Emmeline. There were not very many people who Regulus would consider to be questionable as far as Death Eater categorisation went, but- "Is it Severus?" he asked carefully, unlikely though it seemed.

"No," Sirius said, firmly. "He already teaches Potions. He can't do both, and run Order and Death Eater tasks. I know he has no life, but that's nuts."

"Potions is an easier slot to fill," Emmeline said. "So yes, while I haven't seen him personally, it appears Dumbledore has finally granted his request."

"The Defense position doesn't have a particularly great record, no," Regulus commented, shaking his head. "Who was hired to teach Potions, then? Has it been determined yet?"

"I don't think it's been announced yet," Emmeline replied. "Perhaps they want an air of surprise this year."

"It'll be a surprise if anyone learns anything this year," Sirius grumbled. "At a time when learning Defense is going to be vital, he puts Snape in charge of it?"

"It might not be that bad," Regulus countered mildly, though he laced his tone more firmly as he added, "Certainly more productive than last year, from the sound of it. Even Barty - setting aside that Unforgivables fiasco - made a competent, if ironic, Defense teacher, according to what the kids reported. Snape might manage a decent curriculum a well."

"Because he can't teach," Sirius said. "He’s not much better as a Potions professor, but at least he knows the material. He picks and chooses who is 'worth it,' and to hell with anyone else, which is why purist half-bloods piss me off. Besides, knowing the Dark Arts doesn’t automatically make you good at defending against them, let alone teaching a bunch of teenagers who are about to be let loose on an active war zone."

"If there was a better option available, can you think of a reason Dumbledore would not hire that person instead?" Regulus countered, raising his brow. "We received poor and inconsistent Defense education too, but we survived the previous iteration of this war. Should they need gaps filled in, we can at least do so for Harry and his friends."

"I ended up in a cell for twelve years, and you joined the Death Eaters," Sirius deadpanned. "We're not role models, we're barely more than worst case scenario. Isn't the kids making those mistakes because they don't know any better than we did half the problem?"

"I did not join because of an educational skill deficit, nor is that the reason you ended up in Azkaban," Regulus responded in a deadpan, pointed tone of his own, and for a moment, Emmeline’s presence was seemingly forgotten. "Those mistakes were rooted in separate issues."

"They were stupid mistakes, that's a deficit of something," Sirius groused. "At least they were paid for mistakes. Snape abandons Harry's lessons, leaving him vulnerable, and in return, he gets the job he wanted in the first place. If he decides to pull the same shit in Defense, I'm cursing him into next week."

"You can't," Emmeline said, from where she'd gone back to her parchment. "The Time chamber lost their time turners in the fight. No one is going forward or backwards."
Sirius scowled at her.

Sparing a glance to Emmeline (who appeared unmoved by the scowl), Regulus tipped his head with a tilt of the mouth. “In addition to this undeniably practical point, he will presumably be held more accountable for official Defense classes than he was for secret Occlumency lessons, however important they might have been. Try to bear it.”

"Do I have a choice?" Sirius ran a hand across his face, and then sighed heavily. "I'm going to go write to Harry, since I'll have to find an owl."

Regulus nodded his acknowledgement, watching until his brother crossed the door frame before shaking his head. Shifting his attention back to Emmeline again, he felt a small prickle of awkwardness niggling at the back of his mind, his brother's intrusive questions glaring a little too brightly behind his eyes. With a pointed mental push, Regulus shoved the thought down- he could worry about it at another time- “That could have gone worse,” Regulus remarked with a tip of the head.

"Better than I expected," Emmeline agreed, looking at the door and the amazingly still silent hallway. "Was your mysterious trip fruitful?"

“It was,” Regulus answered vaguely, his eyes dropping to the notes before her on the table. “Are you working on anything of particular interest?”

"Cataloguing," Emmeline said, tapping one of the pieces of parchment. "While there is an element of discretion with certain tasks, you also don't want the right hand not knowing what the left is doing so much it slaps into it. So that's the current mission splits, surveillance, research, undercover work, you know. Then topics of interest, or potential sites of interest in regards to You-Know-Who, given that he chose to hide something in his maternal home, then the diary at Hogwarts. It's possible there are other significant places we ought to be looking - not the orphanage, demolished, but perhaps some of the staff could shed light on the overall picture."

Curiosity sparked visibly in his expression, and with a subtle gesture towards the papers, he asked, “May I?”

“You don’t have to ask,” Emmeline replied. “Membership perks.”

His mouth curled up into a smile as he picked up the parchment, eyes flicking over the neatly organised categories and the lists, not too unlike his own (if more straight-forward). There was no mention of the horcruxes themselves, though the items had clearly been identified as items of interest. He had wondered what all they knew; from the start, he had gathered that the Order was progressing along the correct track in many ways, but it seemed Dumbledore was not being any more forthright with his information than Regulus had been.

Eyes lifting to Emmeline's, he thought once again that if it was Emmeline alone, it might not be so terrible to probe her insights. He knew little about the orphanage in question, and the same applied to the finer details of the prophecy… Deep in his gut, he could feel a recoiling hesitation, but she had been an asset in hunting the ring - he could not have found it so simply without her guiding him right to it - and she was nothing if not discreet...

“I appreciate a well-documented compilation of information,” he said, carefully setting it back on the table. A brief pause, and then: “I have my own, as well. I've been itching to compare them for some time.”

"You, the informational connoisseur, wanting to explore my own? I'm flattered." Emmeline
grinned, filing through a couple of the pieces. "I think I've managed to narrow down some sort of timeline. You can see there that the Chamber of Secrets was opened in June of '43 with a single fatality, then the Riddle murders two months later. After that, he seems to become silent aside from academic accomplishments. My guess the is that something significant happened in the summer of '43 that sparked, but what, I can't say."

“I see,” Regulus murmured thoughtfully, tucking the information away in his mind as the details threaded into his own mental timeline. So little of the Dark Lord’s life had been accessible, shrouded in untapped mysteries and harrowing discoveries, but the Order did seem to have greater access to such things - ironic though it felt, considering how carefully the Dark Lord hid that information from the followers who gave their lives to and for him. Regulus had to wonder just how early the Dark Lord has planned his horcruxes; could the Riddle murders have preceded, or did they occur in isolation?

Steeling his resolve, Regulus stared hard at the parchment as she stacked each page neatly. “I am presently unclear on the timeline of it, but there is something I have been meaning to consult with you about, if you are willing to lend your discretion.”

"I can lend it," Emmeline said, stopping her busying for a moment. "I'll go so far as to freely give it, if you like."

Expression falling a little more solemn, Regulus nodded, then tipped his head toward the door. His mind drifted to the husk of a locket still tucked away upstairs. He had not put much mind to how he might initiate such a conversation because he had not actively intended to have it in the first place, but perhaps something tangible might give focus…

His mind reeled softly inside his skull, but the way his thoughts pulled to a point helped a little with the lingering awkwardness hovering over him since he's had spoken to Sirius. Impossible though it felt, trying to understand the way fondness crept and swelled and grew to something more unwieldy than he had initially expected, this, at least, was something he could anchor himself against.

“I must pop up to the top landing, but I will meet you in the library in a few minutes, if you have a moment right now?” It was as much a question as a statement as he lifted his gaze to meet hers.

Emmeline gave a soft laugh. "I think I can clear some time in my exceptionally busy schedule to join you for a bit of an enigmatic library visit."

Regulus granted a small smile but spared no time in trekking up to the top landing where he dropped his bag and rifled through another, pulling out the cracked and damaged remains of Salazar Slytherin’s iconic locket - the vessel for a fragment of the Dark Lord’s soul. After securing it in his pocket, Regulus padded down the stairs once again, this time veering off to the library where he found Emmeline already waiting, situated primly in a chair.

With a soft, steadying huff, he sat in the matching, overstuffed chair just adjacent to her own - paused - then began, “It’s about the ring we found.”

"The one I've been impatiently dying to know what it is that you felt warranted Dumbledore alone?” Emmeline clarified. "Yes, I remember it."

Some of the tension tightening around his neck loosened just slightly as he cracked a tiny smile, stiff though his posture remained. “It's quite sensitive, as far as information goes. However well-meaning a person may be, one cannot always control the maintenance of a secret once it starts to spread, nor does it retain much weight,” he started, then shook his head. Fighting to keep the
uncertainty behind a mask of neutrality, he continued, “Perhaps it is unnecessary to repeat, but I must emphasise my desire to protect this particular secret for the time being, and judging by Dumbledore's continued reticence on the matter, it seems he is in agreement. I did not intend open the subject to anyone else, but… I trust your discretion, and I recognise value in your analysis.”

Emmeline preened undeniably.

Fending off a small rush of embarrassment, Regulus spoke again, providing little room for response, “Shortly before… leaving, I discovered something I was not supposed to know. Something I don't believe the other Death Eaters are aware of, at least not most of them... Granted, they might know now; I suppose I don't have much perspective on the current state of things… but the point of it remains that I was not meant to find out at the time. He intended to use Kreacher, then kill him to keep it quiet.” His mouth tightened, and with it, so did his voice. “In pursuit of immortality, he appears to be attempting a number of methods, one of which was use of the philosopher’s stone when Harry was a first year, but he was attempting other methods during the first war, too.”

Regulus reached into his pocket and pulled out the broken locket and held it out to her, watching her eyes as they fell to inspect it. “Horcruxes, they're called. Extremely dark magic, with murder as a key ingredient. This is the one I found back then, but Gaunt's ring was another. I originally assumed there was only one, but…” He shook his head, this time pressing his lips to a thin line.

Emmeline frowned deeply, as she sat forward to examine the locked with interest. “Why would murderous jewelry be the key to immortality?”

“The jewelry itself isn't murderous,” Regulus clarified, pausing for a beat to arrange his thoughts before continuing: “To my understanding, murder causes one’s soul to...fracture.” Anxious pressure constricted around his temples as an unwelcome flash of too-still bodies and flicking flames rose in his mind, and it was with a tense straightening of his posture that he shoved it down again. “The fragment can then be bound to an object, which becomes a horcrux. As long as that horcrux remains intact, one cannot fully die, held instead to life by a thread. I had assumed the locket was the only one…” He turned it over in his hand, the thick golden chain shifting off his fingers, and a frown pulled down at the edges of his mouth as he stared down at the encrusted emeralds and the winding S, damaged though the surface might be. “...And I destroyed it a long time ago, so when the Dark Lord successfully returned… well, I suspected that had been a hasty and optimistic assumption. The ring was my first confirmation of another, but I believe the diary was a horcrux too, though it manifested differently from the locket - and the ring was different from both of them…”

There was a moment of studious silence to the revelation, where perhaps Emmeline was unsure of what to say or do to that. “To separate a soul once is a terrible thing, but mendable. To then shove it in a piece of jewelry - or a diary - is reckless and dangerous. To then go on to do it multiple times, perhaps even as a teenager, is unthinkable.” Her eyes flicked to Regulus himself. “Yet I suppose I have to think it. I must admit, I’m formulating more questions than I can reasonably ask. I don’t suppose you’ll mind if I make a list, will you? A private one, obviously.”

Regulus paused for a beat, then tipped his head down in a small nod. “Private and as vaguely worded as you can manage while still sparking memory as needed.” His head rang softly - it was difficult to feel 'mendable' when he thought about his own brush with murder, but the thought of confiding as much to Emmeline made his insides twist, so instead he sat back in his chair with a quiet huff.

"I'll just do what we used to," Emmeline said, moving to sit back. "Have you had the chance to see
“The infamous map, yet?”

“She asked if the one Harry had?” he clarified, thinking back to the extensive map of Hogwarts the boy had unfolded - one that Sirius and his friends had apparently used back in school, though he did not much like to think about it.

“That would be the one,” Emmeline nodded, a small smile forming. “It’s locked parchment, and changes what it has on it if you're not using the correct passcodes to bypass it. It’s a little crude - that particular one likes to insult you - but you can lock it to say anything you like, nothing at all or something different depending on who it's responding to. We used to use a similar method back in the day.”

“Interesting.” Thoughtfully, Regulus nodded. “I’ve used variations on disillusionment but have not used that particular spell. It sounds secure.”

“I think they just wanted to be clever about it. It must run in the family. I only heard about it after we’d left school, and after they’d lost the damn thing,” Emmeline huffed, despite still looking a little amused. “But it did become very helpful in terms of hiding in plain sight. I’ll show you it once I’ve managed to get it all down.”

His mouth slanted up, just slightly. “Perhaps we can consolidate our notes at that time.”

“I’ll show you mine if you’ll show me yours,” Emmeline offered.

Quietly, Sirius’s voice came from the doorway. “Er...I can come back later.”

Face flushing hot, Regulus clasped the locket tight in his hand and stuffed it back in his pocket. “You really ought to knock,” he began a little moodily, shooting Sirius a withering look. It was the burn of embarrassment at what his brother was undoubtedly assuming, more so than true anger, that sent his posture rigid again, but it was annoying nonetheless. “I suppose our note-taking discussion can wait,” he specified further, and in some clumsy attempt to distract, added, “You’ve sent the letter to Harry?”

“Note-taking, riight,” Sirius said, elongating the word beyond all need. “I have the letter, but I need to go to the post office because not even the responsible adults in this house own an owl.”

“Then go to the post office and mail it,” Regulus said, his tone a little more short than was entirely necessary. As he shifted in his chair, no amount of curiosity could turn his eyes over to Emmeline, and the tentative control he’d had over the mental onslaught of awkwardness was rapidly crumbling.

Sirius pointed to the door, giving him a shirty look. “That’s what I’m doing!”

“Actually, you’re speaking to me,” Regulus began, willfully ignoring the intent of his brother’s remark, before evening his tone to something a little more neutral as he continued, “Did you need something?”

“For someone to notice if I don't come back would be nice.” Sirius glanced around the library. “I know it'd probably take a day or two, given you're with your one true love, but even you have to run out of reading material eventually.”

“Ha,” Regulus huffed dryly, and with a tiny grump, added, “Your upcoming absence is noted.” (And anticipated, though he bit his tongue to keep from saying as much).

“I should go clean up the dining room,” Emmeline said. She stood up, giving a small smile in
Regulus's direction. "Just in case your house-elf decides to be fastidious. Study tomorrow?"

"I'm going over to the Burrow tomorrow to see Harry," Sirius said.

Emmeline turned to him. "Do you have a particular interest in digging through some ancient magical volumes and making some notes?"

"No."

"And do you imagine Harry does?" Emmeline pressed.

Sirius snorted. "Doubt it."

"Then it's excellent timing all around," Emmeline replied. "Particularly as you're not invited."

Regulus's mouth flicked subtly as he first glanced to Sirius, then nodded to Emmeline. "A well-suited plan."

"I know I'm devastated not to be invited to fall asleep at the table," Sirius replied, with obvious sarcasm. With the statement, he withdrew, and the sounds of feet on the stairs could be heard.

"The words ‘diligent research’ are a powerful anti-Gryffindor weapon," Emmeline said. “Usually."

Coming from Regulus, claims of notes and research had been ineffective, instead sparking another embarrassing remark of disbelief in place of the desired deterrence, but he could not truly complain at the final result, even if it had required Emmeline’s word to fend Sirius off. Pressing his mouth to a line, he merely nodded.

Embarrassment still lingered and knotted in his chest, but Regulus tugged a small smile onto his face to smother the feeling. “Quite right,” he said in agreement, rising to his feet as his thoughts drifted upward to his room, in hopes that a dash of solitude would re-center him once again. It was annoying, how awkward it all suddenly felt, but he could not very well gripe at Sirius about it without opening himself to more teasing, and Emmeline, at least, was giving no indication of concern. Whether the conversation had heightened his sensitivity or whether she was politely ignoring it, he could not say, but at least her unbothered expression provided a bridge to cross back over to normalcy. And cross it, he would. “We shall resume tomorrow, then.”

For as long as she could remember, Narcissa had experienced a complicated relationship with sandy shores of the Welsh coast that her family (and so many others) had called Summer Home for generations. The sun beat hard without care for her delicate, porcelain skin, and sand inexplicably managed to track inside despite the employ of various spells to ward it off, but she loved the way the sun glittered along the surface of the sea (and the pale blonde hair of her husband and child), loved the sound of waves as she hosted tea with her dearest friends, and for all its invasiveness, the sand did feel lovely between her toes in quieter moments. Tradition persisted in its familiarity, and though tragedy had struck fresh - the first in quite some years - Porth Iago called.

They would need to start readying themselves now, though it would only be herself and Draco, this year. There was no way she was bringing Bella and the Lestranges brothers along, as things were - nor were they likely to object to the exclusion, in truth.

Draco was in the library when she found him, scribbling away at his parchment with a certain diligence. There was a book of curses open on the table, though she could not be certain if it was his own curiosity or encouragement from her elder sister that had her son studying curses during his summer holiday when he ought to be relaxing and having a fun time of it with his friends. He
was a child - not yet a man - and it still froze her blood to ice, that Bella had pulled Draco into a world he oughtn't be touching, giving him responsibilities he was not ready for.

“What are you working on, darling?” she asked as she approached the table.

"I'm just studying, Mother," Draco replied. He barely glanced up from the book upon her question, before returning to his notes.

“Is it something for your Aunt Bella?” she asked, taking care with the casual lilt in her voice.

"It's something she helped with," Draco noted, before he turned to look at her. "Not that I was incapable of looking into it myself, she only offered."

“Of course, dear,” she said, though she could not help a small wave of distress - not in doubt of her son’s capabilities, though he was certain to assume as much, but rather the onset of something too unsettlingly familiar about that edge of determination that overtook Draco when her elder sister became involved - not unlike the edge that had taken their littlest cousin. Alive though Regulus apparently was, his involvement with the Death Eaters had hardly landed him in a safe position: Not for himself, and not for the rest of them.

“Is it related to the task you were given?” There was a certain steel that lined her tone, feeling as anxious as she did protective, though she did not want her son to see her quiver. She knew little of the details, beyond the danger her son was hurtled into when he took the Dark Lord’s Mark, and it worried her, how quiet he had been on those details.

"You're not supposed to ask about it," Draco said, quietly. There was both worry and pride in the tone, perhaps a desire to tell her but an anxiety about what would happen if he did.

In truth, Narcissa was not entirely certain she really wanted to know any more than she was supposed to know; his task would be dangerous, no doubt, and every detail provided just made her fears more vivid, splashing across her mind in horrific shades… but ignorance had done nothing to help Regulus. She had stared straight into her cousin’s eyes, seen him fidget with his arm and deaden his expressions, and she had told herself it was for a greater Cause, that they would protect him, that he must have known what he was doing - but he was a child who could not have known it, a child who was paying for a floundering family, and Draco would pay tenfold. He would pay for Lucius’s mistakes, for Regulus’s, for every mistake their family had made and those mistakes that may still come.

Unfairness stung sharp in her eyes; stubbornly, she blinked it away. “I don’t wish to trouble you further,” she said, moving close enough to smooth his hair - an unnecessary gesture, given that even the closest inspection would not have found a hair out of place, but rather a gesture reaching for comfort. Lucius wanted to harden him, to make him stronger and harsher in preparation for the difficult times ahead, but sixteen was not yet an adult; and no matter how tall he grew, she just wanted to grasp him and hold him and never let him go. She had nearly lost Draco to Durmstrang, a break in their Hogwarts legacy - she did not want to lose him more permanently to the Death Eaters, where there was quite a bit more than legacy on the line. “Your Aunt Bella is supporting you in your task, and I trust that,” she continued, though it was not exactly the full truth of it, “But there is only so much she can do while the Ministry still hunts her. Should you require anything, you need only ask.”

Draco reached for his mother’s hand. "I can handle this, Mother. You have nothing to worry about."

Clasping his hand in her own, Narcissa nodded, forcing a smile even as her insides burned against
the thought that her child should have to say such a thing at all. “I know,” she began, her voice more iron-steady than she felt, “I’m very proud of you. Just remember to be careful; and do try to enjoy the summer, as much as you can.” Squeezing his hand, she added with a little spark of memory: “We’ll be leaving for Iago, tomorrow.”

Draco appeared to hesitate. "I don't know how long I'll stay. I may need to return for some things." He pulled his hand back, and then reached for another book. "Are we going alone?"

Narcissa fought to keep her face neutral, even as a fresh stab of dread struck. “Your friends will be there, as always; but as far as family is concerned, yes, it is only us this year. Your aunt and uncles cannot risk the open exposure, even among friends.” Hardening her frame, she could not bring herself to mention Lucius, though the panging flicker in her eyes were mirrored in Draco’s.

Draco steeled himself visibly, pushing the book open as if it had in some way offended him. "Then I need to get as much as I can done before we leave."

“The elf will pack your things, but make certain to check your luggage before we go, to ensure nothing is forgotten,” she said briskly, once again eying the book her son had in front of him with only a mild flicker of frown.

Prepared was better than unprepared, however much she might dislike it.
Emmeline startled hard when the kitchen door opened.

Around four o'clock that morning, she had given up on her elusive sleep in favour of productivity. For once, this was not because of horrible dreams, but rather the buzzing noise of questions unanswered and uncategorised in her mind. Getting them out and organised into some sort of manner was the only way forward. She had wrapped herself in her housecoat and slipped down into the kitchen with hot coffee, parchment, ink, and her wand and let the questions come.

They were jumble at first. A horcrux was not something she was familiar with, which while terrifying, was also a point of interest. She'd gone through most of the Restricted Section during her Hogwarts years and found little. So how had Riddle known of it? A word like that would stick out, even without its meaning. It sounded a bit like the kind of insult written in the girls’ loos. Of course, that was the location of the Chamber when it had been opened. She thought of the diary and the memory inside it again. The more she thought of it, the more she thought the name – Lord Voldemort – reeked of adolescent ego, so perhaps she ought not to have been surprised by the idea of a teenager taking it on themselves. She was a little disappointed it was a prefect. She'd wanted to murder plenty of people while she served as one and had shown considerably better restraint.

Then came the questions of receptacles for a soul. Could it be anything? Riddle had chosen family heirlooms and a diary, so it was likely that the other objects linked to him. But what would he consider dear? His original wand, perhaps? They needed more information on his movements after Hogwarts. Then came the question of number – three, of course, but also seven, thirteen, how many times had he murdered? Countless. Of course, then it becomes about how is one destroyed, if he has already one it? Does You-Know-Who know if it's destroyed? What about the so-called manifestations? Were they defense mechanisms? Would each one have one? Could it be key to identifying the needle in the haystack? But one defended cursed object was often like another, so perhaps less helpful than she thought. As far as immortality links, perhaps this too was a pattern – Slytherin was a legacy, legacy held a type of immortality through family lines. The diary too, an immortalised snapshot of himself. The ring was Gaunt's, but it was Grindelwald's symbol; she wasn't sure how he played in yet. Two items were a line, not a pattern.

Then came Regulus's own involvement. What would involve the use and destruction of a house-elf? Why, then, was Kreacher alive? How had he found all of this? When? There was also the matter of his own feelings towards the Death Eaters themselves, an issue she found him slipping in and out of in what she suspected was a lowering of guard. He used ‘them’ and ‘we’ interchangeably at times; in the same conversation, he referred to You-Know-Who with the same quiet and reverent title; he had never shown an inclination towards judging bloodlines in front of her, but he'd never indicated otherwise either.

Ready to speak about it, Emmeline deflated when she realised it was Sirius. She hoped he hadn't noticed.

“Fuck you very much as well, then,” Sirius grumbled at her.

Either he'd noticed, or this was just a usual case of insomnia and not being a morning person. Alone in these moments, it was easy to remember these random factoids in quiet moments, things she’d had forgotten or put out of her mind when she’d thought the worst: that Sirius could and would fall asleep anywhere. All enthusiasm and then a crash into sleep, almost as if it was unexpected. It had been a strange thing to think of, these different versions of him – the one that must have belonged here at one point, the unmovable object who doesn't deem much worth his
time, the over-enthusiastic teenager, vigilante, godfather, prisoner, whatever he was to himself.

She'd thought perhaps a small trip would do them both some good. They could not come with her to the funeral, and both knew it. Sturgis had, and he'd endured enough of the gossip that it had made her angrier. If Sirius had gone, it'd have been a disaster. They were too close to all of it, and she imagined after such a long time, a little time experiencing his own freedom would be something Sirius would enjoy. Regulus had been dealing with his own thoughts, perhaps about his place in the world, given his inability to commit to us or them. A little time away was good for the soul. It had certainly seemed it when they got in, bickering but not in any way offended by it.

It struck her that when it had come to Sirius, she had always known him as part of a set. Even now, seeing him by himself was jarring. He and James had lived out of each others’ pockets for most of their youth, and often beyond. He and Remus had lived together, sat together. When laid up for research, he never did it by himself; he always sat and talked to Lily or Remus, usually disrupting the whole thing ‘til he was banished for doing so. She wondered if perhaps, despite his insistence of utter disgust at having to be in his childhood home, it was one of the reasons he hadn't left. Loyalty was important to him, and he tended to latch onto people if they managed to get to know him enough to know his bark's worse than his bite.

A similarity between siblings, she supposed. The desire to be part of something more than oneself, to give life, heart, and loyalty to it. Acceptance and belonging. While she had never gone out of her way to get those things, she liked that she felt she had them. But then, as ornate, complex, and interesting as the house could be, Emmeline was no fool: she knew, between James, between stories, between the lines of interactions and the house itself, that this hadn't been a good place to grow up in. Where she assumed it was latching on to the relationship in deficit of James at first, perhaps James had just been latched onto in deficit of family. She saw a similar thing with Regulus, with his near perfect memory of the mundane details of family, the desire to preserve the house, the excitement and pride he still had. She only really saw Sirius speak about Harry that way now, except for that meeting. He'd spoken of Regulus that way then.

The chair screeched loudly as he sat down in it, hot coffee almost spilling over the table. “What?”

“Just thinking,” Emmeline said.

“It's too early for thinking,” Sirius declared, taking a long drink of what had to be scalding hot coffee.

For all the similarities, she could appreciate the differences. Regulus had a better morning demeanor, and mostly seemed to go to bed at a reasonable hour. She wondered if Sirius attempted it, would he be in a better mood in the morning, but since she was neither his mother (she doubted she had the lung capacity to attempt such an impression), nor was he likely to take the suggestion well, she kept it to herself.

“When are you going to see Harry?” she asked.

“Soon,” Sirius said.

“Couldn't wait?” Emmeline suggested.

“Patience has never been my strong suit,” Sirius said, running his hands over his face and then giving a shake that reminded her so much of his animagus form that she felt profoundly stupid she'd never figured that out all over again.

(Perhaps also a little hurt Lily had never said anything, but it was difficult to be miffed with the
dead; it's not as if they could debate you about it.)

“What are you doing?” Sirius said, breaking her out of her thoughts again.

Emmeline picked up the parchment as the writing changed. “Arithmancy,” she said. “Feel up to giving me a hand?”

Sirius had given her a look of abject disgust, picked his mug off the table and stomped back up the stairs. She didn’t feel offended. It was the kind of friendship they’d always had. He just wasn’t feeling himself in the mornings. She supposed if the thought of seeing his godson wasn't enough to make him a morning person, nothing would.

By the mid-morning, Emmeline deemed it time enough that she could reasonably go and knock on Regulus's bedroom door. She did her best not to laugh at the notice. She'd seen it before, of course, but it always tickled her because it required a level of manner she doubted Sirius had ever possessed, and she didn't think parents paid much attention to such signs. She tried to imagine Regulus as a child keeping little replicated forms for *express permission* and perhaps telling people they would have to be signed.

A funny image, temporarily banishing all thoughts of fluster or dread at the upcoming conversation.

She knocked purposefully three times, and tried to settle back into herself. She had the note, folded over and still ineffectively grouped, despite her best efforts. She had the questions; all she needed now was the answers.

Following a brief pause, the door opened to reveal Regulus, readied for the day, despite lingering on the top landing. With a tip of the head (and the smallest beat of pause), he greeted, “Good morning.”

"Is that what the light coming in from the windows is about?” Emmeline said, leaning back to look out one of the landing ones. "Am I interrupting?"

Regulus shook his head. “I was just reading. Has Sirius gone on to see Harry?”

Emmeline nodded. "Seemed to want an early start." She waved the folded parchment. "So is now a good time to discuss it?"

“It is,” Regulus responded with a little nod, hesitated briefly with a glance back toward his desk (or perhaps the bag hanging over the side of the chair), paused a beat longer, then moved back a step. “The study might be more comfortable for conversation. I must gather a few potentially relevant points of interest, but it will only take a moment.” He left the door open as he turned back into the room, specifically moving to the bag hanging on the chair.

"The study sounds fine,” Emmeline said, though in truth, she was only half listening. It was a bit of a rare insight to actually see the room in question. It wasn't quite as blatant as she'd imagined, but she saw snakes and yet another family crest. (She was starting to wonder if they stamped it on them at birth, given that the crest seemed to be everywhere.) She huffed a laugh to herself, noting with a sense of envy that everything seemed quite orderly and well kept. While meticulous with others' belongings, she had to admit, her own were only sort of ordered and more often shoved somewhere in the general vicinity of the right area. "Don't rush on my account. I imagine Sirius will need time for the at least ten different arguments he's about to have with Molly regarding Harry and potentially himself."
Lifting the bag, he turned a small smile back to her before walking over toward the wardrobe. “A fair point.”

Emmeline returned it, even if he wasn't exactly paying her attention, in favour of props. She doubted much anything else about this discussion would instigate smiling, so she would take what she could get. “Do you need help?”

“I have it under control,” he remarked, opening the wardrobe and lingering for a moment as he leaned in to grab something, though it was difficult to tell what. When he turned around again, it was with a nod, and he crossed the door again to where he stood. “To the study, then.”

Emmeline’s curiosity burned to the point of wanting to come back and ask, but she knew better than to do so. Employment of patience often yielded better results, and she had more pressing concerns.

(Mostly.)

“Is there a situation where you ever admit to not having it under control, out of interest?” she teased, as they trickled down towards the study.

Again, his mouth flickered, slightly. “Out loud? No, not really.”

As they reached the study and yet more questions arose, Emmeline wondered if there was some sort of cap on them and how much she was going to be able to get away with here. “Whenever you're comfortable,” she said.

Closing the door behind them, he crossed the room to settle in a chair cushioned in dark green, worn but seemingly mended at some point, given that the lining was no longer torn. With his bag situated neatly on the side table, he looked up at her with his elbow propping on the arm of the chair. “What questions have you formed since yesterday?”

Turning back to her parchment, Emmeline looked over it, and the words revealed themselves. She was still finding herself unsure of a starting point. “There's a few of a technical nature about the horcrux itself, a few about the specific objects and potential patterns, and a few focused upon you.”

Subtly, Regulus’s mouth pursed, then he lowered his chin in a small nod. “Let's start with the technical questions.”

“The fracture in the soul,” Emmeline launched in. “As I understand it, this is not a neat and tidy business. Does the spell involved include some sort of containment or a regulation size? And if it doesn't, are there significantly different chunks in each object, and would the size matter in terms of impact, defenses, or function?”

“There are only two texts in the entirety of my experience that so much as mention the word, and only one of which describes the process, but it does not specify fractured size, regulations for containment options, nor the implications of how it might manifest.” Regulus frowned and shook his head, just slightly. “However, I speculate that inconsistencies in those fractures might affect how… sentient the fragment is, perhaps, though curses placed upon them could just as easily affect the end result.” Again, he reached into the bag and pulled out the locket, this time extending it towards her. “They were both well protected, that much is certain, just in very different ways. I think protections placed upon them are a larger factor in their defenses than the soul itself; but again, it is more a matter of my speculation.”

“The diary had a full blown manifestation. I know it’s said you pour your soul into your writing,
but this would be a very literal take on it,” Emmeline replied, knowing this was going to end up being frustrating. “The others had no such thing? Or did you mean sentence in another way?”

His expression soured a little more. “The ring did not display any sentient behavior. In the case of the locket, it did not display anything to the extent of what was reported for the diary, but it fought back, so to say, more so than the ring’s straightforward curse.” Again, he huffed. “However, both of them made a horrible screaming sound when they were destroyed, for what that is worth.”

Privately, Emmeline thought that he wouldn't have enough humanity left to scream. But was that not the point? He had, murder by murder, extracted and stowed away his own humanity. The coffee in her stomach felt uncomfortable to the point she wished she'd thought to bring a glass of water, but discomfort was outweighed by curiosity. "Fought back?"

“The Dark Lord seems to like his head games,” Regulus said, his tone sharpening with distaste, “but in the case of the locket itself, it was nothing more than that.”

"Then it was aware not only of you, but knew you?” Emmeline clarified, as concern began to fill her. "Because You-Know-Who knows you, or because it did?"

“I am not sure how exactly it functioned. It was not based on anything I had openly expressed, certainly not to the Dark Lord, given that we did not have direct personal conversations. Yet with skills in legilimency considered, that does not preclude the possibility that he knew, regardless.” Regulus tensed, jaw setting. “However, in regard to the horcrux, specifically, I suspect it is more a matter of the horcrux itself being able to somehow read and project, given that it is meant to protect the soul fragment from any assailant, not just those the Dark Lord has previously access to.”

Emmeline thought about it for a moment. "Like a boggart?"

“In that respect, it is similar, yes.” Regulus responded, leaning back uncomfortably. “I am certain it did not involve an actual boggart, but it had similar access to one’s thoughts. Even so, that does not appear to be a default state for any horcrux, because the ring to not present as such, meaning it either depends on the quality of that soul fragment, or it involved additional spellwork I am yet unfamiliar with.”

"Then if it was just a defense mechanism; do you think he's in any way aware of them once they're separated?” Emmeline asked; they were three down, how many more would there be? Seven? Thirteen? Twenty-one?

“I honestly don't know.” He frowned. “If he is aware, that could be problematic for eliminating them without risking replacement… I destroyed the locket a decade and a half ago, before he fell the first time, and the ring more recently, but I cannot tell if the lack of reaction to either is truly a lack of reaction or just a hidden reaction, given that I cannot observe directly… and it was never open information in the first place.”

"Because it's generally unknown among Death Eaters?” Emmeline clarified, carefully.

“To my knowledge. I was still quite new, so I cannot say whether the information was kept from me specifically or from everyone, but I do not believe it was common knowledge,” he specified, crinkling his nose. “Either way, once I realised what it was, I had no intention of letting on.”

"I can see why," Emmeline admitted, pressing her increasingly knotted shoulders against the back of the chair in hope of some relief. "What about the criteria for receptacles?"
“They seem to be objects of significance. At first, when I only knew about the locket, I wondered if it was related to the Founders’ relics. The other two confirmed items, however, have been personal, so the other Founders’ objects would not strictly fit the current pattern. With that being said, it is still possible that he would consider non-personal items if they were still items of significance, and I merely have not come across one; but there is simply no solid evidence either way.” He hesitated for a beat, face straining subtly before adding, “I have further suspicions, but… the implications are troubling. It's unsettling, having so little in the way of facts to anchor against.”

"Perhaps the Founders are of personal significance,” Emmeline replied. She had meant more the physical requirements, but she had questions about the specific as well and would happily divert for the moment. "Orphaned at a young age, with a single familial tie to a Founder, it wouldn't be hard to see it becoming that. It becomes a second home for many, particularly if things at home are a little...complicated. Being without magic for a few months would point to Hogwarts itself having personal significance as a magical home, wouldn't it? Is that along the lines of your suspicions?"

“Yes… it is entirely possible that the representation of Hogwarts is in itself significant,” Regulus said thoughtfully, followed by a slight beat of hesitation and a steelier shift in his posture. “I have other suspicions… but they remain uncertain, and due to their nature, I must reemphasize the necessity of keeping this information contained to ourselves. You do not seem the sort to become a rogue - if well- meaning - element, but I hope you will pardon the reminder.”

"I'm a little offended you think I can't be a little roguish," Emmeline said, giving him a bit of a deadpan look. However, given the extensive precautions, she also knew it had to be something good. Or more likely, very bad but something she would definitely want to know. "But between us, it remains. I did say so."

“It is not rogue behaviour in general that I doubt - after all, you brought those books from your department - but rather in matters of trust, I am relying on the assumption that you will not act on my suspicions outside of these conversations. I don't feel particularly comfortable relying on trust, all things considered,” he responded a little more firmly, but he seemed to accept her reassurance as it was, because he continued without much pause: “But to the point...Although the texts imply nothing of the sort, I have wondered for some time, whether horcruxes must be inanimate objects, or whether a living being can be used as a host.” Regulus shook his head with a furrowing brow and a tensing tone. “Perhaps it is a bit of a leap… but with Harry connecting so strangely with the Dark Lord’s snake…”

Caught between the desire to laugh at the most bawdy humour of the statement and the desire to be respectful of the tone, Emmeline remained silent while she rumbled the thought around. Two souls in a single, living body was madness, wasn't it? It sounded like something from her own department, an experiment gone wrong. She could see why he wanted the discretion - not only could it be dismissed, it also really ought not to be. But it didn't make a lot of sense. "Then why continually attempt to kill him?" she replied. "Surely, he can't just paste the part back on and try again, and doing it too many times, there's only so much you can take from a structure before it destabilises." Unless...."Or is that your idea? That it has become so unstable it rips and occurs without his knowledge or consent and it's nothing but a freak accident?"

“That is my theory, yes,” Regulus said with a frown. “He shares characteristics with the Dark Lord that he oughtn't, experiences legilimency in a way he oughtn't… Hosting a piece makes more sense than I want it to, and as much as I have wanted to think otherwise, it is unfortunately easier to believe in a mistake than it is to explain Harry.”

"I'd say he knows now," Emmeline said, thinking back to what seemed a lifetime ago but in reality, had been only weeks. The idea of one soul battling another inside a teenager was a horrible
thought, but certainly lined up with the experience. Not to mention the use in the resurrection. That brought another awful thought - how do you kill off one piece of a soul without killing Harry? “If that's the case, it certainly makes Harry's boggart a little ironic. He actually does need a soul extracted.”

Emmeline began to break the information down aloud. “You said the snake as well, didn't you, so that is a total of five - a locket from an ancestor, the ring from either considered family or he liked Grindelwald's ideology enough to want to use the ring, the diary - which was, I imagine, the first one which may account for its potency. Then Harry, by accident and the snake that bit Arthur - which lines up with his parselmouth heritage.” Arrogant, perhaps believing that ring did not need to be placed in anyone's care because no one would ever look into his background deeply enough. “That's five, though if he was trying to hit seven, it's possible that there are three others but equally possible he was aiming for thirteen. The likelihood being that these are things in the possession of supporting families - you had the locket, Malfoy the diary, the ring was perhaps shameful due to it's links to his own origins so perhaps location is also a factor. Either way, I think we can assume one was made during his school days which gives an excellent lead, because if he lived in the muggle world and this is information that someone like you who reads as if their life depends upon it has only found scarce mention, how exactly did he know what to do?"

“I don't know,” Regulus admitted with a huff. “I couldn't even find anything in the restricted section at school, and I spent more time there than studying for my NEWTs for quite some time.”

"I don't suppose you decided to check the professors’ personal collections," Emmeline said, knowing as she did that he probably would have led with that. "That leaves hearing about it from someone. Or a former someone: an excellent place to start when looking at how life can be anchored in the face of death may be speaking to a ghost."

“I did not trust the ghosts enough to ask them… and truthfully, I did not exactly know what I was looking for or trying to ask, at the time.” He shook his head. “But it’s an interesting thought.”

"I'm not accusing you of sloppy work. I'm just problem-solving, I can't turn my brain off. You know this.” The idea of being seventeen and figuring all of this out in isolation probably hadn't helped either, but Emmeline wasn't about to pull on that line of question just yet. "Besides which, I have to say, the Baron doesn't seem the chatty sort."

Regulus nodded, a little less tensely. “He was not particularly chatty, no. At least not in my personal experiences.”

"Helena either, if truth be told,” Emmeline had to admit. "I support your idea, even if I wish I didn't. The idea of a destabilised soul meaning he is currently running out of ways to anchor himself would indicate the need for a new method to prolong his life, such as philosopher's stone. It also explains Harry's wand twinning his own, along with the other scattered similarities. Finding others for experimental removal may be a better way of figuring out how to do it. I don't suppose preservation has been a priority?"

“As much as I might have preferred to preserve the locket, I did prioritise its destruction, first and foremost…” Regulus admitted, though there was a measure of disappointment in his eyes as they flicked briefly back to the remains of Slytherin’s locket. “Such a straightforward solution is not a luxury we have, if a piece really did get lodged into Harry, so further investigation of potential methods for removal - perhaps whether there is a means to transfer from a person to an object? - does bear merit. I strongly suspect there won’t be any material about horcruxes themselves, but perhaps even something similar enough to adapt…”

"It may be that Harry himself may be the key to dislodging it," Emmeline suggested. "He's
sentient, as much as any teenage boy is. He has a soul of his own, and perhaps, given the right conditions, may be able to expel it as he did with the mental link in the Department of Mysteries.” Emmeline held up a finger with a slight smile. "In terms of research for it, you do remember I have access to some of the best forbidden literature as an occupation, yes? Now the Aurors have cleared off, it'll likely return to business as usual - which means everyone minding their own."

At that, a small smile flickered on Regulus’s lips. “I did remember that, yes. I would go as far as to say I was counting on it.”

“You're going to get me in trouble one of these days, I can see it coming,” Emmeline had to laugh at it; of course that was why her. “I might be able to arrange something if you can behave yourself and not wander off.”

“I am very well-behaved,” came the lofty response as he met her eyes, manner relaxing a little further, “and would go as far as to say I have a knack for avoiding capture, though I will respectfully refrain from testing such limits in those circumstances.”

“Capture is not my concern,” Emmeline replied, though being noticed enough that he got in trouble would be less than ideal. “Magic has a mind of its own down there. I've lost entire days. I need you to trust me that I know it better than you do, and if I say no, to listen and not debate it. We can debate it later if you want, but it's very important.”

For a lingering moment, Regulus wrinkled his nose, eyed her, then nodded. "I recognise that you are granting strict secrecy to my concerns and have expressed willingness to respect my judgment regarding the maintenance of it, so I will grant the same in the exploratory sense."

“Have you considered changing your family motto?” Emmeline asked, with a laugh. “Something along the lines of the ability to stretch one word into fifty may suit more. “

Regulus opened his mouth slightly, then closed it to a line with a subtle studying sort of expression. After a moment of hesitation, he tipped his head in a subtle - if slightly awkward - acknowledgement as reached into his bag and pulled out two books: one that looked to be about quidditch, and another one about chess.

Emmeline frowned on reflex; perhaps the joke hadn’t landed quite as well as she'd hoped. She knew family, or she ought to say Family with the gravitas in which it was referred to, meant a great deal to him, and perhaps ought not to be joked about with him. She tucked the thought by; they were not on their third category yet, and it could wait.

She eyed the books instead. "I regret to inform you that I've never much liked chess."

The tension in his face started to loosen again as he flipped the book open. “That's just as well,” he began, turning another chunk of pages over, revealing content that appeared to have very little to do with chess at all, and after reaching his intended focal point, held it out to her. “These are the two books that I was mentioning, with information about horcruxes. I thought you might be interested in a look at the source material itself.”

A thought cut through Emmeline's confusion. "You bought them?"

“Not exactly,” he said with a wry, sloping smile. “They're technically Bella's. I'm… indefinitely borrowing them.”

A laugh startled Emmeline out of her thoughts. Of course, she would have done the same. "So juvenile delinquency does run in the family!" she declared, delighted. "I assume she doesn't know."
“I don't believe he she does, no.” His face lightened a little more as he shook his head. “She permitted me entry to their library, but she did not stay while I browsed. The book I told her I was borrowing was a potions text, and I mentioned I was looking around for supplemental tomes to ‘support my inadequate NEWT level education,’” he added dryly, “I don't know if she noticed that additional books were missing, but the horcruxes are such a small part of the books’ subject matter that it should not be too obvious as to why they were chosen.”

Which dovetailed nicely into her questions about his own involvement. "How did you know what to look for, exactly?" Emmeline questioned. "You were young, unprivy to a lot of things, I imagine, and other people doubtlessly hid things for him. What was different?"

“The Dark Lord requested a house-elf, so I offered Kreacher's assistance, not realising what it was for.” A twinge of guilt crept into his tone as his mouth tilted down in a small frown, but he paused only for a fleeting second before continuing, “As it turned out, that task was hiding the locket, and the steps one must do to place it in that spot or retrieve it again are specifically designed to result in death. That is presumably why he chose an elf,” he said with a touch of anger, “but because I had told Kreacher to return safely upon completing his task, he was able to use that loophole to escape… Upon his return, I questioned him and found the object he described to be suspicious.” With a steadying huff, he shook his head. “In regard to what to look for, truthfully, I was just blindly grasping at anything that made contextual sense and was secret enough that he would go to such an extent by to hide it.”

"I don't want you to take this the wrong way," Emmeline said, carefully. She knew this was about to reach a point where offense could easily be taken. "House-elves are not difficult to procure, and I believe many families go through them quickly. Why was it important that he not die?"

“Kreacher has been in this house longer than I have been alive, and he is family too. Treating him like something expendable without a thought-” Regulus bristled slightly, though the frustration in his expression seemed more distant, rather than directed at her. “He did not ask to be involved. It was my fault he had to go through that, and letting him die for it was not an acceptable option.”

So more of many things in conjunction with one another, then. It was personal, it was familial, guilt, loyalty, expendability - it was nothing if not a complicated issue, and clearly not one he'd had much of a chance to work through properly yet. That would make things harder.

"May I ask what you think of him?" Emmeline asked. "You-Know-Who."

“I'm orchestrating the systematic destruction of his soul; is it really that ambiguous?” he asked wryly, lifting his brow.

"Unfortunately, yes." Emmeline said, letting herself be blunt. "I don't believe for a moment you're insincere, nor am I unappreciative of the difficulties you've had to go through to get to this point. But..."

Taking a deep breath, she plunged onwards. "There is going to come a time, likely soon, where you're going to end up discussing this with law enforcement. Perhaps when it's over, but regardless, this talk will have to happen for you to live your life without threat of imprisonment. But while you hardly sound like Mulciber, bandying slurs and declaring superiorities, you do slip up. You say 'we'. You use the honorific title. You do...understatedly portray yourself as a pureblood supremacist which does not help you, regardless of if it’s true.” She smiled sadly, but she hoped she was conveying the sincerity of the concern through it. "It's understandable, and something we did speak about in your admittance to the Order, but I think you may have some things you need to work out. While this is important - and it is incredibly so - getting through this, hopefully intact, is also of concern, and there are potential issues regardless of what happens."
Stiffening against the arm of his chair, Regulus pressed fingers and thumb to his temple with a frown ambiguously caught somewhere between anxiety and frustration, and altogether uncomfortable. "Hm."

"I don't believe it's because you believe you are a Death Eater," Emmeline continued quietly, unsure of how to help ease through a difficult moment as this. "If I were to make an educated guess, it's the people involved and this unwavering sense of loyalty that you have. You say ‘we’ because they were your friends. You care about what happens to them. Having that loyalty pull you in two different directions is not an easy thing, and I don't envy you for it. I'm not going to yell at you, as perhaps I would have didn't know you, because I know you're still trying to figure it all out for yourself, and as such, I don't want you to feel as if you need to be overly censored with me. I respect who you are enough to be patient with who you were, and to wait to see who you're becoming for myself." Unexpectedly, she smiled widely. "That was very dramatic, but with you, most things are, so it's par for the course. I suppose I'm trying to say it's alright to stumble among friends, but that you will want to try and settle yourself a little more before the Aurors decide to ask questions, and I wasn’t sure you knew you had any stumbles at all...

His eyes flicked briefly to meet hers before dropping again with a heavy, tense sigh. “Sirius recently brought up something along those lines,” he near-muttered, studying the floor with undue interest. For a moment, his lips parted, as if to start again, but instead they thinned to a line as he pressed a circle to his temple.

Emmeline didn't find herself surprised by that. Sirius had been there when it came up. If it came up without Regulus’s presence, then people would watch at the meetings and draw conclusions. There was no point in making things worse if they could help it.

At the same time, it hurt to watch him clearly struggling with it. "It will just take time," she said, in what she hoped was a reassuring way. "When I first asked if you'd like to come with me, it was because I didn't know you. I had voted against ever taking the risk. It didn't seem worth it. But...I was letting my cynicism and grief cloud my judgement. Sturgis went to Azkaban not long after, and I wasn't sure if he would come back. Fabian, Gideon, Benjy, Dorcas, Lily, and Marlene are gone. Alice and Frank...It is very difficult to take an unnecessary risk with the little you have left."

She found that with the fresh losses, she had to blink back a far more intense emotional display than she had been intending to give. After a deep breath, she continued, "But it is not unnecessary, is it? It's so easy to become consumed by the fight that the humanity of it is lost. There are sadists, and people who truly believe in the murder of others, and true believers, but while I believe in consequences for actions, I have come to appreciate that many of these decisions were made by angry, lost, or frightened teenagers the same way our own choices were made. I appreciate the value in remorse, and taking action to rectify the past. I was expecting arrogance, intelligence, entitlement. I was not expecting kindness, humour, debate, nor compassion. I was not expecting friendship, nor camaraderie in purpose, or to feel steadied in my role here in a way I didn't know I missed until it was gone."

And she accused him of not being able to be concise, but she supposed in for a knut, in for a galleon. "You, like myself, like most of us, are still a work in progress. I’m trying to remember to be kind when I ought to be. It just happens that what you’re working on is very visible at the moment. The others may put you through the ringer, they may call out your words and ask for justification for them, but it's only because they don't yet know what I do. Have patience, decide what you believe, and be willing to dig your heels in, and if someone oversteps a line, tell them. Or try not to look smug if Sirius ends up punching them."

Regulus hesitated for a beat longer before lifting his gaze again, granting a thin smile, though
something behind his eyes still seemed to be reeling. “Your concerns and reassurances are noted,” he said, though the corners of his mouth were starting to flicker down again. “Yet there is clearly some agreed upon criteria, and I just can’t seem to grasp what it is anyone on this side of the war wants from me.”

"I'm not sure if it's something I can easily explain," admitted Emmeline. She thought for a moment before pressing onwards. "But again, I think it is just something that takes some time. You run on your emotional centre. If you don't feel something, I think it's harder for you to understand it. The agreed upon criteria for the Order, you meet, for you want to stop the destructive wave that is You-Know-Who. But your experiences differ in a way most don't. You have seen and experienced the suffering from the point of view of yourself, and of the life you grew up with. Other perspectives are bound not to have the same emotional impact, much as most people here don't connect to the cost in the old families because they have no real emotional experience of it or dismiss it as having been invited upon them. It's a different driving force to destroy the Death Eaters, but different isn't bad. It won't please everyone, but pleasing everyone is not a requirement. You can only do what you feel is right. The rest is up to the rest of the Order and myself, to figure out what you want from us."

“That has not come across as a priority, at least not for most individuals involved,” he said wryly, but when he caught her eyes again, his own held something intense and seemingly positive behind them. “But I…” He faltered, then started again: “Your belief in my intentions has been...very meaningful.” For a moment, Regulus wore an almost pained expression, though it might have been a dismissed thought weighing on his furrowed brow. “Truthfully, I expected to feel lonelier in all of this.”

"You're not alone. They're just afraid. The last few months of the war were hell, all because trust was put in the wrong person. No one wants to go through that again,” Emmeline reasoned, though she supposed she couldn't put it past a few people to be dicks for the sake of being dicks. It happened in every group.

“The war was hell for me too,” he said pointedly with a subtle grimace, “but as you postulated, I suppose most people are unlikely to care much about that, helpful or not. I understand distrust - I’m admittedly not a bastion of trust myself - but I cannot say it isn’t frustrating at times.”

"I'm not saying it wasn't," Emmeline insisted. "I know it was an awful experience for you, and so does everyone else. Don't put words in their mouths until they speak them - I saw understanding and compassion as well as judgement. The difference is it happened to them. Of course, it feels more personal. We lost half of our number in four months, some to death, some along with their husbands, wives, their children and some, something worse. One single trust misplaced, and twelve Order members and half their families lost their lives. Not all at once, where it may have been easier to accept, but every week, wondering who you would lose next. Can you also accept how devastating it would be to watch week by week as the people you care about are picked off and you cannot stop it because you don’t know how it's happening?"

“Of course I can accept it was devastating. I’m not that callous. I’m just saying…” Abruptly, the thought seemed to catch in his throat, and he shook his head and rubbed a hand over a sharp, draining expression, punctuated with a drawn sigh.

“That you want it accepted that you've gone through devastating things too?” Emmeline asked. “That this isn't easy for you? You have it. It's just everyone, including you, trying to figure out trust again in light of all of that. It helps that you have a lot of people that do trust you already, but I'm a bit unsure what the rest of us can do to have it reciprocated. Well, not I. I feel trusted, and I hope you feel that reciprocated.”
Regulus paused, then nodded slowly. “I do.”

“Then patience and listening,” Emmeline said, simply. “That is all that's wanted. You don't have to agree - if anyone managed to get all of us to agree on something that wasn't the need to destroy You-Know-Who, I'd suspect something untoward was going on. Just be willing to listen, and ready to debate. We've certainly had enough practice that I think you'll be fine there.”

“I am exceptionally well-versed at patience and listening,” he began as his gaze locked with hers, “and in light of the past year, I will admit that the opportunity to engage in debate has increased dramatically.”

“You'll feel more comfortable after the meeting,” Emmeline promised. “The twins will be a bigger stir than you, trust me. In terms of official statements, it may be worth discussing it with Snape. He's gone through much of it before.”

“I would like to - though I've barely seen him,” Regulus admitted with a little frown.

“Neither have I, but it's not so unusual. I know he has more commitments during the holidays, and I don't think any of us actually know him socially enough to ask him to come without Dumbledore requesting it.” Emmeline frowned. She still wasn't sure what his problem had been at the last one. “I suppose it makes things easier. You're suffering for your attachments on both sides being at odds.”

“It certainly makes things more ironic,” he huffed wryly, “given that he is the only person I was already friends with; but everything is already tangled, as it is, so what is one more complicating factor?”

“I imagine there's a few things interrupting that,” Emmeline replied. “It is one thing to pull Harry out of the fire, it's another that he feels enough familiarity with you to owl you personally. Even Remus gets quite a few Lupins, as if he's not quite sure what to call him now he's not his professor. That's without touching Sirius or the lack of noticeable animosity between you lately.”

Rubbing at his temple, Regulus lightly squeezed his eyes and nodded. “I have found those two issues to be particularly problematic, yes.”

"They're not easily resolved issues," Emmeline admitted. "Or rather, the problem being that you are resolving some and he's clearly unwilling or unable to do it. I don't think I can help there. However, I am glad what I can do has been meaningful. In a horribly inappropriate way, it's almost fun. Always love a good mystery, as long as it's solved in a satisfying way at the end."

“I admit to a similar draw to mysteries. Nosiness strikes again,” Regulus said with a tone that had begun to lighten at the edges.

Emmeline snorted, despite herself. "You're just dying to know what that prophecy says, aren't you?"

His mouth quirked, a little lopsided as his frame relaxed into the chair. “Dying is an understatement.”

Emmeline considered her options. The prophecy was it stood was now within Hogwarts, but the school was empty for the holidays. It might be the perfect place for a little privacy. "Have you ever been inside any of the other common rooms?" she asked, in a sudden shift of subject.

Regulus lifted his brow, followed by a small headshake. “No. Why? Are we still talking about the prophecy?”
"Sort of," Emmeline said, a plan already beginning to formulate. "As I understand it, Dumbledore doesn't want it getting out what it says, and Hogwarts would be the safest place for its study. Assuming he approves of such study, I was thinking that asking Filius - Professor Flitwick - if we could use the tower for a study meet, since the entering mechanism is a little more tricky than the other common rooms."

Interest immediately lit his face, and he nodded, sitting up a little straighter in his chair. "I think that seems like a very reasonable plan."

"Alright, good. Now, about Harry," Emmeline said. "Did you mention that to Dumbledore?"

"Not yet," Regulus admitted as his expression crinkled, "With everything happening in the past few months, we have not actually spoken in detail about the horcruxes since destroying the ring. Truthfully, I was hoping something would arise to contest the theory, upon gaining more Order-related information, but unfortunately that information has done more to support it than it has to debunk it. I intended to ask about the opportunity to listen to the prophecy, in the case that it might provide some additional insight. I suppose that is as fitting a time as any to propose the theory, undesirable though it might be."

"Dumbledore likes to play it all very close to the chest," Emmeline said, wondering if the man didn't have his own suspicions. "Regardless of what he says of the prophecy, I think you should say something. If nothing else, he may be able to point in the direction of ways to disprove it if it's not true."

Though Regulus pressed his lips to a line, he nodded his head shortly after and let out a sigh. "Perhaps so."

Accepting that, Emmeline nodded. There wasn't much else to do: either it was a correct theory or it wasn't, and time would tell. "Until then, it's worth looking at other potential places one may be. It might be a good time to go antiquing."

"I do enjoy antiquing," he said with a little smirk.

The obvious signs of Ministry security at the Weasley home were a surprise, but not a wholly unwelcome one. Where the new Minister stood on Harry and Dumbledore was still fuzzy at best, but Sirius wouldn't deny that seeing some protection was probably a good sign. Or it was a terrible one, because they were trying to keep an eye on them and see what they were going to do next. From what he'd heard about Scrimgeour, this wouldn't surprise him.

It didn't matter much, since they were rubbish.

He ducked them in two minutes flat, and while it probably wouldn't have caused any issue to just say he was there, some old habits died hard. The rise of irritation at needing to knock didn't help either; he hadn't exactly been making social calls in a long time, but despite what people often said, he had some manners. Not a lot, but some.

There was a lot of noise from inside the place, and he recognised the smushed up face of Ron and Ginny trying to fit against the same window. The door opened to reveal Harry, who was in the process of being told that they were supposed to use passcodes mockingly. Despite the obvious humour, it was moments like this that reminded him the war was back in full swing, and his own still slight giddiness was misplaced. He had to get his head back on straight.

"We haven't set anything up yet," Sirius said, looking Harry over. He seemed in better spirits. The
results must've gone decently. “But there's not animagi about, so I think I've got a good tell. Alright, Harry?”

Harry nodded, and Sirius spotted a familiar cat on the side. Hermione must've come as well. No wonder he seemed happier if they were both here. “Everything go okay?”

“Yes,” Sirius said, with a nod. It'd only been a couple of days, but it had felt so removed from the sudden chill that seemed to permeate the air everywhere he went. Even for English weather, it was out of place. He suppressed a thought about dementor breeding in favour petting the cat.

Molly came into the kitchen, and startled suddenly. “Sirius!”

Sirius looked down at himself, and as if it was were a conclusion to come to, “I think so.”

Molly clearly wasn't listening. “When did you get here?”

“Just now.” Sirius shrugged. “Got back last night, but didn't want to disturb you that late.”

“I didn't hear the patrol,” Molly replied.

“Went around them,” Sirius said, “They're rubbish.”

Harry snorted. Clearly, he'd had the same thought. Sirius caught his eye, and winked, causing a full-blown smile.

“They're stretched very thin these days,” Molly said, the crinkle in her face conveying a great deal of concern. “But obviously, they want to keep an eye on Harry.”

From the looks of it, Harry was about as thrilled about that as Sirius was. Nevermind all that. He'd already decided he wanted to go up to the coast, where it was probably a little warmer, a little sparser, and a little less dangerous. It wouldn't hurt to get Buckbeak out as well. It was all going to be a bit of a balancing act. They could easily duck between here and Grimmauld Place without being seen, and there was always Tonks if they ran into trouble.

“It's because the battle at the Department of Mysteries was leaked to the press,” Hermione said, head appearing around the corner. He was surprised to see her a bit beaten up. Maybe they'd been playing Quidditch out the back. The broom closet had been lying open when he'd arrived. Crookshanks hopped off the side to go and join her.

Sirius frowned. “What kind of leak?”

“That there's Ministry property missing,” Hermione replied. She looked extremely shifty saying it, which probably meant this was something between them that he didn't know. Or it was something she didn't want to say in front of Molly.

Filing it away to ask later, Sirius changed the subject. “Any sign of your OWL results?”

Hermione nodded, but she looked a little disappointed. Ron was rolling his eyes at her. “She got one E, and she's annoyed about it.”

A little reminded of the fact he'd had a similar reaction with his own, Sirius decided not to comment on it. “How'd you fare?”

“I only failed History of Magic and Divination,” Harry said, though he also seemed a little deflated about it. Considering Harry was the subject of a prophecy and was undergoing a mental battle with
Voldemort, he thought only two wasn't too bad at all. Harry must've picked up on the look he was giving him, though. “Snape won't take anyone who got below an O, and – I need the NEWT to apply for the Auror programme.”

Something clicked in Sirius's head, and he had to give it to Dumbledore, he was clever. “Snape's not taking Potions this year.”

There was a collective 'what' going around the room, with only Molly seeming unaffected by the news.

“Is he leaving?” Ron asked, clearly hopeful at the prospect. Sirius almost didn't want to tell them. It probably would have made an excellent early birthday present for Harry.

“No such luck,” he said, catching Molly's glare with a pronounced shrug. “He's doing Defense.”

“No!” Harry exclaimed, much more dramatically than he would have expected. Sirius tried to bite back a laugh at it. “I went with Dumbledore to meet the new Defense professor.”

“Slughorn teaches Potions, dear.” Molly piped up from her baking. “Not Defense.”

“Slughorn?” Sirius had to admit being blindsided by that one. He'd nothing much against him, a bit doddering, but he'd known him from childhood. He'd gone to school with his grandfather and his siblings; he'd been Head of House for his parents and great aunts, even Andromeda had been fond of him. The biggest tell he supposed was still Lily. Suddenly, he knew why Harry was uniquely qualified to go with Dumbledore – Slughorn had liked Lily, and Harry was definitely Lily's son. “That's what Dumbledore wanted.”

Harry nodded.

“You might like him,” Sirius shrugged. He'd definitely like him more then Snape. “Your mother did.”

“He said he liked her,” Harry said. Definitely why Dumbledore wanted him along. “Did you?”

“He's alright,” Sirius said, because middle of the road was a good way to put it with him. “Slughorn's always been about influence, likes to know he has people he can call on if he runs into trouble, so he goes out of his way to be nice about it. All a bit fake for me, though he always had a decent sense of humour. Never seemed too upset if he ended up pulling a few stunts in his classes.”

“He likes his favourites,” Molly agreed, from the table.

“He does,” Sirius agreed.

“Maybe you'd like to show Sirius your results, Harry,” Hermione said, in a pointed manner. “They're upstairs in Fred and George's room.”

Harry looked fit to ask her what she was talking about, but seemed to catch on quickly enough that she was giving him an out to speak in private. “Oh, er, yeah.”

Subtle as a blasting curse to the chest. Sometimes, Harry was so painfully like his father that it was a little difficult to breathe. “Lead on, then.”

Hermione called after them. “Don't touch the scopes!”

The house was the epitome of higgledy-piggledy, so he guessed it made sense that there was no
rhyme or reason to where everyone ended up situated. The orange room was at the top of the
house, with more Chudley Cannons merchandise than you could probably have bought at one of
their games.

Harry'd barely shut the door before he seemed ready to overflow. “Dumbledore's going to give me
lessons.”

“Good,” Sirius replied. Dumbledore should have been doing it last year, instead of relying on
Snape. This was the kind of mess you got into, relying on that prick.

“It's just I-” Harry stopped himself, and obviously became a little uncomfortable. “It's starting to
seem real, this idea that I have to do it for him to die.”

A frightening idea even if he wasn't a fifteen-year-old kid. Almost sixteen. Damn, but he was
going so tall now. He seemed to grow every time Sirius looked away. “It'll be alright,” he
promised, willing it to be true. “You've got a lot of help, and you have time. “

“While people are getting hurt,” Harry said, frustrated.

“Which is Voldemort's fault, not yours.” Sirius put his foot down about that. He couldn't carry the
weight of what was going to happen next. “Go back to school. Learn everything you can. Trust the
rest of us to do our parts. Besides, don't you have your own group to lead?”

Harry shifted about a bit. “There's no point now that Umbridge is gone, is there?”

Sirius smirked. “You've got Snape for Defense, and you want to get into the Aurors. You'll need all
the practice you can get.”

Harry looked appropriately horrified at the idea. “I might not get the marks.”

“How'd you do on Defense?” Sirius asked.

“I got an O,” Harry said, bashfully.

Sirius had to laugh at him. “That'll be good enough for the Ministry. Half of them are useless
anyway.”

“I know,” Harry said. “And I know it's weird, seeing that it was Death Eater that put the thought in
my head, but ever since Moody – Crouch – said it, I just can't get it out of my head.”

“That's good.” Sirius had to smile at that. “The Ministry could use more of that. It could use more
good people in general.”

Harry seemed happy enough with that.

“How's your weekend been?” Sirius asked, with a shift in the subject.

“We've been playing Quidditch,” Harry said. “Hermione's terrible, but Ron and Ginny are good.”

“That's good.” Sirius had to smile at that. “The Ministry could use more of that. It could use more
good people in general.”

Harry seemed happy enough with that.

“How's your weekend been?” Sirius asked, with a shift in the subject.

“We've been playing Quidditch,” Harry said. “Hermione's terrible, but Ron and Ginny are good.”

“Get over his nerves, did he?” Sirius asked.

“You heard about that?” Harry asked.

“It was a very long two weeks,” Sirius said, shudderingly remembering being confined to the
hospital room. People tended to talk about anything and everything, but the same walls had begun
to get to him easily. Suddenly, he felt the desire to be outside again, but he pushed it down. “You
want to stay here for a bit, or come back to HQ?"

There was almost a guilt in Harry's voice when he spoke, as if wanting to be with your friends was something awful. "Er, just if you don't mind, I'd like to stay for a bit longer."

Despite the desire to see more of him, Sirius related to it. He wasn't about to turn into his own parents and forbid him to be with his friends. "Nah, it's fine," Sirius said. "It's Regulus's birthday next week, so we're thinking of going up to the beach. Well, probably not the old place, but somewhere near it. He can go up there if he wants; he's gotten sentimental in his old age. I just thought it might be fun to go up and stay in one of the cottages by the sea."

"It sounds fun," Harry said.

Sirius realised his mistake almost at once. "I'm saying I'd like you to come up with me. I was thinking it might be safer for Buckbeak to stretch his wings up there, and there's some good stuff down at the harbour."

"Really?" Harry asked.

"If you're up for it," Sirius said. "It's a weird old place, where my Great Aunt used to live. She was batty, but harmless. More cats than sense. Still, a bit of sea air sounds pretty good. It might be a bit warmer up there. Go up for Reg's, stay 'til yours."

Harry, however, still looked hesitant. Sirius wasn't sure if it was because he didn't feel welcome, or if he was worried about his friends not being around on his birthday. That was an easy fix. "Ron and Hermione can come up as well, if Molly's alright with it. Iago – bit of a hot spot for the pureblood snobbery – that's right up the road, so it's a safer place than most at the minute. Remus should be back by then, too."

"Is Regulus going to be okay with it?" Harry said. "It is his birthday."

Sirius waved it off. "Of course he will. He loves having family birthdays, and I think he's missed them."

Harry was quiet for a moment, but smiled. "What about the Ministry?" he asked.

Sirius made a disparaging noise. "They're not invited."
A different sort of tension had settled in Regulus’s bones in the days following his horcrux-revealing conversation with Emmeline, mind reeling taut and swift as they fell back into routine. Sirius had returned in a reasonable amount of time, though without Harry, against Regulus’s expectations; instead, Sirius mentioned that Harry would still be coming along with them to Iago, which was even less expected, though not in itself unwelcome. Hermione and Ron had been invited, too, to which Regulus had raised a questioning eyebrow - a muggleborn and a Weasley roaming the purist-occupied shores of Porth Iago alongside Harry Potter seemed like a comically terrible idea - but his brother had assured that they would be staying at the harbour, for the most part, and Regulus could not argue against the fact that letting Harry have his friends around for the birthday trip was the more thoughtful thing to do.

(Perhaps more rebelliously to the point, if they were going to cause a scandalous ruckus, one could argue there was no need to do it half-way when they could go all-out.)

With some level of uncertainty, he had invited Emmeline to come along, to which she had teasingly reminded that she had work and could not very well lounge about on the beach for several weeks. The sting might have shown a bit on his face because she went on to insist she would not miss his birthday, regardless, though the back-and-forth jolting occurring in his chest made it harder to determine if that jolting was showing up in his expression or if she would have said the same, regardless of his own internal state, with all its masking.

Since returning from France, Regulus felt as though he was treading lightly with each step, tiptoeing across a floor of glass shards, yet nothing had actually changed in the past week. Emmeline did not seem to be acting differently in any discernible way, but if he let himself think about it, every word ended up filtered through his brother’s assessment of the situation, and Regulus could not even say for sure if Sirius was right. Perhaps she did not even feel any special way about him, and Sirius had assumed drama into the situation; or perhaps she did, and there was something more to the teasing and the smiles and their shared extensions of trust, but any time Regulus let himself think about it, he felt his stomach drop out, like missing the last step on a staircase on a far too regular basis.

The horcruxes filled his mind with a much-needed distraction, yet even as he distanced his thoughts, the proximity remained - and in that proximity, he nonetheless found himself wondering, if only for a fleeting moment, if he had spoken more than he ought to, or if the Order could truly care for his plight past the tolerance of his presence when the tolls on his own friends and family were often viewed as ‘deserved,’ from the sound of it. They could not truly understand him, nor could he say much to help them understand when the nightmares that gutted him were similar to the nightmares that haunted his new allies - but from the perpetrating side of the event. In the calm of solitude, he knew he could not ask them to feel sorry for him because of his guilt, nor could they possibly comprehend the way he had felt sick from the pressure around him at the time - but unfair though it was, he wished that he could ask it, that he could explain that experience, that he had lost people he still ached to see again. His own experience was as out of reach for them as their experience was to him, and even as the war drummed up within the Order again, he knew he had missed the worst of the final stretch, last time.

Emmeline had claimed there were at least a few who sympathised, and they had permitted his joining in light of his efforts and contributions - the truth of which was a greater comfort than he could possibly verbalise aloud - but for those who were implied to maintain their negative feelings (Auror Alastor Moody among them, if he had to guess), it was not a personality conflict that would
come back to bite him. Regulus could not even recall referring to the Death Eaters as ‘us’ or ‘we,’ except perhaps in the context of the past - an appropriate reference, given that he was, at the time - but he could not guarantee that he had never slipped. For all his dedication to his horcrux-destroying cause, somehow the perceptions had gone askew, and he did not know how to combat it when both she and Sirius had expressed such similar concerns. Did they intend for him to cut out everyone in his family except for Sirius and Andromeda and Tonks? Most likely, they did want just that, but following that trail of thought only made him more frustrated and did little in the way of convincing him that he ought to do so. Did they want him to candidly chatter about a newfound love for muggles? He admitted that it had not been so terrible to open himself to the idea of investigating them in some contexts, and he did not harbour negative feelings towards the group of them, but he felt his insides constrict at the mere thought of freely going about chattering about muggles. (About anything, really, but especially muggles.) The reaction was hard to pin down, fuzzy as it was, and he could not say for sure whether it was the feeling of invisible eyes upon him, or merely the knowledge that opening that door invited people to talk to him extensively about it, pinning him to a wall for examination. He did not know what to say at the best of times - could not pull apart the finer details, even when he was quiet and still and alone.

Uncomfortable though it was, he knew Emmeline was right about the Aurors. Dumbledore might be on his side, but especially if the Death Eaters sought to drag him down, he oughtn’t give the Aurors any reason to think it safer to listen to Death Eater accusations than Dumbledore’s reassurances. After the previous year and the newness of the current Minister, nothing was a guarantee. Sirius was free - but Sirius was innocent.

It was high time that he spoke with Dumbledore about his case and about the horcruxes, alike, and his mind had been buzzing with Emmeline’s plan to examine the prophecy in the safety of Hogwarts itself. (And inconsequential though it was, he had to admit a further measure of curiosity about the Ravenclaw Tower, however fond he might be of his own schoolage common room.)

Though Regulus could not wrangle the headmaster for a chat prior to their departure, he supposed there was nothing stopping him from trying again from Iago. There were goals to accomplish - relationships to mend, dissent to foster, messages to send - but his social calendar was unlikely to be full, even with Sirius and the kids along for the ride, allowing time to arrange something preliminary, at the least.

Limited time, but time, nonetheless.

The drawing room was quiet as Regulus plucked a book from the shelf, flipping through it to decide if it was worth bringing along to Iago, despite all the books that resided permanently in the summer home. He was already packed for their departure the following morning, but he had intended to brush up on occlumency knowledge again, and a holiday seemed as good a time as any for more reading. Turning his glance slightly, he could see Kreacher tending affectionately to the tapestry of their family tree, and Regulus flicked a small smile on his face, however looming it all felt on some days. How long it had been, since last there had been any semblance of a family gathering...

As if noticing the shift in attention, Kreacher turned to look back. “Does Master Regulus require anything of Kreacher?”

“No,” Regulus responded, shaking his head. “I was just thinking that it will be nice it will be to visit Iago again, after so long,” he said. It was not entirely reasonable to assume it would be nice when the ordeal could easily wind up devastating - or dangerous - with such close proximity to the hotbed of purist summer culture, but it was a rare opportunity to arrange interaction in an
environment he was not tied to, and though it was probably foolish, he could not help the trickle of
nostalgia. “Did...Mum take you at all, in the last few years?” (Before she passed - it was implied,
but the shared flicker of upset between man and elf required no explicit mention.)

“Mistress did not travel, after Master Regulus left,” Kreacher said a little miserably, but Regulus
cut back in before Kreacher could dwell more on the thought.

“You did well, caring for her,” he said reassuringly, “as you always do. I expect it has been a long
time since you have been to the summer home, too. Perhaps as long as it has been for me.”
Catching a familiar form passing outside the doorway (fresh from work, no doubt), he paused the
thought and shifted to a more calling tone as he said instead, “Welcome back.”

Regulus noticed Kreacher making a little face when Emmeline paused in the doorway to stick her
head in, but when Kreacher went back to tending the tapestry without further disturbance, Regulus
said nothing of it.

"I wasn't sure if you'd be taking an early night," Emmeline said. before giving the room a quick
glance. "I'm never as quiet as I think I'm being."

“You were quiet enough. I just noticed the movement,” he assured, turning his frame toward the
door.

Emmeline nodded, accepting that. She hesitated upon coming into the room. "Did you spend the
day packing, or did you go out?” she asked.

“For the most part, I was already packed. Merely a few last minute considerations,” he said, though
‘last minute’ took a very different meaning for him compared to his brother, who interpreting it (or
rather {exuded} it) rather more literally.

"It's getting messy out there,” Emmeline said, deciding eventually to come into the drawing room
with a heavy sigh. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

“I don’t know that ‘sure’ is the right word for it, all things considered,” he said dryly with a small
lift of his mouth. “It’s a bit unpredictable at the moment, but I’m considering my contingencies.”

"You will keep your wits about you,” Emmeline said. It sounded a little more like a statement than
a request, despite the tone. "Diagon Alley had a visit of the masked variety this afternoon, and
there's been an uptick in creatures attacks. They're becoming bolder, now hiding is no longer an
option."

“Hm.” It was a quiet, huff of a sound, and Regulus shook his head. “Was it an attack or a threat?”

"I'm not sure what it was,” Emmeline frowned, and crossed her arms. "Ollivander got dragged out
of his shop, and they haven't been able to find him. But given wands are a valuable resource,
especially those not traceable to a specific person, perhaps it was a restocking issue."

“Perhaps so,” Regulus responded thoughtfully, thinking for a moment back to his own wand - or
rather, wands. He had purchased a second as a teenager, having reasoned among friends that it
would help, should their primary wands ever be tested by a reverse spell to move backwards
through previous castings. It had felt quite safe and clever in the moment, though looking back, it
would not have spared him for an instant if their Death Eater wands were compromised,
considering Ollivander had an exceptionally alarming accuracy in reciting the owner of any wand
he ever sold - or at least such was the rumour, and the old mand had performed well enough on
that day. If the Aurors had gotten hold of his wand and simply asked for an ID from Ollivander, he
would have been as good as caught, regardless of which wand it was. He could have claimed it was stolen, but that may not have been excuse enough, given the climate.

Shaking off the thought, Regulus let loose another soft huff. “He’s a valuable resource, you are quite right about that. Furthermore, abducting him makes him unavailable to others, whether it is acquiring new wands, or even identifying owners, should any fall into law enforcement’s hands. Dragging him out in broad daylight…” Regulus crinkled his nose. “...No subtlety at all.”

"Yes, it sounds rather dramatic," Emmeline mused, before biting her lip. "Perhaps it was someone you're related to."

Regulus made a little snuffing sound. “Perhaps. Bellatrix does have a bit of a flair about her, though I doubt she would be keen to share the details of her victories, these days, and it doesn’t seem like her style.”

"It's less likely to be an abduction pure and simple if Bellatrix Lestrange is involved," Emmeline said, though she didn't loosen any of the tension. "Though I've always wondered. Do those masks come pre-designed, or are they something people design themselves?"

Crinkled his nose, Regulus’s mind flashed briefly with a bone-white mask, fitted against his face like an outward skull. “They’re initially plain. Generally, people design for themselves.”

Emmeline stared at him in silence for a moment. "So there's Death Eater arts and crafts."

“Well, it sounds silly when you put it that way,” Regulus responded dryly.

"Because it is silly," Emmeline insisted. "I now have to deal with the image of several people on wanted posters gathering around the crafts table with designs and deciding who gets a dragon, because not everyone can have a dragon, just because they're cool looking."

He rolled his eyes, but for all the irreverence of it, felt his mood lighten slightly. “To be able to deny it would be more dignified, but that was more or less the spirit of it.” His mouth tugged a bit humourlessly as he shook his head with a sigh.

“I'm almost jealous,” Emmeline teased. “We don't have an arts and crafts meetup. I suppose if I ask what you chose, it would be uncomfortable?"

Without warning, Regulus felt his heart hammer against his chest, as if yanked repeatedly by some invisible string, and he fought the urge to look upward towards his room. In the past year, he had forgotten about his mask, hidden as it was, though that was another piece of incriminating evidence he ought to eliminate.

“It would be, yes. A bit,” he answered, meeting her eyes - she appeared subtly playful, despite the subject matter - but the memory of the mask’s defining feature made him a little sick to his stomach. Forcibly lightening his tone to match, he added, “It was nothing as dramatic as a dragon, I’m afraid. Missed opportunities.”

“I suppose with that lot, snakes would be a more popular choice anyway,” Emmeline nodded, without pressing the issue. “Besides, if I looked like some of them, I'd wear a mask too. You have nothing to worry about there.”

Though it was probably rude to some of his former comrades, he granted a small huff of amusement, a little more pleased than uncertain, however judgemental the tapestry felt from across the room at the obvious compliment.
“You are too kind,” Regulus said with his eyes catching her face, ash and embers extinguishing in favour of a warm, if small, smile. By that criteria, he privately thought she would not need a mask either, though he could not wrangle the remark past his lips. Instead, he added, “I would not go as far as to say I miss the mask, but I must admit it is very annoying to be on this side of it.”

“We're more prone to glamours,” Emmeline replied. “Or polyjuice, but that was when we had Lily. Having your master potioneer playing both sides is difficult. When we can't use plausible deniability, we still glamour. I have heard from a reliable source you do much the same, but that blonde doesn't suit you.”

Mouth still slanted, Regulus shook his head. “I'm not surprised that you have. Perhaps I possess the wrong complexion for it.”

"Does being recognised bother you?” Emmeline asked.

“When others might want to kill or arrest me, then yes, it bothers me quite a lot,” he quipped, “but generally speaking, no.”

Emmeline snorted. "Those are reasonable exceptions. I just wasn't sure if, when, or if, we decide to go and do something, it's something I should consider.”

He shook his head again, mouth tugging up a little at the fluster. “No need to worry yourself about it. Unless the outing is illegal - which I suppose is not out of the realm of possibility - disguise should be unnecessary.”

"Nothing illegal as yet," Emmeline shook her head. "But you are awful to buy for."

“Your presence is gift enough,” he reassured, though it sounded a little more embarrassing out loud than it had within his head. Without missing a beat, he added, “Which is to say you needn't worry too much about it, should a decision prove troublesome.”

"You want me to show up at a birthday for a friend without a gift?" Emmeline gave him a look of abject horror. "That is not the way I was raised. I will find you something thoughtful that you like, and that's going to be the end of it.”

“Your manners are impeccable,” he remarked with a little tilt of amusement.

"You're not so bad yourself," Emmeline replied, with a smile. "I'll just have to be creative. Not all of us did arts and crafts as part of our illegal experiences."

“I will make a point to judge your creativity fairly, bearing in mind your lack of experience in illegal arts and crafts,” came the teasing jest, for all the matter-of-factness in his tone.

"You're ridiculous.” Emmeline rolled her eyes. "Go back to picking out even more books to lug up to Wales. I'm going to go find my comfy slippers."

“These particular books aren't there,” he argued with a lofty tone, though the hint of a smile maintained even as she was moving toward the door again. When Regulus shifted his posture and caught a glance of the other side of the room, it looked for a moment like Kreacher might be scowling at the back of Emmeline's head, though it was hard to say with the way the elf was turning back to the tapestry. Their family tree did not look as though it needed more care than usual, but it was not something he would argue - after all, that was not to say it didn't need care at all.

Brushing it off (a scowl was still an improvement over the mutters of the previous year), Regulus
Back when first discussing Harry's experiences with a pensieve, Regulus had noted the private nature of wandering around someone else's memories. Sirius had brushed him off at the time, but the sight of Porth Iago was almost enough to change his mind. There was an uncomfortable feeling that pulled at him, made him shy away from staring at the houses, the businesses, and the coastline of the small wizarding holiday settlement where he'd spent most of his childhood summers. It felt as if he was disturbing something. Did it count if the memory you felt as if you were intruding upon was your own?

It seemed ridiculous to feel shy in the face of it. Sirius wasn't shy in face of anything. He'd been accused of having no shame more than once, no respect for boundaries more times than he could count, and he faced everything head on. Yet there was something here that he didn't like at all. It wasn't Grimmauld Place, but something had shifted in his perception of the place in the time since it'd become HQ. It had shifted even more now that there just always seemed to be someone around, people popping in not just to see him, but occasionally Regulus – would wonders never cease – and Emmeline, as their temporary house guest. Now, there was Harry, and no doubt after he got back, Remus was well. There was something about the full house that made the ghosts easier to quieten, and the contrast in the people – a half-blood, a blood traitor, an ex-Death Eater, Harry (who had his own category), and a werewolf couldn't be further from the house’s intended usage. It would have driven his mother to fury, and even now, Sirius took some small satisfaction in that.

Still, the smaller holiday home – more of a cottage, really – brought with it a feeling of dread Sirius hadn't banked on. He hadn't seen this place since he was sixteen, and though it didn't look in as bad a shape as Grimmauld Place, it was obvious it'd been at least a few years since it'd been used. Narcissa would use the Malfoy home, wouldn't she? The garden was overgrown, but nothing was smashed up. The wards likely held.

Unbidden, the thought that it was a hell of a jump from the upstairs front window, and that it was surprising Sirius hadn't broken something when he'd decided to jump out of it. He gave himself a sharp mental reminder that this wasn't for him. He wasn't dragging himself into a pureblood elit cesspit for fun, nor was he eager to relive the last moments he'd spent on the tapestry two decades later. This was for Regulus, and it would probably make him stupidly happy to have another birthday here after a long time without one. He really was ridiculously sentimental about the stupidest things.

It's not as if Sirius himself could talk; this had been his idea. Though things had improved to a shocking degree between his brother and himself, there was always room for things to fracture. The last big argument, and the subsequent dancing about it, had shown Regulus didn't really feel as if he was a priority for anyone. He always came behind someone. Sirius wanted to give him this one, sentimental moment in a place he supposed they'd been happy once or twice as children to show he did put him first sometimes. Not always, because he had a godson, and kids always came first, but as much as he could. This was where it'd all gotten fucked up for the final time before he'd left, right before Regulus's birthday. He owed him one. If nothing else, he'd learned there wasn't always time to make it up to someone later before they weren't there at all.

Still, it felt no less spooky to open the door and be confronted by the same hallway that never seemed to get enough light. It'd feel less spooky on the beach, or in the town, or in the harbour. Or maybe it wouldn't. The family ghosts felt stronger here. It had been just their parents and Regulus in the house, save for special occasions. Summers like this, sometimes more than one generation or more than one branch would all stay in the place together. People who'd married into their own families and different names didn't usually, but there were still things here that reminded him more
of them than names on a tapestry ever would. The last time he'd seen his uncle on the pebble beach only twenty minutes walk from here; the large comfortable chairs which always seemed to incite some kind of chair war between the academics over who managed to get the really good ones for their reading time and who'd be relegated to going elsewhere; he wouldn't have been surprised to see cat toys or old perfume bottles that most definitely did not belong to their mother. Family condensed into a living, breathing presence and bric-a-brac. It wasn't nostalgia, not exactly. He couldn't definitively say he missed them; he refused to romanticise the memory of them as Regulus tended to do.

There remained a feeling of the absence of something. Merlin knew what.

At least there was no shrieking portrait here. It could almost be mistaken for peaceful. Sirius really hoped Regulus knew what the hell he was doing. Maybe he could put all of the strange feelings down to the fact it was stupidly early in morning, and he was too damn old to be functioning on that little sleep.

“I always get surprised when nothing attacks me when I go through the door,” Sirius admitted, once they'd safely gotten into the hallway.

He'd lit up the lamps to get a bit more light in there and tried to remember there was going to have to be a birthday party type thing in a few days, so it wouldn't stay as obnoxiously quiet as it seemed. Regulus was an introvert, and at his heart, a snob. Being around a cultural centre and plenty of nooks and crannies to situate himself with a book would probably be the easiest way to make him happy until then. He imagined ambushing Narcissa was high on his to do list as well. As for Sirius, he needed to brush up on spellwork, might actually get to play about with that since there was room here (dependent upon twisting Regulus’s arm to join him), and if he had time, get some sun. He refused to end up with a Snape-like palor for the rest of his life.

“The doors don’t seem to hold the same grudges that some among the living do,” Regulus remarked as Kreacher offered to take his bag, though his eyes were still tracing the walls.

"Plenty of time to piss off the living yet," Sirius commented. It wasn't that he was out to make trouble, but trouble did have a tendency to find him regardless. "What level of 'this feels weird' are you at?"

“Using what scale?” Regulus asked as he picked up a framed photograph of their Aunt Lucretia and Uncle Ignatius, examining it for only a few seconds before putting it down again.

Sirius shot him a look of disdain. "You're obnoxious in the mornings."

“You’re grumpy in the mornings,” Regulus countered and shot him a sideways glance, lifting an eyebrow.

Something everyone who'd ever met him knew at this point, but Sirius also imagined anyone who'd spent enough time around Regulus knew he could be an obnoxious, pedantic brat given half the opportunity. "Wonder who the last one up here was," he said, instead of giving him a response. He nodded towards the photo. "Maybe them."

“Possibly. The house is actually in better shape than I expected it to be,” Regulus admitted as he peeked his head into the living room.

"Most people were still kicking about until four, five years ago," Sirius reasoned, looking about a little more. "It was never anyone's home; people come and go as they please. When was the last time you were here?"
“’78,” he responded, looking for a moment as if he was going to add something to the statement but let the thought trail off.

“Weren’t you busy being a Death Eater that summer?” Sirius asked.

“I was,” Regulus admitted uncomfortably with a crinkled nose, “comparatively speaking. As were quite a few other people holidaying here, Bella included.”

A fresh wave of anger rolled through Sirius at the thought of it, at Bellatrix, at their parents, at anyone to stop a bunch of holidaying kids from throwing their lives away. Some were always meant to be lost causes, it wouldn't have mattered what anyone said, but that wasn't true here. It just showed how proud they were of having another Death Eater in the family. He had no idea how to articulate any of it to Regulus without losing his temper, and while he blamed him a little, most of his anger was still directed at the people who should have stepped in and stopped him. Fifteen-year-olds do stupid things. He knew that better than most. Regulus didn't deserve it slung at him, especially at this particular moment.

“What’d you do for the grand occasion of your birth that year?” Sirius said, hoping nothing Death Eater related.

Regulus started to walk into the parlour, paused, and leaned back against the wall, just next to the doorframe. “On the day itself, there was a standard gathering, but with a grander air. It was my seventeenth, after all.”

Watching him go from place to place, looking and refamiliarising himself with it stung more than Sirius thought it would. It was no secret Regulus missed them, probably all of them in different ways, and because of that, it probably didn't feel strange to him. It probably felt almost like something good. Sirius would never understand that.

“You get the watch?” he asked.

Regulus nodded soberly. “It was a very eventful summer, to say the least. In both good ways and bad,” he said, mouth thinning to a line.

It didn't sound that eventful. “How eventful?”

Shaking his head, Regulus straightened off of the wall again and slipped into the parlour properly this time. “I just mean that it was a meaningful birthday year, especially in respect to Dad’s watch, and a very stressful summer.” He glanced back. “I can't imagine you really need too much elaboration on the latter.”

“Just wondering if you'd suddenly started having eventful parties. I can't think of a single one.” Sirius shrugged off the implication. He'd missed another moment his brother had found important. “I don't think there's anything going to bite you in the parlour. I'll do a boggart sweep in a minute.”

“I'm loosely defining ‘eventful,’” Regulus admitted with a nod, eying the room for a paused moment. “To address your earlier question, this does feel a bit strange, yes.”

"You've never been loose a day in your life,” Sirius snorted. It did feel as if you could open any door, and still find someone long dead sitting within it. Maybe that explained some of his unsteadiness; the expectation was still there. "Nothing will have changed. I don't think anything's changed in this place in the last century.”

“I don't know about that. I think this photograph might have been on the table by the far bookcase,” Regulus said with slight wave of the hand over the nearest table, which was - as
expected - covered with frames and knickknacks, though a tiny smile had started to rise.

Sirius glared at him. "Oh, no. The blasphemy." He glanced down at the photograph. "Maybe they moved it because his nephews got outed as Order members."

“Perhaps - yet if that's the worst that happened, he got off lucky,” Regulus remarked with a thoughtful tip of the head, looking at the photograph of Ignatius and Lucretia again, though he did not pick it up. “At least the photograph is still here.”

"Or Grandfather tried to trash it, and Cass just kept putting it back." Sirius shrugged. Another thing about the shared space was you got to see that regardless of age, siblings still tended to act like brats around each other. Looking at Regulus, he could surmise this was a family tradition they were still upholding.

“Valid point,” Regulus granted, “That is very much a possibility.”

It had seemed out of place to actually consider most of them (with the exception of their Aunt Cassiopeia, who had always been deemed a few dates short of a fruitcake) never spoke ill of each other where they could hear it. Still, in retrospect, he could remember enough bratty comments to realise that they were definitely bickering. It was odd, because there was really only a handful of people in the world left that would know why it was not only plausible but funny that their grandfather and his sister would have a passive-aggressive argument by moving about holiday home furniture without ever really saying a word to each other.

Still, it was difficult to tell if the hesitation was brought on by bad memories, good memories, being nostalgic, or being upset. Regulus was not the easiest person to read. "We don't have to stay here if you don't want to," Sirius offered.

“I want to,” Regulus responded without hesitation, eying the soft-stuffed chairs situated between a bookcase and a longer table. “It's complicated, but I doubt this house is going to be the most complicated issue to address here.” He shot a sideways glance back to Sirius.

"I don't think anyone's going to argue with you if you want to nick the good chairs," Sirius said, in a loud whisper. He was really hoping sooner rather than later, it would sink in that he didn't have to seek permission to do things in his own home.

“I know,” Regulus said, shaking his head with a wry smile, “Competition has lessened significantly.”

A thought struck with Sirius. They didn't come back up here in '79. Or, if they had, it'd been their mother and maybe her parents and/or his father's parents alone. The first year without their father might also have been the first without Regulus. "You didn't come back here," he said, quietly. "After Dad."

Regulus shook his head, releasing a heavy sigh. “I didn't, no.”

"That feels weird," Sirius shrugged. "I don't know why. I sure as hell haven't been here since ‘77."

“It feels weird to me too,” Regulus admitted. “The year I left, I considered coming here briefly during the offseason, when no one was likely to be around, but I didn't end up staying in Britain long enough.”

Curious, Sirius asked. "Where did you end up going?"

“Before France?” Regulus clarified, though he did not pause before continuing, “I property-hopped
for a little while - mostly the house where Great Aunt Lycoris used to live because no one had been there in a long time... but I did not stay still for long and warded heavily, considering it would be a logical place if anyone started looking.”

"Smart," Sirius said, trying to push past the flare up of irritation that tended to flare up every time he realised he wasn't considered a safe bet. Even if he knew logically, it was probably true. "There's a stupid amount of places."

“There are. I kept expecting someone to jump out and murder me, no matter how many wards I put up,” Regulus responded, still milling around. “Part of me didn't want to leave, but in truth, it was a bit of a relief at the time, getting that distance.”

"The push and pull." Sirius shrugged. He couldn't argue that. No matter what, it always came down to a seventeen-year-old, literally days out of Hogwarts, running scared. If the choice was to throw himself into becoming the kind of monster that others became by slaughtering over and over, and getting away from it all, it didn't seem like the easier option. In very few circumstances did Sirius advocate running, but he'd done it once. He didn't begrudge it. "I understand it. I don't think anyone is about to jump out and murder you here, but you never know. I wouldn’t be concerned. They've wanted me dead longer, and I'm still here."

“Stubbornly so,” Regulus said with a little quirk of the mouth. “Your ongoing ability to provoke and avoid the typical consequences is really quite commendable.”

"I'd put part of it down to the dibs." Sirius liked to think skill was also a part of it, since it meant getting past McGonagall as well, but he couldn't deny it helped. "Even if someone isn't afraid to draw the ire of Bellatrix, a decent amount really don't like spilling pure blood, and they hold back. Unless you're expecting Bella to bolt out of the bathroom cupboard or something, I think you're fine."

“That would be deeply unsettling, to say the least,” Regulus said, pressing his mouth into a half-smile. “I want to be prepared for the possibility that it might go poorly, but given the circumstances, I don't expect the experience to be terribly dangerous, either. Most of the people present this summer are likely to be family and friends, rather than Death Eaters themselves, and I don't think Cissa herself will angle to put me in harm's way.”

"Narcissa should have other things on her mind," Sirius agreed. The fact her son had followed in his father's footsteps being one of the bigger problems she was about to be facing. "But you'd better talk to her before we cross paths. I don't think she'll be in the mood to after."

“I intend to,” Regulus said with a nod. “It's a delicate argument, and I want to approach it with care. You do tend to escalate each other - which applies to interactions with all of them, really.”

"I don't think any amount of care will stop the escalation," Sirius said. It was true - if Regulus's own presence wasn't enough to make waves, his own would. Harry's definitely would. However, Regulus would like to play happy families, and if he was obstinate enough to try, Sirius wasn't about to hold him back when it was just Narcissa. "But I can be civil if you can pull off a miracle. I just don't usually choose to be."

“I know civility can be difficult in those situations - and not just for you... Perhaps it will all blow up spectacularly in my face, but I cannot bring myself to let it lie without trying.” A little smile grew on Regulus’s mouth, subtle at the corners. “I appreciate the hypothetical effort on your part.”

Civility was not the problem. The problem was the innate ability to turn the wrong tone on a single word, or even a look at the wrong moment into a perceived slight, so you could screw up and derail
any attempt almost immediately. It was a lesson that wouldn't be learned through talking about it. The possibility that Narcissa had managed to be taken in enough that she rejected him out of irritation was unlikely if she hadn't done it right off the bat, but he wasn't going to discount whatever Bellatrix decided to say to her little sister. Narcissa was the compromise, and Regulus knew it. Sirius would never accept Bellatrix as family ever again; she was too far gone, and everyone who thought otherwise was kidding themselves. She made her choices, and clearly doesn't regret them. They could only respond in kind.

"I don't want you to appreciate the effort," Sirius said, his expression pinched. "It's all difficult, and I sure as hell wouldn't make the offer for anyone else. I wouldn't come here for anyone else, not anymore. But I'm not about to let you try this without back up, and I owe you a half-decent birthday or two, and this place used to make you happy. If only for your sake, I want this to work." Setting one sister against another wasn't going to be an easy task, and that was (whether he realised it or not) what Regulus was about to do. But Narcissa, regardless of anything else, had clout. Getting her to budge even an inch would have a shockwave, and anything that disrupted the pureblood and Death Eater status quo would only help. "I'm not about to let me running my mouth fuck it up."

"I intend to make this attempt count," Regulus said, watching Sirius's face with an earnest expression - then in a lilting, prodding tone, he added, “but if you insist, will try not to visibly appreciate your support, even a little bit.”

"Uh-huh," Sirius deadpanned. "You're going to struggle to explain us even being on speaking terms. Throwing actual emotion in there is going to make her want to check for the imperius."

"It’s possible she is at least halfway there already,” Regulus admitted, shifting slightly on his feet. “You did come up last time, albeit briefly, but she did not get stuck on that part of the conversation as much as I might have expected, which is hopeful. I just have to find the right balance…” With a sideways glance, he added, “Ignoring your existence entirely is not a solution that I am interested in, as it turns out."

"You haven't successfully ignored my existence for more than a few months without faking your own death," Sirius pointed out. Even at school, there was Quidditch, there was the sniping, there were prefects versus them, and then when school was over, they still ended up running into each other. A lot more awkwardly, as vigilante and Death Eater, but his point stood. "It's nothing new. It's just the script got thrown out somewhere around Christmas. Maybe before, I dunno."

"Christmas is about right,” Regulus agreed with a nod, “We weren’t speaking in November, as I recall, but December sorted itself out. Quite a lot has changed, even since then. Communicating that context without admitting I didn’t say anything to her for a year is going to be a bit of a trick.”

"Somehow, me asking you not to is probably not going to go down well," Sirius admitted. "It's going to depend what you're going to leave out of your explanation of why you let everyone think you were dead in the first place, isn't it?"

"It will depend quite a lot on that, yes,” Regulus said with a nod. “All of this will come down to a matter of presentation: things that are essential to the argument, and things that are probably better left unspecified. Fortunately ‘they presumably would have killed me if I stayed after defecting’ is a pretty solid argument, given your average defected Death Eaters' track record on the matter."

"The defecting part is what I meant," Sirius clarified. "From previous perspective, you got mouthy - which everyone assumed was you drunk, which amuses me no end - and disappeared without any indication why either happened. You defected, but not to anything, and as far as anyone's concerned, for no reason at all."
“Yes, well… The decision to defect won’t be particularly compelling if the motivation remains unclear, I recognise that much. I’ve indicated some of my concerns… but I don’t know the degree to which they have had an effect in either direction. There wasn’t much time to explain in detail,” he said, slanting his mouth down a little. “But I want her, at least, to understand.”

“There's time now,” Sirius said. “But to understand is going to take some doing. Or it won't, and she's already scared enough to want an acceptable reason to be angry at the Death Eaters.”

“I do think she’s scared,” Regulus began with a frown. “It might be a matter of whether she is the right kind of scared to leave, rather than stay.”

“Depends what she's scared of,” Sirius shrugged. He didn't think she was afraid of Bellatrix, Andromeda wasn't, and he wasn't, he didn't even think Regulus was afraid of her in the conventional sense. Regulus wouldn't have gone to the Department of Mysteries if it was that kind of fear. What she represented, maybe. Whoever she was before. “Everyone's the kind of scared to leave in the right circumstances.”

“I suppose that is what I mean,” Regulus said, a thoughtful expression settling in his face. “That being ‘scared enough’ is not in itself enough, at least not for a change of any real substance. I imagine she is scared for Lucius and Draco - it's just a matter of determining the cost of that safety, contingent on the decision made.”

Sirius made a noise of frustration. This was why he hated it. It all came down to trying to scare each other into doing what they wanted. That wasn't family, that was just trying to control everything. He hated resorting to the same tactics. He ran a hand over his face, "You're discounting Bellatrix."

“Trust me, I haven't forgotten Bellatrix. That's part of the 'cost' I'm referring to,” he said with a sigh, shaking his head as his arms folded loosely across his chest. “I don't want to give an ultimatum, but I recognise that Bella will turn it into one...and as her sister, is a very relevant factor.”

"You don't have to give an ultimatum. Bellatrix will do it for you." Sirius shook his head, but things were changing faster than he expected them to. "Malfoy's going to be a bigger problem than I thought. He couldn't have kept his nose clean; he had to go and maim a bunch of fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds. I don't know why I'm surprised. He had no problems setting up an eleven-year-old. I don't know what Narcissa is going to do without a way out of that - and damn it, I don't know if he should have a way out of it!"

Regulus frowned, brow furrowing. “I don't know either, honestly. With the Dark Lord gone, it sounds as though Lucius retracted in turn, but the lack of remorse is...a problem,” he said with a twinge of aggravation. “Especially while the Dark Lord remains active… but I know Cissa won't see it that way, nor would Draco - and that's not even addressing law enforcement's inevitable opinion on the matter.” Grimacing, he added, “Every string tugged will tug another, and I wish there was a way to truly isolate the issue... but I recognise that is not an option. A mess is unavoidable, I suppose.”

"Malfoy plagued the imperius last time. Once, with enough gold to grease palms, people will accept it, but twice? He can't even claim it's all Voldemort. He was torturing people at the World Cup." Tonks had told him a little about it, Harry and the Weasleys more. It was a stupid thing to do. "I'll give you the kid; he's got time to grow the hell up. Lucius was an adult back then, and he keeps making the wrong choices. Whether he believes it or he just thinks Voldemort won't go down again, it's still the wrong choice. It's something you were willing to give your life to help stop, and without that knowledge, I don't know if you'll get your point across with Narcissa."
Regulus nodded, the frown still etched on his face. “I cannot explain everything, but I know I must explain at least that much. I put forth my stance on the Dark Lord last time, though it was first and foremost a refusal to return and rejoin, rather than anything extensive enough to address the circumstances of my departure. I don't know how to convince her to accept the likelihood of Lucius and Bella's situations ending badly, but I don't specifically plan to start with that, at least.”

"It's not what you plan that worries me," Sirius said. "It's that she decides it's futile to try and stop things now that they've gone so far, or that Voldemort will not win this war. Bellatrix won't accept that. She'll die first. She'll sacrifice everything and everyone first. Narcissa may think she's safe, but she's not, and she won't see it coming."

“I know,” Regulus said with a sigh. “I understand her situation thoroughly, and that I can't force her to view it as I do - and though she might not believe me, I'm not going to ignore the Bella concern either, even if it's just to plant the idea that aligning with Bella and the Dark Lord is not inherently more safe. I can handle taking to Narcissa, so try to relax.”

Sirius blinked a couple of times. "Did. Did you just tell me to relax?"

Following a light eyeroll, Regulus looked at Sirius again and responded, “I did. I have it under control for the moment, and you're making me feel more anxious.”

Sirius put his hands over his face and said a muffled, "This is what happens when I get up stupidly early to come to the land that vowels forgot."

“You can go back to bed if you need to,” Regulus said, a little smile quirking on his lips. “It's early enough.”

"Can't," Sirius said, with a huff. He had to go see a man about a hippogriff, not to mention sorting out an actual present. "I got stuff to do. I'll do a quick boggart sweep, then head out."

“I will see you later, then,” Regulus responded with a nod, “In the meantime, I shall busy myself with settling in and determining how I want to initiate the conversation with Cissa.”

"You could walk up to her say hello like a normal person," Sirius said, taking one last look around the parlour.

“Goodbye, Sirius,” Regulus said dryly.
Chapter 5

Lunchtime had come and gone when at last Regulus ventured out of the summer cottage. The sun rose high above as he was met with a rush of warm, salty air that thickened the anxiety swelling in his chest and hung about him like the brush of a spectre. It was noticeable, the way the cold and foggy descent of the dementors avoided this particular magical area, but hardly surprising, given the alignment of its summer occupants. Though he took note of the changes in the shops lining the street - some aged, some gone, some sprung up in place of the old - it was the faces he passed which burned into the back of his mind, and with them the echo of their dawning realisation.

There was a measure of ambiguity involved when attempting to tell apart those who had been informed of his involvement with the Department of Mysteries fiasco from those who had not. Persephone Greengrass (or whatever her surname might be now, given that she was undoubtedly married after so many years) looked shocked, then visibly uncomfortable as she slipped back into the shop she had just stepped out of, as if pretending to forget something inside. He had half a mind to follow her through the door and say hello, but reason led him to think of better of it. Pushing too hard too soon for resolution did little to help in situations such as this, and she was not among those who triggered the urge to taunt. If she knew - and he guessed that she did - she was more than likely an information bystander. The greater question was, perhaps, who these various bystanders were getting that information from - who else besides Bella had been spared capture that night.

Approaching a cafe, Regulus saw one of the Urquharts (the one that was close to Narcissa’s age, as he recalled - Kenneth?) at a cafe. The man stared with a glaze of puzzlement that made it hard to tell if he perceived Regulus as a ‘traitor’ who was out of place, recognised Regulus but had not realised he was alive, or if he was merely surprised to see an unfamiliar face in an area that made outsiders feel exceptionally unwelcome, thus did not host very many of them.

Inside the cafe, the mood was quiet and unobtrusive, and perhaps a less rife with stares, though the difference might be attributed to the indifferent mask of the cafe attendant more so than anything. When Regulus returned to the patio with a cup of tea a few minutes later, there was a woman in the chair next to Urquhart, blocked in part by a large-rimmed hat, and it was only when she shot a furtive (if not entirely subtle) look over that he recognised her as one of his yearmates: Seraphina Travers (Urquhart?). She appeared considerably more aware of the situation, if the discomfort - rather than surprise - was telling in itself. Her brother’s Azkaban escape earlier that year might have dragged the war back to her doorstep, even if he was doomed to be carted right back again after the Department of Mysteries break in. Regulus doubted it was because or Urquhart. Curious though it was that the man was not more bothered, the Urquharts had never been quite so involved, and it stood to reason that Sera would be invested in her brother’s situation.

Truthfully, no one was acting as bothered as he’d built up in his mind, and while “unbothered” was usually a positive tell, in this case, it only felt more unsettling.

Regulus raised his eyebrows when she flicked another glance, but she did not look again after that, instead hunching slightly in the opposite direction. It was frustrating - surprisingly so - considering they had been friends of some sort. Perhaps it was naive, but he’d expected some sort of reaction, even if it was a negative one, after all the stress and planning he had put into his upcoming debates with the summer crowd of Porth Iago.

When several minutes brought nothing more than the plaited blonde line down her back and an unreasonably large hat, he lost interest in favour of watching the passers-by, mentally naming the ones he recognised and wondering at the ones he did not. So many of the holidayers were the same
as they had always been, though the patterns of interaction (or rather, lack thereof) were markedly
different from those he had come to expect in childhood. Wryly, Regulus thought that he had
discovered this effective social repellent years too late: no one could seem to hold eye contact for
more than a second, and not a single word had been offered. The thought rang with more
frustrating disappointment than amusement, despite the irony. He could not claim to have wholly
expected otherwise, knowing that - with the exception of Severus - all of his closest friends were
imprisoned or dead (or worse than dead) now, and even if they weren’t, he doubted their Death
Eater statues would incline them towards positivity, even if they were here. In Mulciber’s case, it
certainly had not, and seeing him again, even once, would feel too soon. Avery had been a more
unfortunate situation - one that Regulus had almost thought would smooth over, being a barrister
and the son of another - but he was dragged off in the end, too, by Scrimgeour’s Ministry, just as
Lucius had been. Undoubtedly, the Order would assert that any Death Eater in prison was
something to celebrate, and logically, he knew he ought to feel the same, but the two losses felt
markedly different, and there was no room for admitting as much.

Unwelcome thoughts pricked at the edges of his mind, and as Regulus started his second cup of
tea, he dismissed the depressing state of his people-watching in favour of settling into a book. The
walls of text, at least, were something to secure against, an anchor of familiarity, however niggling
the the unspoken tensions reeling around. The afternoon seemed to laze forward, from then on.
Sera and Urquhart had wandered off at some point between starting the book and looking up again
at least an hour later, and though the cafe was under no threat of overflow, the book, too, was soon
set aside for a more active - if still relaxed - stroll past the shops, towards the rockier area where he
and Sirius had found a tunnel system as children. Regulus had scarcely fit, the last time he’d
crawled inside, armed with a furious sort of nostalgia and a perhaps misplaced blame on a set of
books that were certainly ruined by now, assuming they were still at the end of the pocket spaces
within.

Engaging in his first and only instance of book neglect had not brought Sirius back home, and it all
felt a bit absurd, looking back. Even so, Iago was thick with memories, bitter and sweet and
contradictory as they stretched back as far as he could remember. Pick up quidditch games, quiet
evenings on the beach, and a snowball fight in July; Sirius running away in the night, dark magic
lessons with Bella, and his first casting of the Killing Curse on some unassuming beetle. Vague and
unbidden, he was struck with the question of whether the curse had to have a living target, or if he
could have practiced on some nondescript rock somewhere, were he able to manufacture a
sufficient mimicry of intent. A moot point, he supposed, and one that made him feel a bit like
retching, but he shook the thought off, back to the clouded haze where the rest of his summer
memories lived.

The sky was dimming to an inky smear of purple when Regulus finally wandered to the beach: a
stretch of sand embraced by two snug, grass-glazed walls of rocky earth. The brackish scent was
stronger here, the soft roll of waves more prominent, and as his eyes brushed over Porth Iago’s
darkening water - a deep grey, flecked with golden reflections - it took a moment too long to notice
the way his breath caught uncomfortably, the way his chest thudded strangely, or the strange hint
of a buzz thrumming in his head. Familiar and unsettling, a steady beat of thoughts tapped against
his skull. He heard the hollow sound of waves and breathed in the salty, fishy smell of the outer
cave as he pressed a bloodied arm to its stone-wall entrance. He took in the poorly lit water
surrounding the locket - and the Thames with its flickering streaks of streetlight, dotting the spaces
around a swath of dead bodies. Stiffening against the thoughts, he staggered back a few steps,
shifting into an abrupt turn back the way he came.

It was frustration that he grasped at in some attempt to fight the intrusive memories and the
rebellion of his physical faculties. In that rebellion was the betrayal of a familiar spot that was
supposed to be calming, soothing, comforting. (Breathing in, and out-) For a fleeting moment,
Regulus had quite seriously considered kicking the sand like a tantruming three-year-old, resisting only by the skin of the more adult restraints framing his mind, and it felt wrong. The reactions felt wrong (They weren’t supposed to ignore him), this aversion felt wrong (why couldn’t his mind just calm down and cooperate?), and though he had walked into the day knowing he could not fix it by sundown, with sundown upon him, it simply felt like some intangible smoke beyond his control.

He could not convince them if they did not engage with him - and engaging them himself ran the risk of putting them on the defensive, which was harder to spin back to his points -

Cissa. He needed to talk to Narcissa. (But not today.)

By the time he was stepping back into their summer home some twenty minutes later, his palms had dried, his chest had ceased its pounding, his head had cleared (at least somewhat), but his mood was no less sobered. In his mind, it was not their expressions that lingered, but rather the backs of their heads.

"You're not dead, then," Sirius called from upstairs, perhaps making up for the lack of being able to shout from various rooms at home, where the risk of awakening their mother’s portrait was constant. He then popped into view. "Brilliant. I thought this was going to get very awkward, very quickly."

“Not dead, no,” Regulus said, shaking his head as he shut the door behind himself. “There was a clear reaction of discomfort, but I do not think I have ever been so thoroughly ignored in my life, and it was...surreal? Frustrating?”

"That's not fair," Sirius leaned over the railing. "You probably have, and because you were ignoring them so much, you just didn't notice."

Shooting his brother a look, Regulus rolled his eyes. “That is different.” To his brother’s point, it probably wasn’t that different, considering Regulus had done a fair amount of ignoring in his own experiences, but the parties in question had always been a mix quite unlike the present sides. These were meant to be social peers, disagreements aside, and it was jarring to see the backs of old friends turning in contrast to the more explosive reactions of his cousins. Bella’s scream had been unsettling, but she had reacted...

Shaking his head, Regulus considered the possibility that his mind was still a bit frazzled if Bella screaming at him somehow felt like a more genuine response, but he did not know how to pick apart that particular feeling. “I suppose I expected more of a reaction.” He recalled, then, the hushed silences that had followed Sirius’s vanishing act, that awful summer of 1976 - an entire subculture smothering the problem that no one was talking about, at least not when the Blacks were in the room - and he let out a huff, walking toward the parlour. “People are frustrating.”

"I reckon I see your problem." Sirius smiled, brittle and bright. He punctuated himself by pointing the end of his wand at his brother. "You think how Bellatrix, or Mum, or anyone from the more mental side of the house is normal, that that's what people are going to do. It's not. Most people aren't that crazy, they'll just try to pretend you don't exist in case someone yells at them for engaging someone who is not supposed to exist to them anymore."

Pausing, Regulus looked back at him, opening his mouth to comment but closing it to a thin line, just a beat later. ‘Someone who is not supposed to exist to you anymore’ was the way of it, and it was at least as agonising as he had feared it would be - yet it was strange, the part of him that must have expected something different, for that dropping feeling in his stomach to be so disappointed.

“It’s still frustrating.”
"What, you want them to yell at you?" Sirius asked. "Call you names, sling accusations, tell you off, repeat the same five interactions that haven't been updated in the last thousand years?"

"No," Regulus said with a frown. "That would be frustrating too."

"I can yell at you if it'll make you feel better," Sirius offered. "You haven't pissed me off lately, but I'm sure I can find something."

"It won't make me feel better," Regulus responded flatly, then shook his head, tone lifting again. "I realise this isn't supposed to be easy, or there wouldn't be anything to fix. It just felt...strange. Some of these people were friends of a sort - well, 'friendly' is probably more accurate - but the point is that it didn't even matter, and I suppose part of me thought it would."

In a completely situationally inappropriate way, Sirius smiled and shook his head. "If someone shut their eyes, most of them… I don't think they'd know me and you were related," he said. "Except every now and then, you just like to give me a good shock by doing or saying something I would, or have, done. You do want them to yell, because you want to yell back. Or your version, which probably has quiet, logical discussion more than actual yelling. But you do want them to, don't you? Because you want them to get it. It's not enough for you to just be here, you want - what, them to listen because they liked you?"

"Not because they liked me, though I was hoping that would assist with the initial approach," Regulus said, crinkling his nose a little. "I specifically want them to listen because I'm right, but that is the gist of it."

Sirius gave a sharp laugh. "If being right were enough, I'd have managed it twenty years ago, and you saw how that went."

"But it's…" (different, Regulus felt it should be different - he was not as offensive as his brother had been - ) "...You have to admit you were a bit more derogatory about the whole issue."

"Eventually," Sirius agreed with a slight bob. "Not at first. I wouldn't expect you to remember, you were still flying high from being hailed as the hero over being sorted into the same house as everyone else. Everyone wanted to talk to you and congratulate you, so we barely saw each other for a while. But back then, I was still trying to figure it all out and had a lot of questions that made people yell. Don't blame me if they didn't like it when I started to yell back. You just care what they think of you more than I did."

Regulus felt a bristling sting creep up in little pricks, and for a beat longer, he watched his brother's face with a subtle furrow, trying to decide if the words were a jab towards him as well. Sirius's tone lacked the normal bitterness that came with discussing that particular period of their lives, but in matters of their ever-common differences (in experiences, in opinions, in preferences), it was always a question of when those differences were a problem.

(As children, it had always been a problem - Sirius had always been the problem, and Regulus hated the part of him that still cringed, even a little, at how petrifying it had all felt. He hadn't wanted them to crowd around and fawn: He just didn't want them to be angry with him.)

Loosening some of the rigidity that had stiffened his stance, Regulus slanted his mouth downward. "I just want caring what they think to assist with changing what they think. The alternative doesn't seem to be very effective in bringing that particular change."

"Nah, you want them to care about you." At that, Regulus made a face, though Sirius did not seem to pay it any mind as he continued, "This was your world, and since you legged it, you never saw
any of the fallout from wising up. You walked away, but you've never had it taken away when you wanted it. That's all this is. This could end up just being a really uncomfortable summer and not working at all." Sirius shrugged. He didn't sound particularly bothered by it, stating it in matter of fact tones. "But this is a world of polite people following a set of pre-written conversational rules that you've always been better at, and most are sheep. It only takes one person to show an inclination towards so-called normal behaviour with you and most will just follow suit. They don't know what you are yet. I don't think you do either, but I don't think it matters. Sticking it out is terrible, and we don't have to do it, but it's important to you, and it's Narcissa's world, so I think you want to try. Just keep reminding yourself that although a person can be smart, people on the whole are stupid, and it takes time for the truth to get through those thick skulls. Those who still don't listen probably know the truth already, but if Voldemort wins, they don't want to be on his bad side, so they'll ignore it no matter what you do or say because they're shit scared of Voldemort and not scared of you."

Regulus pressed his lips to a line, tipping his head as the words settled and tucked away - then subtly, there was a wry, strained flick at the corner of his mouth, despite the uncomfortable twist in his chest. "They underestimate my deep capacity for vindictive behaviour, but I suppose he can be a bit frightening too." Shaking his head (and with it, attempted to shake off the mess of nerves that clawed up), Regulus let out a stubborn huff. "All the same, you're right. I do want to try anyway."

"Of course you do," Sirius replied, slouching into his lean. "You can't blame them not knowing you're a petty, obstinate, vengeful brat. It's your own fault for being well-mannered in public. Being tiny doesn't help, but mostly the manners. Just dig your heels in, and I'm sure someone will start a fight sooner rather than later. I'm looking forward to it."

Regulus leveled a prickly look. "I sense that you were trying to be encouraging, but you don't have to phrase it so insultingly."

"A little insulting is good for you." Sirius waved him off. "My biggest complaint about you was that I thought you were a soft, rule-abiding, fragile goody-two-shoes. But you're not fragile at all, are you? You only follow the rules you want to, and your shoes got traded in for a decent pair years ago. Being soft-hearted isn't the shameful thing I used to think it was. My point is that if you still surprise me, they have no idea. The only reason they think you'll shy away if they look away enough is that they're still seeing things you were, or they thought you were. Once they figure out you're not what they're expecting, and you're digging your heels in, I don't know what'll happen, but I'm looking forward to the front row seat."

With an appraising look, Regulus nodded, and the cold clenching in his chest retracted and warmed to something reassuring, however questionable the delivery might remain. "That's a bit better," he said as his mouth quirked up wryly, trying to shroud some of the sentiment threatening to creep onto his face. "Hopefully the entertainment value will not disappoint."

"It won't," Sirius said, with some confidence. "Besides, there's only person you truly care for the opinion of here, and as long as she wants you here, I doubt anyone will argue with her. Narcissa might look like an overgrown porcelain doll, but she's got claws beneath those lace gloves, and she's not afraid of pulling them out. It's almost admirable."

"That does sum it up well," Regulus agreed, and though he had not dragged himself up to her doorstep that day, Sirius was right about that much, without a doubt: Her opinion was the one that mattered. The purist community as a whole was secondary, and if there was one thing he could expected from their conversation to come, it was that she was not going to ignore him.

"I don't know why you always seem surprised when I know what I'm on about." Sirius huffed a
laugh at him. "It's not about pleasing them, or making them comfortable, so it's not going to feel comfortable. You need to decide what parts of this life you want to keep - fight for those and damn the rest. It'll all look different when Voldemort's dead, and it's up to you if you feel like being gracious about it when it's over."

‘What to keep’ was ever the question, both emotionally and logistically, when it felt so large and specific at the same time. Focusing on Narcissa and Draco was simple enough. Undermining a tightly threaded aspect of the present purist culture was quite a larger issue. Though the culture was a lower priority than Narcissa, if she was in the culture and did not want to leave, it was no less connected...

“Identifying what’s most important is not so much a problem as all of the related pieces that get tangled up in it, but the war does not stop to care about our clarity in such matters, so we can only work with the situations available to us - or change them, should it be possible.” He shook his head with a huff. “Protect what I want to keep, change what I don’t like, and don’t die. How hard can it be?”

“Was that you attempting to sound flippant?” Sirius asked.

“I wasn’t attempting to ‘sound’ flippant. I was being flippant,” Regulus countered with a wry sniff.

“It needs work.”

Undoubtedly, his brother was just being difficult, and yet: “There is nothing wrong with my flippancy,” Regulus responded, his tone curt but light.

“You’re so easy to wind up.” Sirius grinned. “Better than you used to be, though. You didn't insist you weren't small.”

Regulus rolled his eyes, biting back the sudden urge to object on that very point, if only for being reminded. Instead, he said, “You are insufferable.”

"You want to argue it, don't you?" Siruus said, with obvious glee. "Are you taller than Narcissa now?"

“I am,” Regulus responded stubbornly, though he had taken no specific measures. They were more eye to eye than in the past, which was well enough for the purposes of his defense.

"Congratulations on the extra inch," Sirius said. "I'll save my round of applause for your birthday. You're not planning on asking her to that, right?"

Regulus leveled a scowl, then let the subject drop. “I would like to see her, but I'm not going to invite her anywhere around the rest of you - for everyone's sake.”

"Before or after, then?" Sirius asked. “Because you look like someone just kicked you repeatedly in the shins, and you’re determined to get revenge.”

“Before, perhaps in the morning. Hopefully it will be a more productive interaction.” Regulus responded, and added in a dry, if not entirely humourless, tone: “Though I would not blame the entirety of my annoyance on them, right now.”

"Even after all this time, I annoy you that much?" Sirius placed a hand on his chest in false sincerity. "I'm touched."

Feeding into his brother's mockery had a history of maintaining it, but however annoying Sirius’s
open enjoyment tended to be, Regulus found it more amusing than aggravating, in that moment, and less insulting, to exchange barbs than it once had been, when everything felt a little too serious behind the masks of humour. Shaking his head, Regulus released a put upon sigh. “Even after all this time. At this point, I begin to think I may never stop finding you unbearably irritating.”

"I already got you a birthday present; you don't have to butter me up." Sirius smiled, wide and bright.

“Can these things be banked for later? 'Remember that time…’” A flicker of amusement lifted the corner of his mouth.

"Who keeps a running tally of whether someone has been nice to them?" Sirius scoffed, before he stillled. "If someone would be that much of a weirdo, it would be probably be you, but reassure me otherwise. Give me hope for some sanity in the family."

“I don’t keep formal tallies, no,” Regulus responded, “I just have excellent memory.”

"You're not making an internal list of everyone who chose not to talk to you today?" Sirius pressed.

“Chances are high that I’m going to remember such a category, possibly in the form of a list,” he granted, and with a pointed lilt, added, “but I can say with confidence that I will not be tallying anything, so my point stands.”

"Oh, no, tallying would make it silly," Sirius deadpanned.

“There is nothing wrong with developing an ongoing internal context,” Regulus remarked stubbornly, “How else am I going to determine who gets my graciousness and who does not in your scenario in which I survive this war and the Dark Lord is wiped from existence?”

Sirius glanced downward, perhaps about to say something before he just shrugged at him. After a beat, he added, "Does your mind ever take a break?"

“I do sleep,” Regulus responded, and though it might not count fully when the coaxing of potions was a common requirement with the stressors of the present reeling all day and the stressors of the past reeling all night, he left the point as it was. “But during conscious waking hours, not typically, when there is always something to mull over.”

“Do you dream?” Sirius asked.

'Not if I can help it' was the response that rose first in Regulus's mind, when dreams so often turned to nightmares, but he hesitated in pushing the thought past his lips. Instead, he shrugged. “Not usually.”

“Then it’s good even your brain gets some relaxation,” Sirius said. “Otherwise, I’d worry about you and that just gets awkward and mawkish fast.”

“You needn't worry. I have my self-imposed relaxation under control,” Regulus said, quirking his mouth slightly. “No additional awkwardness necessary.”

"Good," Sirius decided. "If you went and lost your mind, I'd have to put up with an I Told You So."

“Who thinks I'm going to have a mental breakdown?” Regulus asked with a little crinkle of his nose.

"People who remember the highly strung teenager you used to be?" Sirius held his hands up in a
pacifying gesture. "People who tally up the people on the tree who've had a mental breakdown and realise your odds aren't good? It being the reaction of most people who have to talk to Bellatrix?"

Regulus made a little ‘hmph’ sound. If anything, it was a mental breakdown that turned him from the Death Eaters towards defection, but that didn’t seem to be the sort of breakdown being implied. “Well, I’m not going to.”

Sirius made a ‘pffft!’ noise in response. "I know that! You're too much of a control freak to have a break down."

It was not exactly a compliment, but it was close enough, for their purposes. Accepting the objection, Regulus nodded curtly. In truth, Regulus did not feel as though he had control over much of anything, at present, but it was a small comfort to play at it, if only in the hope that the play might rub off on reality.

“Hopefully this nebulous ‘people’ group will figure that out eventually,” Regulus said dryly, and with a shift towards the doorway, he added, “but for now, I will be in the parlour if you need me.”

Without ceremony, Regulus slipped inside the room and pulled out the book he had been reading early. Perhaps the day had not been as productive as it could have been with more aggressive tactics (nor as disastrous as it could have been), but at least it had not been a waste on the entertainment front.

The 22nd of July, 1996. Another birthday had fallen upon Regulus, this time in the form of an overly warm Monday morning. Sirius was still (presumably) asleep when Regulus left the house, but the seabirds were risen and ready to squawk as they swooped over the distant beachfront, sunrise glittering warmly on the sliver of water that could be seen from the village.

The Malfoys’ summer home was nearby - smaller than the manor in Wiltshire, but it was white and gleaming and nonetheless more sizable than most. Neatly manicured blooms were out in full splendor, fanning along a brick wall barrier like colourful, splayed fingers. Reaching the iron gate, Regulus peered inside, and as he was steeling himself to move forward, the sudden movement of the front door opening froze him in place for a beat, followed by a smooth retraction back to the other side of the wall. Almost immediately, he heard a voice - a boy’s voice, Draco’s voice, as he recalled, followed by Narcissa’s - and tempting though it was to stroll up anyway, especially for the chance to see his cousin on this particular day, the reality of it starting to settle.

Assuming Draco remembered their previous interaction, association with the girls lavatory (regardless of its level of usage) or Harry Potter were neither likely to be helpful in making his initial case to Narcissa - so it was with only a flicker of reluctance that he stepped back further and apparated to the owl post before he could change his mind (or before discovery changed the circumstances for him).

The letter he scribbled out for Narcissa was a brief one, pointing out his presence (something she may well be aware of by now, if Iago gossip was not sleeping on the job) and welcoming her to another meeting, whether it was in the security of his own summer residence or elsewhere, should she prefer it. There was risk involved, and nothing to guarantee she would not formulate some terrible trap if she had soured to him in any significant way since last they had spoken, but in his gut, he felt she wouldn’t.

Upon handing his addressed letter to the man tending and facilitating the owls, Regulus firmly specified that the letter oughtn’t be sent until the 23rd. The last thing he needed was Narcissa wandering up to the gathering later that day, where she was unlikely to mesh well. Confrontation
was likely to escalate beyond what he could contain, in such a circumstance, and blending his worlds could wait.

The remainder of the morning and the start of the afternoon seemed to drag, once he returned to the house. It was all a bit mundane as far as birthday activities went, but Kreacher fussed in a manner that felt quite nostalgic with meals and cake and reminiscing, and Regulus would never argue with the merits of a relaxing opportunity to read in peace, especially with weeks ahead that were plenty open to more ‘exciting’ dramatics. Rattling the cage was simple, once a modicum of effort was applied.

Regulus was tucked in the parlour with a book when he heard the tells of someone being welcomed inside. The experience was different from those one might expect at home, where his mother’s portrait still reigned - quieter, more subdued. Iago had it's open disapproving concerns, but based on the tone of the muffled voices, he expected it was probably Emmeline rather than a Death Eater come calling.

A voice came more clearly from the hallway. “...stuck in a book, so nothing different from usual.” Sirius, then, as he looked around the door. “You want to do these cards and presents now, or are you going to pretend you're an adult and wait 'til after dinner?”

Marking a place in his book and setting it aside, Regulus looked up at Sirius with raised eyebrows. “I am an adult,” he said, pointed but light, “Though I'm surprised your argument isn’t that ‘adults can do whatever they want.’ Look at you, acknowledging conventions.”

“How can I defy convention if I don’t know what they are?” Sirius scowled at him, but couldn’t hold onto it. “Besides, we have polite company.”

“I’m polite company?” Emmeline’s voice sounded amused. “I’ve seen too much to be considered that. But you are making me impolite by being tall, so I can’t actually see - Happy birthday!”

“Thank you,” Regulus responded with a smile as she appeared from around his brother. “In matters of politeness, I think we can take perspective into consideration here. Compared to Sirius, you still qualify as polite.”

"I did think about a tackle, but it seemed rude to tackle a sibling on someone's birthday," Emmeline smiled back, giving a little wave.

Sirius gave the whole thing a massive eye roll, "Give me a shout when you're ready, and ignore any odd noises.”

Regulus quirked an eyebrow. “Odd noises?”

"You want to wait," Sirius reminded him, with a smirk. "So wait.”

“Technically, I didn’t specify a preference for waiting,” Regulus countered, “but I am nonetheless capable of it, suspicious though the circumstances now sound.”

"You want to wait to open presents?” Emmeline added, skeptically. "Are you very sure you're not secretly evil?"

“I am. Sure, that is,” Regulus responded, playing along with the tone despite the charged terminology. “It’s not a matter of wanting to wait, but rather a matter of precision in language. Capability and preference are two very different things,” he added in objection, crossing his arms loosely as he turned his attention to Emmeline, “My brother’s assumptions are faulty and purposefully incendiary, and you should not take them for truth.”
"I was aware of that already," Emmeline smirked, shedding her coat. "It's a lot warmer up here, isn't it?"

“I thought the conversation could benefit from a reminder,” Regulus responded, quirking his mouth in return. “You’re right about the heat, though.” It was especially noticeable, compared to areas where the dementors were gathering in lieu of doing their jobs of guarding Azkaban. He waved off the return of that thought.

“Can you two resume your manners after deciding a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ on what we’re doing?” Sirius complained.

Regulus eyed him. Though it was a bit childish to want to open them immediately (and played right into their banter to do so), he had to admit- “I am curious. I suppose it would not hurt anything to mix up the order a bit.”

"I'm dying to get it out of my room anyway," Sirius said, taking off at a run.

Emmeline stretched her head towards the stairs before lowering her voice. "Would you mind if I gave you yours now? I'd much rather do it in private."

“Private is fine with me,” Regulus responded, thinking it was probably less embarrassing without Sirius, anyway.

Turning to her bag, Emmeline began to rummage through it until she pulled out what looked like an owl letter. She did another check for there to be a sign of Sirius reappearing before putting her hand out with it. It simply looked like an address with a timestamp. "It's not strictly legal - well, to be quite honest, it's not legal at all. I'm divulging classified information, but I know you like that, and I did promise to be creative." There was a loud stomp upstairs, and she rolled her eyes. "Whether you choose to use it or not is up to you. I won't be offended, but either way, discretion is key. Understand?"

The flicker of curiosity immediately rocketed as he accepted the parchment, though there was nothing in its brief contents that indicated what it was for. Illegal might be concerning for some, but he had to admit the call of classified information was far too strong to reject the offer, regardless of what it was. He trusted she would not direct him towards anything too terribly dangerous in itself without warning, rebelliously shared or not.

“Understood,” Regulus said, tucking it in his pocket as a smile lifted his expression. “Thank you. The curiosity is a bit unbearable; I saw there was no date indicated, just a time… Does this apply to any day?”

Emmeline tried, and obviously failed, not to smirk. "In a manner of speaking. It's a time loop. It's under my jurisdiction to shut down anomalies like this, but given how stretched the Ministry is, I can't get the proper equipment until Friday. Until then, anyone who passes through this street will live approximately six hours before time resets itself, and they'll find themselves back on the street six hours earlier, regardless of anything they do within those six hours." She looked quite pleased with herself. "Muggles aren't aware of it, of course, but we are if we're caught in it. Some people chase them down, because they get a few days - or hours - where there are few consequences to their actions, but the Ministry frowns on it, so we keep them under wraps. You lose all but six hours of the time from walking through it, but it is a small price to pay a unique experience that few ever have."

“Fascinating…” he said thoughtfully, his mind starting its inevitable reel. Time loops were not a subject he had a great deal of knowledge about, but he did know - even without the explanation -
that they were a rarity to stumble upon. “Does one retain a memory of what occurs in the time loop, despite the consequences themselves being retracted?”

Emmeline nodded, visibly pleased. "As long as you've passed through into the loop itself, memories are retained. Otherwise, no. There might be some feeling of something having happened before, but it passes. Think of it like writing a letter and vanishing the text and beginning again. You still know what was written, but the exact wording will fade over time to just have the gist of it. There is some danger involved, but mostly just if you're going in to shut it down and can’t do it in the time period, you can get stuck. This looks straightforward, or I wouldn’t offer the opportunity."

“I figured an elaborate plot to murder me would not make for a great birthday present, nor a particularly creative one in the given climate. With that in mind, I had already ruled out excessive danger as a possibility,” Regulus said with amusement tugging at his expression. “Even with the potential for minor dangers, it sounds intriguing. Full marks.”

"I imagine you've already had death threats for your birthday, so no, it would not be very original," Emmeline agreed. "I'm going in at that time on Friday, so please do let me know if you're planning on using it so I can make sure to let you know when it's ending. It can be disorienting to lose time that way."

Regulus tipped his head in a small nod. “I absolutely intend to investigate, yes. Should I still inform you on the day itself?"

Emmeline gave her head a shake, as there was another bang upstairs. "No, that's alright. I'm sure I can track you down." She indicated the floor above. "You didn't request a hippogriff for your birthday, did you?"

“No,” Regulus said, eyeing the ceiling, “but whatever it is, it seems be too be giving Sirius a difficult time, assuming it isn't Sirius and Kreacher having it out.”

“That’s certainly possible,” Emmeline looked perplexed for a moment. "Or he's doing it because he wants to make a fuss."

“I will likewise grant you that possibility,” Regulus said with an amused huff. “Stomping about to heighten the dramatic suspense.”

"As I've said many times before, the dramatics do seem hereditary,” Emmeline agreed. "Are you enjoying your holiday?"

“I am,” he responded, letting the comment on ‘dramatics’ slide as he quirked a slanted smile. “Mostly relaxing, but I intend to meet with Narcissa sometime soon, which may or may not be relaxing, depending upon her reception.”

Emmeline ducked her head. "I think that'll depend upon what you say to her and what you're willing to accept."

“It will. That’s part of the potential problem,” Regulus admitted, “but it is a conversation I have been mulling over for a year now, so it’s high time for it to happen.”

"Then I hope common sense can prevail." Emmeline smiled, a little tightly.

He offered a little smile in return. “That is my hope, as well.”

"You must talk to that bloody house elf," Sirius grumbled. He appeared in the doorway with a stack
of post, a couple of badly balanced boxes, and what looked like a large sheet over a cage. The tell-tale squawk gave away its occupant, much to Sirius's apparent bemusement. He set the postcards - by the looks of it - on the table and managed to dislodge himself of the boxes without the toppling in a surprising twist.

Another squawk. "Fine, announce yourself then!" He huffed, eyes glancing at Regulus. "Happy birthday."

Regulus sniggered softly at the disarray, shaking his head. A smile rose warmly to his eyes as he carefully dislodged the shrouded cage from his brother’s overloaded arms, propping it on a side table. Pulling off the sheet revealed a relatively small but nonetheless stunning owl, long and thin with inky black feathers. The spread of black was splotched with bronze patches that trailed up to a heart-shaped face - bronze, too, with a bright, eclipse-like lining. He felt a nostalgic pang, thinking of his childhood owl, Canopus, with his white face and a mess of golden brown speckles. Canopus had been bigger, at least in the end, but he could not say for certain how old this one was.

The thought-interrupting squawk was a bit deafening, but despite a slight jolt, Regulus’s smile grew, returning to the present once again.

“Hello to you, too,” he said, shaking his head as he stood up straight again and turned back to Sirius. “Thank you, Sirius. It’s a bit loud but undoubtedly lovely. Male or female?”

"Male, far as I know." Sirius let his mood slip back into something more positive, and he smiled genuinely. "He's a barn owl; it's just a genetic quirk that makes him that colour. Bit mouthy, but he's rare, and he's smart, so I think he's up your alley."

“He sounds to be,” Regulus granted with a nod, looking back to the bird again. “I like the colouring.”

Emmeline crouched by the cage, tapping it lightly with her finger. "I think he just wants attention. You must get on splendidly."

Sirius responded by sticking his tongue under his bottom lip and flipping her off. "The blue box is Tonks - which your elf was trying to throw in the bin, just so you know."

“I don’t think he trusts her very much,” Regulus said unnecessarily as he plucked it off of the pile. Peeking inside, Regulus saw a tiny book, and after pulling it out for closer inspection, noted the title with a quirk at the corner of his lips. The subject seemed appropriate, though he could not decide if it was more amusing because she was an upholder of the law, as an Auror, or if it was more amusing because she seemed the type to flout rules without a great deal of concern for it.

“Ridiculous Magical Laws that Still Exist,” he said, flipping it so they could see the cover. "Kreacher needn't be upset about that. It's a rule book."

"Tonks wouldn't know a rule if she tripped over it," Sirius scoffed.

"Perhaps it's aspirational," Emmeline replied, still obviously preoccupied with the small owl. "There is an inordinate amount of law-breaking in your family, and that's without including you, as to my knowledge, you've never been arrested."

“No, I’ve never been arrested; but with the odds against me, this should be quite useful,” Regulus began thumbing open the book to skim the listed laws. “For example, what if the Ministry were to swoop down upon me, and I was - crossing a stream while holding a moke on a Sunday or something unforgivable like that,” he said, tracing one of the lines on the page. “Caught in the act
“I'm just saying that it could be very important someday. It's illegal to ride a dragon while intoxicated, but it's also illegal to ride an intoxicated dragon. I wonder if they prosecute you differently based on whether you were aware of your dragon mount’s level of inebriation,” he mused, ignoring Sirius’s remark entirely. “And this one is strangely specific. The Ministry lifts oughtn't be used for the sort of inappropriate behavior one might expect to be illegal, but also takes care to mention smuggling magical creatures in suitcases?”

Sirius scowled at the book. "I'm going to end up hiding that thing."

“You cannot have it,” Regulus said, sticking it in his pocket and setting the box down on the table next to his owl, which made another squawking sound, but quieter this time. “I need to decide on a name.”

"He's pretty," Emmeline agreed, turning her own attention to the owl. "Almost like burnt copper or rusted iron."

"Like a tawny got sunburnt," Sirius put forth.

Emmeline bobbed her head, clearly preoccupied. Her eyes flicked to Regulus. "What about Mars? He's certainly the right colour for it."

“He does. Our Great Aunt Cassiopeia had a cat named Mars,” Regulus commented, watching as the owl stared back at him with a turning head. “Several, actually, all black. Every time one would pass, she would get another black cat and name him Mars.” Glancing over to Sirius, he added, “Do you have any owl treats?”

"Yes," Sirius slipped into his pocket, pulling out a couple of random treats. "She was doing the same thing as the rest of the family. Every time someone dies, get a new baby and give it the same name. She just did it with cats instead of babies."

“I suppose so, though Grandfather made it sounds like she only did so with that one. Perhaps she just liked the name more than the others?” Regulus said with a shrug, accepting the treats and pinching one between his fingers as the others went into his pocket. He opened the cage to present it to the owl, which eyed its snack for only a moment before deeming the offer acceptable.

"He's a snob," Sirius said. "You'll get on great."

"I'm not sure you have a leg to stand on," Emmeline replied, with a smirk. "We're none of us what you'd call ‘working class.’"

"Anyway," Sirius glared at her. "We haven't had a Mars, so I dunno where she got the name from."

Mouth flickering a little at the blatant redirection of conversation, Regulus shook his head but allowed the point to drop.

“Neither do I,” Regulus said as he tentatively patted the owl’s head, relaxing a little when it didn’t nip him. “Stars and galaxies are typical, but not planets,”
Sirius sat down, leaning forward on one of the chairs with a thoughtful expression. "There might be one in the graveyard. We don't exactly have a full family tree, do we?"

"There are a lot of examples to consider in the last millennium, but you're right, nonetheless. Even just among the disowned, there are names we can't account for," Regulus agreed in thoughtful tones of his own: an anxiety he'd felt when imagining the prospect of disownment, even if there weren't many people left to forget him, at the point, had it happened...

"You better do Harry's." Sirius indicated another box on the table. "Leave that shit for when you're back in London and can go snooping for yourself."

Regulus lifted his brow, a little surprised that Harry would get him something, regardless of his upcoming presence at the outskirts of Iago; but it seemed rude to exclaim as much aloud. Instead, Regulus shut the cage again and pulled over the last box. When he opened it, a charmed toy Seeker (with the tiniest little snitch) zoomed out from captivity, and although it went too quickly to spot the logos, the colours were all too familiar.

"It looks like the Magpies' colours," Regulus observed aloud, a little smile on his face as it circled around Emmeline's head. Quidditch - seeking in particular - was well established as common ground, but it was a bit impressive if the kid had remembered… or perhaps Sirius had reminded him?

Emmeline made a noise of irritation, moving as it to swat it before relocating herself. "He's thoughtful," she declared, even if she seemed less than thrilled about having to move from the owl.

"A damn sight more than I was at that age," Sirius agreed. "He's surprisingly awkward. He asked if it was alright to get something, as if anyone in their right mind would turn down a present on their birthday."

Emmeline pointed to Sirius. "What about the poisoned chocolates?"

Sirius bobbed his head, "Forgot about those. Mad-Eye blew a gasket, but I still think it was Snape. He seems like the type that'd want to ruin a perfectly good birthday celebration."

"Or people who are dumb enough to eat chocograms when there's a war on," Emmeline replied, resettling on the arm of one of the larger chairs. "Perhaps this is what your house-elf worried about."

"Most likely," Regulus agreed, ushering the little Seeker back into its box. Tipping his head, he added in an admitting tone, "Kreacher tends to trust people about as much as he likes them, which is to say not very much, for most."

"Oh, good," Emmeline deadpanned. "It's not just me."

"No, Kreacher would happily give me poison chocolates if he could," Sirius snorted.

Mind flicking back to the offending gift itself, Regulus followed up: "Though I can't recall hearing anything about poison chocolates. Has someone received them, as of late?"

Sirius waved his hand. "No one got them recently, we got a box of them when I was nineteen, I was drunk, which was all Dorcas' fault, and then I ate one, had a little St. Mungo's trip for my trouble. No big deal, other than feeling a bit stupid and heaving my guts up for a while."

The remark surprised Regulus more than it should have, perhaps. He and Sirius had been out of touch for years, but even if they hadn't been, it was around the time Regulus had left - perhaps
even after, depending on the time of year.

“He’s not going to give anyone poisoned chocolates,” Regulus said firmly, “but I’m glad it was not
anything more serious.”

"Remind him of that when Hermione runs about trying to make friends with him," Sirius said,
darkly.

“He’s not going to do anything to her,” Regulus repeated, shooting a sideways glance. “I spoke to
him some time ago, and he is making an effort to be less unpleasant to our various guests.”

"I've barely seen him," Emmeline admitted.

"Lucky you," Sirius sniffed before looking at the lack of remaining packages. "What'd you get
him?" he asked, swiveling his head towards his brother.

"Something that is not for public viewing," Emmeline replied, crossing her arms.

Sirius's eyebrows shot up, making it obvious that discretion due to her occupation was not on his
mind. He looked between them and shrugged. "Alright, yep, don't need to see."

The look on his brother’s face - accompanied as it was by the flicking glance - made Regulus
profoundly uncomfortable, in light of recent conversation. Somehow, the brush off almost made it
more embarrassing.

“A sharing of information,” Regulus clarified, smothering the awkward feeling as he dipped down
a bit to look at the owl again. Resisting the urge to clear his throat, he straightened again. “I do like
secrets. While we are still on the subject of gift-giving, I thank you both for the thoughts and gifts
extended. Harry, too, and Tonks, though I assume you will see them first.”

"You can thank Harry yourself when he comes up. I dunno when I'll see Tonks," Sirius said,
looking a bit shifty. "She needs to get over this thing. Or under it, if that's her thing."

"It's not always that easy," Emmeline said, quietly. "Crushes can be difficult. Even if you go
through the heart-wrenching fright of not knowing if you're liked back, there can be so many
obstacles that can see unsurmountable."

Although they were discussing Tonks by name, Emmeline's words struck a little too familiar,
though he could not tell if that was a double meaning behind them or if Sirius had made him
paranoid. For an uncomfortably quiet beat, he tried to coax some response past his lips, but
reassurances felt too pointed and final (and in truth too presumptuous), while dismissals would not
be true, even if he could force them out.

Instead, Regulus gathered his owl and the small boxed Seeker toy, glancing towards the stairs. “If
you will excuse me for a moment, I'm going to take the owl to my room, but I expect that our meal
and the cake are ready by now,” he said, sparing a brief glance to both of them. “I will meet you in
the kitchen.”


"I'm sorry, but I have no idea how you're supposed to breach the idea of a werewolf in the family,”
Emmeline said, slipping onto a chair unceremoniously.

Sirius glanced at her. "What werewolf?"
"Remus," Emmeline replied. "How many werewolves do you know?"

"Just that one!" Sirius said. "Who's marrying Remus?"

"No one said anything about marriage," Emmeline clarified. "Tonks, Remus, crush, as you put it, getting under him."

Sirius blinked. "As in my Remus."

"I've yet to see a ‘property of’ stamped on him," Emmeline replied, "but yes, Remus Lupin. Is it really so difficult to imagine? Is he that hideous?"

"No, I just don't know if he likes people, he's worse than him." Sirius indicated his brother’s retreating form, before giving himself a great shake. "I'm going to address that later, possibly while not sober and definitely with cake."

Despite the awkwardness of earlier in the day, there was no doubt that Porth Iago was a port in the storm for the war weary. For most, the war had only just started, but it had raged for a year in reality, probably even longer, and it was a year too long for it. This was not the sort of place Emmeline ever saw herself; she wasn't unwelcome precisely, but not welcome either, when it came to spaces like this where class, blood, and allegiance all melded uneasily together. Her parents would never have come here. They were - had been - proud people, and the idea of being looked down upon was not appropriate behaviour at any point, let alone on a holiday.

Still, she couldn't deny it was a beautiful area. It had the qualities of a seaside, a village, and modern signs all wrapped up together. The sea air permeated, even this far from it. Though they could see the cliffs, the sea itself was not in view and it was a clear night, shone over by the waxing crescent. A good night for potion making, for those so inclined.

Emmeline was inclined towards her meander with Regulus. She had found him sitting outside and suggested stretching their legs. It was for him she had come, after all. As much as she would consider Sirius and herself to be friends, perhaps even good friends after being in and out of each other's pockets this much, he was private about his family events (in so much as he could be with a hopelessly dramatic family), and it was unlikely he'd have asked. Still, Regulus had asked and had even looked a little put out when she'd indicated that she may be unable to come. An indicator it was a truly desired presence, rather than politeness forcing itself upon him.

After a day of cake, presents, and some truly terrible singing, taking a walk alongside a friend in a warm seaside village felt as far from London and from the Death Eaters as you could get. An amusing thought, since almost everyone at Iago was related to one in some way or another. Perhaps that was why it felt untouched; a safe space by design. It should make her angry. If no one else felt safe, why ought they? But tonight, she didn't want to break the illusion that the war didn't exist and this was nothing more than two people taking a wander.

"I feel badly for suggesting you come away from this for a few days for your present," Emmeline said, though there was nothing stopping him returning here for it. She was simply curious what he would choose to do with ephemeral time. "Though I suppose it would still be here if you chose to remain here longer afterwards."

"Porth Iago won't go anywhere, but your gift is a rarity. You needn’t feel bad," Regulus responded with a smile. "Quite the opposite, in fact."

"It's my second in as many months," Emmeline admitted. She had lost two days back in June, stuck
in Dumfries. Not exactly a cultural hub. "Magic appears to get more erratic, the more it is misused on a wider scale." She cast him a look of amusement. "Or people simply get extra dumb and desperate during wars."

"Perhaps both," Regulus said, mouth quirking up a bit more. "I suspect there is some relation."

"Everyone has messed about with magic a little and had it backfire," Emmeline reasoned. Even she'd had some bad reactions from time to time, but privately, and none where she would willingly admit to it. "But wartime brings stupidity and terrible life choices. The desire to alter one of those choices can lead to playing about with time."

“I can't argue with that,” Regulus agreed as he tipped his head. “I've at least wondered at the same, though it's hard to say what else would have changed - for good or for ill - had it all gone differently. I suppose that is the trouble.”

"Not to mention the side effects." Emmeline gave a little shudder. "Imagine what you'd have to live through again to catch up with yourself. Not to mention how difficult pinpointing a time period is - you can try for eighty hours and end up with eight hundred years. You'd be doomed to live 'til you were eight hundred with your body degenerating. It isn't worth it."

“It doesn’t sound to be worth it, no” Regulus concurred, scrunching his face a little. “I suppose I will make do with things as they are.”

"You seem to be enjoying yourself," Emmeline smiled, before glancing around. He did seem to be more at ease here, but maybe it was just happy childhood memories. "Have you liked your birthday thus far?"

“It has been a wonderful day, yes.” Regulus granted a little smile in return. “No complaints so far.”

"Is that so unusual?" Emmeline asked.

“I wouldn't call it unusual. I just wouldn't call it a guarantee, either,” he said with a slightly slanted mouth. “But more to the point, I thank you for setting aside the time to visit. It has made the day that much better.”

"Because spending the day with you is such a difficult thing to do." Emmeline rolled her eyes, despite the little pleased feeling that wormed its way into her stomach. "The cake in particular, how I have suffered.”

“A veritable burden, I know,” Regulus responded with a little grin.

"It would be easy to forget what's going on in the rest of the magical world here," Emmeline mused, ducking her head. "I imagine that's the point. Still, some sea legs are good for you. You look better."

“I’ve always liked it here,” he said thoughtfully. “It’s a bit strange, the way something can feel the same, yet feel different at the same time. Not surprising, given all the change, but strange, nonetheless. Sirius and I used to run around the area all the time when we were kids, and it’s just...ironic that I know his presence would be considered a highly offensive change when it’s a return to a previous state of things. That previous state is just a bit further back for most people’s taste.”

"It's quite funny to imagine you purposefully running about,” Emmeline teased. “But I guess you have some ragamuffin tendencies buried in your childhood consciousness.”
"Ragamuffin' might be overstating it," Regulus said with a tiny smile, shaking his head.

“Children running about a little village sounds very ragamuffin to me,” Emmeline said, managing only barely to keep a straight face.

In all truth, Emmeline had never given much thought to what the children did here, and it was easy to demonise the upper echelons of the Death Eaters and the stalwarts of the purist community versus the rest of the logical and freethinking magical world as separate and similar entities. It wasn't as simple as that. They'd all been children at one time or another, and still had the terrible choices ahead of them. It was a rare glimpse into the state of these beginnings, and sadly humanising. Regardless of choice to join up, it did force looking at them as people instead of an amorphous blob of prejudice and hate. "It seems that the only acceptable change is a change for the negative, with no wiggle room for individuality. It's the kind of absolutist thinking and shortsightedness that we should all be much too old for."

"I would not go as far as to say it's all negative, but expectations are quite strict - and in many cases, undesirable." Casually, he slipped his hands into his pockets, eyeing the cliffline off towards the shore, peeking around an upcoming hill. "A bit of flexibility would go a long way."

"Has there been a positive change I'm unaware of?" Emmeline asked. Admittedly not her wheelhouse at all, but she doubted it.

“There isn't much change in general, but it depends on the scale of action and time frame. Joining a certain misguided cause is a change for the worse, while joining a wide-scale charity, for example, is a change for the better. More neutral changes and consistencies lie somewhere in between,” he responded a bit distantly towards the cliffs, then glanced over at her with a small smile to add with a thoughtful lilt, “It isn’t all bad, all the time, but I understand your point, nonetheless. The problem is more than one isolated rejection or another, and the scale is quite skewed…"

“But enough about them.” Regulus shook his head with a little huff. “Did you go on holidays much as a child?” A beat of pause. “If you don't mind me asking.”

Personally, Emmeline was inclined to believe he wanted to change the subject because he couldn't think of a real, non-negatively impacted change, but she supposed she could be indulgent. It was his birthday, after all. "Does it count as a holiday if it's visiting family?"

“I would count that, yes,” Regulus responded with a little nod.

"Then a couple." Emmeline nodded, trying not to feel a little wistful towards the idea. "From what I've seen, we're considerably more spread out than your own family. Most frequently, we'd go up to Nana Henley on the Isle of Wight - she wasn’t from there, but retired there. Occasionally, we’d go to Germany. My paternal grandmother, before she passed, lived in Hannover, and her sister still lives in Munich. The funeral must be the first time I've seen her in years. It was mostly visiting them, going to old market places and these massive gardens with huge fountains and hedges. I think I enjoyed it more when I got older and understood the cultural significance of a lot of it." She snorted to herself, straining to contain a giggle of the image. "While my mother was quite enamoured with going around all these little stalls and attending tea at the tea houses, I have never heard her squawk so loudly than her realisation that it's culturally acceptable to sunbathe nude there."

Regulus made an amused, huffing sort of sound and crinkled his nose. “A reasonable thing to squawk about. It sounds lovely, though. I've never been to Germany.”

Emmeline snickered to herself. "I've gone more places as an adult, but not back to Germany. It was
having a bit of turbulent time with the muggles, and I thought I'd left all of that behind me."

“That’s fair enough. We have enough turbulence here, as it is,” Regulus agreed wryly.

"You wouldn't think it tonight," Emmeline said, softly. She gestured around them. It was quiet, warm, and had a stillness you can rarely attain in a busy metropolis. "Although as I recall, you are the not the biggest fan of wide, water expanses. Is it bothering you?"

“For the most part, no,” he said in a more sobered tone, shaking his head. He hesitated for a beat longer before adding, “Sometimes it does, and sometimes it doesn’t.”

"You do know you can say if it does, and we can meander in another direction?” Emmeline prompted. She had no desire for him to get caught up in a traumatic feeling on her account.

“I know,” he said with some finality, though the tone remained a little uncomfortable. “I’m familiar with the area, and we are meandering in a fine direction.”

"I always have my wand at the ready if there's trouble," Emmeline said, though her sort of trouble might be of the people taking exception to the presence of an outsider. "But everyone has things to carry with them, so don't martyr yourself if you don't feel like feeling those demons at any particular moment. I don't want to make you truly uncomfortable."

“You aren’t making me uncomfortable,” he said, letting out a soft breath. “It’s an inconvenience, to be sure, but I’m managing it.”

Remembering their earlier conversations on the idea of going to see the Northern Lights, Emmeline decided he was likely underplaying it a little. Still, there were ways of working around this particular fear. "Then there is hope for camping?"

To that, Regulus granted a smile, small but warm. “There is hope for camping - as long you don't expect me to sleep on the ground or anything like that. The muggle way sounded awful.”

Emmeline flinched as she thought back to the crowded tent and the sudden, very apparent realisation that a single knocked over light could have started a fire. Talk about being young and experimental.

"No muggle camping," Emmeline confirmed before giving him a look of distaste. "Too many insects."

Regulus nodded, the little smile still flickering on his face. “I can imagine. At least we remain in agreement on that matter.”

"I can get a handle on Death Eaters and dark creatures.” Emmeline shook her head with a smile. "But ants crawling up my legs, and I run about screaming and flapping about. I don't want you to think less of me, having seen that."

His expression brightened a little as he met her eyes. “The mental image is amusement enough. Amusement aside, I would not think less of you, even in such indignities. A person can only remain so collected in invasive ant-crawling circumstances.”

Emmeline bumped him with her shoulder, in a way that would hopefully be construed as playful and not an attempt to make him stumble. "Is there such a thing that would make you think less of me?” she asked.

Regulus lifted his brow with a sideways glance. “Not that I have discovered, thus far,” he
responded with a little lift in his tone, gently bumping back against her shoulder. “High praise, I hope you know. My standards for these things can be quite strict.”

Emmeline tried hard to look cross at the judgement, but she was entirely too pleased to do so. “Be careful,” she warned. Those are some high stakes to live up to. “It'll go to my head, and I won't fit through the door.”

“You should have nothing to worry about,” Regulus countered with a flickering smile. “The door is actually quite lenient, in that respect.”

“Do you have a lot of egotistical people staying there, then?” Emmeline teased. “It does seem a little large for four people.”

“I was going to remark on Sirius in the fashion that brothers should, but honestly, it allowed James Potter through the door one time, and I think that is support enough to my argument,” Regulus quipped back, a little dryly. “The house felt quite full that day, but not in the good way. You, on the other hand, have not been intrusive in the least.”

“That's because James was a very chaotic person, and the company of a chaotic person causes considerably more ruckus than I do,” Emmeline replied, though her heart panged in a surprising way for the chaos. James had calmed more when Harry was born, but they were always itching to cause a little hell. It made her think of Marlene, and she felt on the verge of making herself sad again. She cleared her throat. “However, unless they've grabbed your kitchen trays, charmed the stairs, and decided to slide down them while screaming uproariously, you don't have the record on being disturbed by them.”

“I'm confident that I could come up with something comparable,” Regulus responded, but when he glanced over at her again, he hesitated for a bit before shifting the subject again.

“I was thinking about the loop,” he began. “Have you ever used that sort of thing for fun, knowing that it would reset? Does the department have a way of knowing if you do?”

Oh ho, he was catching on now. “I will, since I'm working on it,” Emmeline admitted reluctantly, as she'd have liked to see what he'd do without knowing she would know. “Others won't. They get déjà vu if you have the same conversation, but no. That's why people chase them down, except not knowing when it'll be shut down, they can get stuck with the consequences of a day they didn't mean to be the real one. I have a leg up in that department.”

“That would certainly be a problem,” Regulus agreed. “I know you are aware of my awareness and thus my likelihood of attempting it, but your explanation sounds as though they are monitored by individuals rather than groups. Because of this, I was curious specifically about whether you had ever used one for sport, personally.”

"Everything in the department is monitored on an individual basis, we're not aurors," Emmeline admitted, though she thought it had more to do with them not having to deal with it if an individual then ended up dead on the job. "You can dip in and out, or change departments, but no, no one has ever stumbled upon me messing around." She gave him a cheeky wink. "And I have most definitely messed around."

He flicked a little grin. “That is lucky. Any particularly fun adventures?”

Emmeline quirked a grin at him. "Maybe."

“Any you can share?” he asked, sidling up closer as they walked to add in a (perhaps exaggerated)
"I did a few things, some more ridiculous than others," Emmeline admitted, as she tried to hide the blush that began to creep on her. "I suppose I treated it mostly like having a day off at first, went to museums, a few shows, read a lot of books, but then..." Emmeline huffed a laugh. "I gate-crashed a few events, shoved the guy who keeps taking my lift spot in the mornings, ate ice-cream ‘til I was sick, attempted to learn to surf - which do not attempt, it's not worth it - asked out someone I liked but didn't really feel ready for the impact on the relationship if it went wrong. I have yet to work up the courage to go into the love room, but I’ll see how I get on. Oh! I learned to juggle."

Lifting his brow, Regulus huffed a little laugh, letting the amusement settle for a moment before he spoke. “What an extensive list. I didn’t know you could juggle, nor that there was such a thing as a ‘love room.’ Another area in the Department of Mysteries, I assume, though I’m now imagining something like Madam Puddifoot’s, but with more piles of research scattered about. What about the man on the lift? Did he subconsciously adjust his poor manners in the future?”

"I’m very proud of the juggling part," Emmeline beamed. It had been a rough week, and dropping balls had been a good metaphor for the spiral, but she had enjoyed gaining the ability. "There are many mysterious departments, the name is rather a give away, but I have heard it's pink. They keep it locked, but part of my vigilante-in-training has meant learning to bypass most locks. I'm just not sure it's the sort of thing we're ever meant to know. But that's never stopped an Unspeakable yet."

She continued with a huff of laughter. "No such luck on the subconsciously teaching some manners, though. I did decide to follow him about to get an idea of his routine, so I make sure I'm there a few minutes before he is, and I take a petty sort of joy whenever he arrives just in time for me to close the doors."

As his smile morphed into a little smirk, Regulus nodded. “It is the little things, yes? A bit of pettiness has its place. All in all, it sounds like a time-loop well used. I have not decided how to spend my lost day yet,” he admitted.

"Just try not to die," Emmeline nodded. "I think it'll still reset, but I really don't think you should chance it."

“ ‘I won’t pretend like the question didn’t cross my mind,’” he said wryly, shaking his head. “ ‘Not that I’m planning to go get myself killed on purpose, even impermanently, but it’s not a challenging thing to do at the moment. I will make my best effort to remain alive, just in case.’”

“ ‘I don't know,’” Emmeline made a big show of thinking hard. “ ‘You do have some self-destructive tendencies. I don't want to be responsible for you getting hurt.’”

“ ‘If I engage in any self-destructive behaviour, it is most assuredly not your fault. I can do that all on my own, as it turns out’,” Regulus responded lightly with a fleeting glance, mouth half-turned.

“ ‘So I noticed,’” Emmeline said dryly. “ ‘But you are my friend, and I reserve the right to worry for you at any given moment.’”

Regulus was opening his mouth to respond when a dark movement off to his left grabbed his attention and locked his gaze. Pausing in step, he watched the junction where their path split off along the retreating wall of a rocky hill, tucked up beside a sparsely wooded area. The sun had not set yet, but with the dimming shade of dusk, it was hard to tell if it was some animal scampering or a threat of any true concern. Inside his pocket, he thumbed the grip of his wand and flicked his eyes over to Emmeline’s.
With a frown, Emmeline reached for his arm and gave it a mild tug without looking away. "I think we ought to go back. It's getting late."

Shifting with the tug, Regulus nodded. The evening had fallen still, save for a subtle ocean breeze meandering along the path, but the unsettled feeling lingered, and so too did his hand on the pocketed wand. After eyeing the junction one more time, he stepped into a turn - Emmeline turning with him - and without further word, they started again for the house, quieter but closer in step.
Chapter 6

Warm, salty air beckoned Regulus awake the next day: too warm for the deep hues of a pre-dawn sky, but tempered somewhat by the breeze. Cooling charms did well to neutralise the worst of the heat, and even as he stirred to set about his morning routine, the remnants of those charms held well, more delicate than they were brisk.

By the window, his owl was napping in the open cage following a long night’s hunt - Deimos, he’d decided, one of the moons of Mars - with one eye left comically wide. A relatable way to nap, Regulus considered to himself. Though he preferred the reprieve of a deep and dreamless sleep over the anxieties of a natural rest, it seemed a rather apt image for the bird, tucked and watching, even in sleep. Most likely, owls did not experience the dread of war, but it was amusing in a depressing sort of way.

Stillness had not quite given way to morning yet when he wandered downstairs, and he had felt a rather pleasant lift in his mood to see Emmeline already flitting about. Their passing exchange did not last long; the sun was still tucked below the horizon when Emmeline left for the Ministry, leaving behind the shores of Porth Iago in exchange for the realities of everyday life in London. Even so, it had been a nice diversion to catch her before she left, however short the visit had necessarily been. For the stretch of an afternoon and evening, the village had felt suspended - a birthday celebrated in isolation of his other problems, for once - and though the chaos was certain to return with the rising sun, Regulus had felt well and truly relaxed.

Regulus was settling into his favourite parlour chair with the absurd little pocket book Tonks had gifted to him when Kreacher appeared with tea, crowned with steam and prepared with the usual amount of care. Skillfully moving the tea cup to a coaster on the side table, he smiled down at Kreacher with a word of thanks.

The elf was turning to leave when Regulus glanced down at the book in his hand, wriggled it a little, then spoke out: “Kreacher, I wanted to take a moment to offer something of a reassurance, if one could call it that.”

“What is it that Master Regulus would like to say to old Kreacher?” the elf asked in raspy tones, though he had adjusted his attention quite thoroughly.

“The gifts yesterday. Sirius informed me that you were putting great effort into my protection,” he said gently, and though Kreacher had visibly bristled at the mention of the elder Black brother, that bristle softened, if only somewhat, at the acknowledgment of what must have been genuine efforts.

“Master Regulus deserves better. Deserves the best, from those who can be trusted.” With a scowl, Kreacher shot a stray look upward towards Sirius’s room, though it was not hard to assume that the statement referred to the whole group of them. Regulus suspected he was biting back commentary about more than just their trustworthiness, but it was hard to say for sure. The ongoing effort was commendable, if that was the case.

“They were quite safe, as it turned out,” Regulus continued, holding the little book out, though he didn’t expect Kreacher to actually examine it. With an amused air of willful misrepresentation, he added, “Tonks actually bought me a collection of rules and regulations. It was surprisingly thoughtful.”

The comment did little to lighten the opinions flickering behind Kreacher’s eyes, but his tone was genuine enough when he responded, “Kreacher is glad for the safety of Master Regulus.”
Ignoring Tonks was probably better than expressing an opinion, in this case, and Regulus supposed he did not want to compel an insincere kindness when a polite restraint of distaste was reasonable enough.

Kreacher excused himself shortly after, leaving Regulus alone with his thoughts and his books for the quiet stretch of morning. Regulus had read through the majority of the book when a knock on the door eventually interrupted the current Ridiculous Law in question (regarding the illegality of entering a muggle’s home without explicit consent unless urgent need of toileting facilities was required - a loophole that would make for a horrifyingly interesting defense). Harry and the others weren’t supposed to arrive until closer to the afternoon, and as far as he knew, it was Aunt Cassiopeia’s house by the harbour that Sirius was supposed to meet them at. Narcissa was the other logical leap, though the letter he had sent to her was not meant to be sent out until today. If it was his cousin just outside the door, more than likely it was the the tell of postal workers who could not follow a simple instruction. Alternately, she might have come to visit without invitation, spurred on by a spread of information set fire by the summer warmth. He hoped it was not the latter. Marking his place and slipping the book into his pocket, Regulus strode to the front door-

-and on the doorstep stood his cousin, as primly put together as always, though she wore an earnest look on her face. Earnest, or perhaps anxious, and he could not truly blame her for it, however it might sting.

“Come in,” he said without delay, and she wasted no time stepping through the door, eyeing down the hallway as he clicked the door shut behind them.

“Happy birthday,” Narcissa said with a little strain to her tone, though her eyes held a bittersweet sincerity. “I know it was yesterday… but I was not certain if you would be here.” Reaching into her pocket, Narcissa pulled out a piece of parchment. “I received your letter this morning during breakfast. Draco is spending time with his friends, so I thought to come right away.” (‘While questions could be avoided,’ Regulus finished for her silently. He had considered it too.)

Her mention of breakfast led Regulus to wonder if it was later in the morning than he had realised - in hindsight, the sky was a bit brighter out now, and he was a little more hungry than he’d noticed - followed with an acknowledgement that perhaps the postal workers were not entirely incompetent, after all.

“Your birthday wishes are no less well received. Thank you,” he said with a tiny smile, leading her down the hallway towards the parlour. “It has been too long.”

“Far too long,” she agreed with a frown, fingers lightly brushing the ornate wooden table just outside the parlour door as they passed it by.

All at once, Regulus was struck with the urge to ignore the raging war around them, to fall back into the past - the distant past before he branded himself into the service of a monster who cared nothing for any of them. Even within the safety of these walls, there was something stiff in her stance, and when they took their seats in the two most comfortable chairs in the parlour, she had folded her hands neatly in her lap, as if this meeting was some formal call.

In a way, perhaps it was, a little bit. They were neither of them children anymore. Nearly two decades separated the last time they shared tea on a summer morning, and a frazzled exchange on the side streets of Diagon Alley hardly counted as a proper reunion, with all the baggage they were now dragging about in their wake. Regulus had written notes for himself on what to discuss, focuses to prioritise, but his throat felt dry and sticky, trapping those thoughts before they made it to his mouth.
Silence was broken by the crack of Kreacher apparating into the room with a pot of tea, and when Kreacher’s eyes settled on today’s house guest, Regulus thought the sheer relief on the elf’s face might startle the pot from his hands. In this end, an impressive grip was maintained, even as Kreacher dipped into a respectful greeting.

“Old Kreacher is honoured to welcome Miss Cissy back into this house.” For a moment, he looked as though he might continue, but following a flicking glance from Regulus, whatever commentary Kreacher had been preparing to share seem to fall away.

“Oh, your elf is still alive?” Narcissa said with an air of surprise, though it was evident she was a bit pleased by the greeting. As she straightened her back, a degree of tension in the air dissipated for the moment. “Rather old indeed, I imagine, but he seems to be managing. Good elves are so hard to come by. You are exceptionally lucky.”

“I am,” Regulus agreed, meeting Kreacher’s eyes again in a meaningful glance as he held out his tea cup for a top off. Anxiety thumped lightly against Regulus’s chest, but Kreacher had spoken no word of the unconventional company that preceded her, and Kreacher’s exposure had triggered no suspicion in Narcissa - rather, her comment seemed a more benign commentary than it did a calculated observation. Of course it would be. The Dark Lord might have given the diary horcrux to Lucius for protection, but it was unlikely Narcissa was involved, even if Lucius did know what he’d been given.

Kreacher conjured a second cup of tea, which Narcissa accepted with a sigh. “Our newest is absolutely dreadful, Regulus, and I cannot make such observations to the others lest someone agrees with me. I’m sure they’ve noticed.”

“Thank you, Kreacher,” Regulus said first before looking back to Narcissa, unable to stop himself from thinking that the familiarity in her tone was an unexpected comfort, even if it was a complaint. “What of Dobby? Is he no longer with you?” he asked, though he thought he had heard something of the sort in past months. The circumstances were unclear, nonetheless.

“I don’t want to talk about that wretched elf right now,” she said, waving her hand dismissively. “Frankly, I am more interested in talking about you and your presence here. I hope it is not too forward of me to say so, but I did not expect it, considering…”

‘The debacle at the Ministry’ seemed to be the unspoken consideration, but her gaze was fixed on him with the sort of keen, searching expression one might wear when combatting a puzzle. He lifted his chin, slightly. “This is my summer home, as you surely recall.”

“I did not intend to suggest it wasn’t,” Narcissa began carefully. “I was simply wondering if perhaps you had… reconsidered.”

“Reconsidered what?” he asked, gaze shifting back to her face as he took a sip of his tea.

“Coming home.”

The answer was direct as she fixed her eyes on him, as fond as they were uncertain and a familiar mirror of his own. In his head, Regulus could feel some part of him, young and small, thrashing against the tangled mess of every concern - both logical and anxious - that told him returning to the Home she was suggesting would be a terrible idea. Those acknowledgements were prominent, repeated like a mantra for a year now, but he could not help the part of him that was desperately happy to hear her ask it again.

“My intentions have not changed since last we spoke,” Regulus responded, mustering every shred
of will that he had. “Neither has my desire to be part of this family. I don’t believe the two must be mutually exclusive.”

“Regulus.” Her expression tightened a little, though she held his gaze. “You know how this works.”

“I know how this worked,” he subtly adjusted, “but I’m not willing to accept that.”

“What makes you think it matters if you’re willing to accept it or not?” A tight frown was pulling down the corners of Narcissa’s mouth, her expression subtly creasing. “You cannot just disappear for seventeen years and expect the rules to bend around you. Where have you been?”

“Away from the people who would have killed me, which is why I survived seventeen years instead of being dead at seventeen,” he answered firmly, and though she winced, he added, “The Dark Lord cares nothing for us or our family. If Lucius is deemed to be unworthy of the effort, the Dark Lord will not hesitate to toss him aside. If he messes up, if sacrificing him is considered beneficial to the Dark Lord’s personal interests, you must realise that your family - our family - is dispensable.”

“What proof do you have?” she asked, chin jutting stubbornly, but there was uncertainty in her eyes as she added, “Lucius is important.”

“To you, yes, he is,” Regulus said with a frown. “I’m not trying to upset you, but I want you to understand. I worry for you and Draco, both.”

“You should be more worried for yourself,” she said, though her tone was more distressed than it was threatening. “Our Lord would not discard us for no reason.”

“You don’t look like you entirely believe that,” Regulus said, setting his cup down for a moment as Narcissa’s expression pinched. “But I’m not here to coerce you; rather, I want to...explain my point of view, I suppose. I am making an effort to state things as I see them.”

“An explanation would be wonderful. Do explain why you’ve come home if you don’t intend to come home,” she said earnestly, her own teacup held delicately with two hands. “Why now? You must realise how unsafe it is to be here if you insist on associating with traitors. You ought to know better.”

Expression drawing to a frown, Regulus let the words hang for an uncomfortable moment as he filled the silence with a sip of tea. (‘Ought to know better’ - why did that phrase get slung, no matter which side he fell on?)

“I’m not doing it out of some delusion of safety, no,” he began, shaking his head and setting down his tea again. “Coming home to everyone is what I’ve wanted since I left, but it is not as if anyone here is interested in interacting with me, present company excluded. I was serious when I said I have no intention of re-joining the Death Eaters, but that isn’t intended as a rejection of you.”

Just outside the parlour, the rather prominent thump of a shutting door grabbed their attention, both glancing towards the entrance to the house. When they looked back to each other again, Regulus could see her expression had tightened further.

“Darling, whatever you have in your mind, you must realise it isn’t going to work. Bringing him here, mixing with this ilk - you are only going to make yourself a target. These things are mutually exclusive. You know how it works here, how it has always worked.” With a frown, she dipped her chin. “Society is always going withdraw from those who break away, and that is what you have
been doing, in case you haven't realised it. You are acting… erratic.”

“I'm not erratic,” Regulus objected with some defensiveness in his tone.

“Perhaps you can't see it, but you are,” she said in response, framing the tone with finality. “Nothing you are doing is consistent with the Regulus Black I know, and the others undoubtedly feel the same.”

Stubbornly, he pursed his lips for a second, then responded, “Coming here is consistent.”

“It is, and that is something to be celebrated,” she granted a little more warmly. “You belong here with us, not with the riff raff.”

“Yet when I come here, everyone ignores me.”

“Because of the riff raff,” she pointed out with a sip, “and the erratic behaviour.”

“My behaviour is quite purposeful, actually.” Subtly, his expression darkened to something more serious. “I’ve already stated my concerns about the Dark Lord, both in respect to myself and in respect to you, and I struggle believe that you do not have even a shred of doubt.”

Discomfort seared the edges of Narcissa’s expression, but she did not drop her eyes. “Let us entertain for a moment the claim that Dark Lord would... discard us if we displeased him. Betrayal is guaranteeing that to be so, and I cannot put my son at risk-”

“He's already at risk,” Regulus interrupted a little more sharply than he intended, and perhaps more sharply than Narcissa had expected, given the startle on her face. “He was at risk the moment Bella broke out of prison, arguably even before that. She’s recruited him, hasn’t she?” Narcissa’s face had already begun to shatter before he pushed the last words past his lips, barely managing to set her teacup aside before clasping a hand to her mouth to stifle what might have otherwise been a rather miserable sound. Steadying himself, Regulus continued, “That’s why you were so upset last time.”

“I didn’t know until he’d already done it,” she began with a tightness to her voice, half muffled by her hand, though it had clenched to a fist now. “I did not want that for him, not when there is so much danger. He’s just a child, and I cannot give the Dark Lord an excuse-”

“-The Dark Lord doesn’t need an excuse, Cissa,” Regulus interrupted again, a sad sort of weight pressing heavily in his tone. “He has enough already, if the mood strikes, and before you pin that on me, it’s not just about me, and you know it. That is what I am trying to tell you.”

“He will kill us if we leave now,” Narcissa said, digging her still-clenched fist into her thigh, as if to brace again the emotion trying to claw its way back onto her face.

“He will probably try,” Regulus said, supposing it sounded a little bit like bravado, but there was little else to grasp on but the willful confidence that he could make this work. “However, you might have noticed that I survived this process, and I was alone in it. You don’t have to be alone.” Her face contorted a little, but he spoke on with an earnest push. “I want to help you.”

“You aren’t helping,” Intently, she locked their eyes again. “Even with the Dark Lord aside, and all of the Death Eaters, there's still Bella. I can’t leave her to this, and she’s…”

Trailing that thought to its end was unnerving and depressing. Regulus shook his head and continued with a frown. “Dangerous.” Narcissa’s echoed frown offered no immediate objection, but as she started to open her mouth, he spoke on: “Has she said anything else about me?”
“She still isn’t pleased,” Narcissa said, perhaps unnecessarily, though Regulus could not help the twinge of dread at his cousin’s confirmation.

“At the Ministry, she was going to kill Sirius,” Regulus said, his frown deepening as his eyes flicked down to the teacup he had picked up again. “Does she intend to do the same to me?”

“She told me no harm would come to you for now,” Narcissa answered, though Regulus wasn’t sure he liked the hint of uncertainty in her tone. “At least nothing permanent. I’m doing my best to keep this from exploding in your face, and you are making it very difficult. Whatever Sirius told you that you have to gain, it isn’t worth it - not for you, not for any of us.”

“Sirius isn’t making me say or do anything,” Regulus insisted, tearing his eyes from the tea and leaning forward.

“Of course not,” she said quite unconvincingly, mouth thinning as she clasped her hands on her knees. He watched his cousin’s eyes tighten at the corners, a subtle tell of annoyance, but she did not pause long before speaking again, voice more stilted. “How was your birthday?”

“It was all right,” Regulus responded, though it felt like a terrible understatement. “Uneventful.”

“I assume he was present.” Narcissa leveled a sideways look at where the front door would be, were there no walls closing them in, and her nose crinkled slightly as she took another sip.

Lifting his brow slightly, Regulus mirrored the sip, letting her question hang uncomfortably in the air between them, though he couldn’t decide if it was more or less damaging to confirm as much. Narcissa made that determination for him when she stood, expression strained but softening somewhat. “He’s going to drag you down with him, Regulus. When you surround yourself with danger, danger has a way of catching up to you.”

An ironic warning, given her own situation. Though it seemed rude to counter the remark so bluntly, Regulus met that expression with steel of his own, rising with her from their chairs. “It does; yet I’m not the only one courting danger.”

Her expression flattened a little, but her eyes were no less genuine as she looked him over again with a subtle headshake. “I thought your birthdays were long since over. I would rather this wasn’t the actual end to them, so please just...try to think this through.”

“I hope the same for you,” he said, eyeing her with a sad smile, and for a beat, he nearly left it at that.

This matter did not rely on thinking alone, as he well knew, and the look in Narcissa’s eyes suggested a similar conclusion. The past was heavy, weighed down further with the complications of the present, and no matter how they might have relied on the scripts of their youth, those scripts could no longer be relied upon. Her words were deeply familiar, yet her intentions felt as shrouded as ever, catching him in a strange limbo between the hope of acceptance and the threat of rejection. Childish though it was, some part of him just wanted to hear that it could be okay - however much he might fear that it couldn’t.

Mustering the words, Regulus spoke again as she started to shift towards the door. “You came here today, but what will you do if I remain as I am?” he asked, staring at the golden locks twisted up on back of her head. “I can’t safely come back without accepting the Dark Lord too, and that...is not an option.”

Silence stretched for a little too long. “Regulus...”
He did not much like the pangs of distress in her tone; whether they were better or worse than the
harrowing silence, he could not decide, so he cut through both of them. “I know it feels unfair to
ask. The guilt I carry for putting you through this is no small thing, but I would not be doing so if I
was not serious about finding some other alternative. Bella… I don’t even know how to start
talking about Bella.” (Bella, who sobbed at the Dark Lord’s feet; Bella, who would kill Sirius and
Regulus and everyone around them in a heartbeat, if he was honest with himself.) “But I’ve said it
before, and I will say it again, that I do not intend to give up on this family.”

“Stubborn, aren’t we?” she said with what sounded like the smallest hint of a smile in her tone,
though she was still facing out into the hallway.

“We are, a bit.”

It was not until the front door had shut behind her, punctuated by the familiar crack of apparition,
that Regulus realised she had not answered his question.

“Hold the lift!”

Emmeline spilled into the half-open doors of the Ministry lift, slamming against the side of the
wall with an undignified ‘oof’. She wasn't sure if she was more or less embarrassed to find the
world's most uncoordinated Auror as her only company, but she was in a hurry. Getting caught up
in anachronistic research was easily done, both because it was interesting and because it felt like
doing one of those 'spot the difference' games they do for the sweepstakes in the paper. It gave
such a pleasant feeling of accomplishment to find the patterns, but it was doubtful that Hestia
would enjoy being left at the Leaky by herself.

“I think I'd die if I tried that in heels,” Tonks said. She smiled in a somewhat forcible manner,
which made Emmeline want to give she and Remus both a good shaking. If they were so clearly -
and so miserably - not pursuing something, they really ought to get it together and make a try of it.

“Running in heels is an acquired skill,” Emmeline declared, but took the compliment. “You look
terrible.”

“Cheers,” Tonks deadpanned.

“I mean you don't look like yourself,” Emmeline said. “Not quite as colourful as usual, shall we
say.”

Tonks made a face. “It's complicated.”

“So complicated that you're both making yourselves miserable,” Emmeline said. Tonks shot her a
dirty look, so she shrugged and continued. “I don't claim to understand the difficulties involved
with lycanthropy, but as I understand it, it's only contagious through bites, and the scarring is quite
permanent. A good regime of bondage really could solve your problems.”

Tonks stared at her blankly for a moment, before something in her eyes sparked and she started
laughing at her. At least it was a genuine seeming laugh, if a bit outside what Emmeline thought
she'd do. Tonks was holding onto the side of the lift and wiping her eyes as Emmeline waited
impatiently for the uproar to calm down.

“It's just good practical sense,” Emmeline tried again.

“He won't even think about going out with me,” Tonks wheezed, “and you're recommending
practical shagging tips!”
“It’s not as if he’s never gone out with anyone,” Emmeline said, as a hint of defensiveness slipped into her tone. “I’ve met a few girls he’s gone out with. Besides, none of them ever described him as a natural biter, so he’s really overreacting if that’s the only problem.”

That seemed to set Tonks off again while Emmeline rolled her eyes and waited.

“I suggest sitting down and making a list of potential problems, weigh them against both of you looking like wet blankets, and come up with some creative solutions,” Emmeline replied over Tonks’s wheezing. “You’re my friends, and I don’t like to see you both miserable. Especially now.”

“Don’t tell me,” Tonks said, rubbing her hand across of her face. “Tell him!”

“Why don’t you suggest it?” Emmeline said.

“Because he half-runs every time I get him alone,” Tonks said, beginning to droop a little. Merlin alive, but she was so young in moments like this. The intermittent relationship drama during the last war had kept the gossipiest of the Order going through frightening all night waits.

“If you really want to talk to him, then invest in some good running shoes,” Emmeline advised as the lift doors opened. “I’ve got to go. I’m meeting Hestia for lunch.”

Emmeline bid Tonks goodbye in the lobby and walked at a hurried pace for the fifteen minutes or so to the Leaky Cauldron. It was looking depressingly sparse, but she gave a nodding acknowledgement to Tom, who pointed her in the direction of what looked like lime green robes reading the paper. She ordered with him before taking her place in the far corner, just in time for Hestia’s head to pop over the broadsheet.

“You’re very late,” Hestia chided.

“I lost track of time,” Emmeline said with a smirk.

Hestia returned it; it was always a fun commentary on her that she worked with time and had a tendency to lose track of it. Not as badly as Dedalus, but certainly enough. “How was your mini-break?”

“Quiet,” Emmeline said, truthfully. It had been a quiet, pleasant night spent looking at a curious owl, a sleepy village harbouring the pureblood elitists, and for the most part, good company. “How’s the hospital?”

Hestia pinched her jaw. “Overloaded. Me, Ida Delaney, and Caro Abbott by ourselves in Spell Damage when the last attack came in. It took half the houses in the street right off of their place and scattered them. It was chaos. Not to mention the reporters sniffing around.”

“The Prophet had their chance,” Emmeline said, trying to keep the bitterness from her tone.

“The Prophet is worried about being taken over like the WWN.” Hestia barely suppressed a shiver. “They found that poor newscaster’s torso halfway across the station.”

“Barbaric,” Emmeline said stiffly. She had been trying to ignore the fact that she knew her own home had been a mess; if not from Regulus telling her, then from the state of the room afterwards. She supposed it was cowardly not to see it head on, but she didn’t want that to be the memory she carried with her or to compound her own guilt.

“We were supposed to have another....gathering,” Hestia said, looking around conspicuously.
“I know,” Emmeline nodded. “We're all so spread out, but there's been so many attacks lately.”

As if she had queued it up herself, there was the sound of screaming and things breaking from the back. With haste, both women sprung to their feet and raced towards the entrance of Diagon only to be caught in the tide of people fleeing it. Frustratedly, Emmeline promptly grabbed Hestia's arm and apparated near where she had once lived in Knockturn and took off at a sprint.

The cause of the ruckus became immediately apparent. Florean Fortescue's ice cream parlour had overturned tables, glass all over the floor, and the door had been knocked off its hinges. Looking back at Hestia briefly, Emmeline grabbed her wand tightly and steeled herself for a fight that did not come. The place had simply emptied. There were smatterings of blood that made her adrenaline kick into her veins, but whatever it was, it had happened quickly, efficiently, and with a target in mind. Emmeline wanted to kick something over. She hated when they were truly competent – it made her feel damned useless.

“He's not upstairs,” Hestia said, brow furrowed as she appeared in the doorway again. “They’ve taken him, haven't they?”

Emmeline nodded curtly.

“Did that happen before?” Hestia asked.

Emmeline nodded again. People had gone missing all of the time, but there had also been signs of disappearance here and there. She thought with a shiver of the inferi, an army of the living flesh, and wondered with a sickening lurch if that was what had become of Caradoc and the others like him for whom they found no body. If it was the fate of poor Florean.

“Nothing we can do,” Emmeline said, looking about. “We ought not be standing here when the Aurors arrive, in case it's no one friendly.”

There wasn’t a lot of time to spare once they got to the train station.

It had been a manic morning. Mr. Weasley had been called into work early, and despite repeatedly pointing out they were now NEWT students who didn't need to be escorted, Bill volunteered to take them before he went into work. Then it was a matter of getting things packed up, since Harry wasn't sure if he was coming back here or not. Mrs. Weasley seemed to think he was, but Harry hadn't spoken to Sirius about it yet. He hadn't seen him since he left to go up 'the beach,' barring a quick trip to Diagon Alley, which had been irritating enough for both of them that they didn't stay. If he thought being thought of as soft in the head last year was bad enough, the rumours of what happened at the Department of Mysteries (part of it, anyway) had meant he was not only getting the Boy Who Lived level of public staring, but also the talk of being ‘chosen,’ which had sparked it even worse. Adding Sirius into the mix hadn't helped either; it'd only been a few weeks since his name had cleared, and he hadn't said anything publicly. Hermione supposed it might mean people thought it was all a ploy, or they were just scared, but the mix of interactions had left them both feeling sour.

The beach, or Porth Iago, had turned out to be a small wizarding seaside village in the north of Wales. Hermione had delved into researching the place. She’d explained that it was a cultural hotspot for old magical families, with vacationing there going back half a millenium due to being both remote and difficult to get to for muggles. They weren’t staying there directly, Harry knew. He’d heard Sirius saying as much to Mrs. Weasley. They were going to a neighbouring magical harbour about a couple of miles away, which was apparently much less exclusive and a popular holiday spot for younger children. Mrs. Weasley had said she’d gone up to the seaside and ridden
the winged horses with her brothers when she was a little girl. She'd then warned them against getting sunburnt.

(Ron had told him later that he'd heard the story of one of her brothers managing to get the other to burn a swear word into his chest using the salve, and his grandma hadn't been too pleased. It sounded like something Fred and George would do.)

The closest thing Harry had ever been to going to the beach had been when they were trying to get away from his Hogwarts letters, so he wasn't sure what exactly they were going to do. Hermione must have had the same thought, because she had her head in books and guides for several days before they left. She wanted to try the diving (Harry'd had enough to that with the Triwizard), sailing (might be alright), and she was curious about the pleasure wheel (Harry hadn't asked about that one). Thankfully, Bill reassured them that there were interesting things to do as well, and that they had a lot of quidditch space up there, haunted houses, live music shows, and they sometimes had jousting matches you could go and watch.

After some wrangling with the Ministry guard, they finally got away and met up with Sirius on Platform 3¼. Until that moment, it had never occurred to Harry that there were other platforms at King's Cross for wizards.

They spotted Sirius easily enough; he was still uneasy about the crowds. Harry guessed if he'd been avoiding being human in crowds for a decade and a half, he might feel a bit uneasy too. He did look better, less pale or drawn. Harry had vaguely thought Sirius would like living by the sea, somewhere a bit wild and stretching out. He'd thought the same back when Sirius had first asked if he wanted to come and live with him. He still hadn't gotten used to the idea, and it felt like it'd be snatched away at any moment.

Sirius grinned when he noticed them. “Alright, Bill?”

“Yeah, just dropping off some trouble for you,” Bill said, with a wink.

“They do look like trouble,” Sirius agreed. He looked them over. “Nice hat.”

“Thank you,” Hermione beamed.

They clambered onto the train with just enough time to get their seats before Hermione launched into a million questions, each of which seemed destined to go unanswered. Sirius explained he didn't spend much time in Porth Colmon, having spent his summers in Iago, but that the train goes up there.

“You get there magically or not at all,” Sirius said with a snort. “You can have a look about if you want, but not by yourself. Remus is coming down tomorrow, and Regulus and Emme – Emmeline Vance – are there at the minute, so you want to go about, you talk to us first.”

“There are supposed to be some historic sights,” Hermione said, her sense of danger conflicting with her desire to see all of it. “The castles, the gardens, the cliffs, the gallery-”

“We can figure something out,” Sirius promised.

They spent the rest of the train journey talking about the games of quidditch they'd been playing, the wedding preparations, the animosity in the house with Fleur, and the prospect of going back to school with Snape teaching Defense, as well as a new Potions master.

“He might come up here,” Sirius remarked, before barking a laugh at the horror that must have reflected in his face. “Slughorn, not Snape. He used to do the circuit.”
“He said he'd been hiding for months,” Harry said, thinking back to meeting him.

“It must be bad for Slughorn to give up his creature comforts,” Sirius mused.

When they reached the station, they stopped by the harbourside to get cones of fish and chips before taking a walk up the winding road along the coast for what seemed like ages. The house they came to looked like it was two houses that had been slapped together haphazardly at the middle, with a wooden panelled blue top and a stone, white bottom and a giant overhanging roof. The garden had obviously been let to run wild, but the place looked sturdy enough. The inside was like a mix of Mrs. Figg's old furniture, Umbridge's office, and old car boot sale with junk everywhere.

“Who lived here?” Hermione asked.

“Cass,” Sirius said, before elaborating. “Cassiopeia, my great aunt. She was a bit mental, but harmless as far as people I'm related to go.”

“She must've really liked cats,” Ron said, picking up what looked like a dusty cat toy.

“Yep,” Sirius said. “Took them everywhere.”

Definitely reminded Harry of Mrs. Figg.

They unpacked their things into the bedrooms, with Hermione on the second floor and he and Ron on the first. Sirius encouraged them to go explore when they were done, which they took to heart. About half a mile down the road, they came to another village, which looked peculiar. A lot of the houses were mismatched colours, there were gardens and hedges shaped into a variety of animals, a horde of palm trees, and a gigantic chess set that made him instantly think of the set they'd encountered their very first year. He hadn't thought five years later, they'd still be fighting Voldemort.

Still, Ron seemed to be enjoying himself, and Harry couldn't help but get caught up in his enthusiasm.

They spent the rest of the day exploring. They went to the unicorn preservation society at Hermione's request, then down to the maritime boats where they had battle reenactments. They were too late to see one today, but promised themselves they'd come back to see it the next day.

It was starting to get dark by the time they were coming back. Harry had lost track of the time, but it was the first time in ages that he felt he wasn't being watched from behind him or from something in his head, and it felt good enough that he hadn't wanted it to end. He'd thought Sirius might make a comment on it, but he didn't; they just talked about what they did and about the reenactments. He seemed happy enough for them to go.

“I'd go early,” Sirius recommended. “Remus'll be here in the afternoon, so we should take the chance to go up to the main house and look at the castle while he’s around.”

“Where was he?” Harry asked.

“Order business,” Sirius said, with a tone of finality. Another frustrating dead end. “You should get some sleep. You have people to offend tomorrow simply by existing.”

The morning brought a smattering of rain, but it cleared up as they headed along the main path. Harry could get used to the anonymity of it, to warm days spent in grasslands, on beaches, and
being able to walk to the next villages without apparition. Hermione had already said that she and Ron were going to go out for their licenses this year, as they'd be seventeen when the next tests were administered. As fond as he was of flying, Harry couldn't wait to be able to do it as well. It seemed like the kind of thing that came in handy when people kept trying to kill you.

The reenactment was busy: a lot of noise and people enjoying trying taking the helm of the ship or following around the 'treasure map' along the main coast. They were trying to find the pub (which had once been a pirate hangout) when Harry spotted a familiar wisp of blonde hair. He smacked Ron's arm and headed on in the same direction, but within five minutes, Harry had lost him in the crowd.

Hermione appeared in front of them. "What were you looking for?"

"Malfoy," Harry said, going up on his tiptoes to try and see better. "I thought I saw him."

"So?" Ron shrugged. "A lot of people come up here for the holidays."

Harry hadn't been sure if he wanted to tell his friends about his suspicions. He didn't want to get brushed off, or told he was imagining things, and he couldn't be sure that they wouldn't. He didn't want to keep it a secret either. If they did believe him, then they could go and find out what Malfoy was up to.

"He's joined the Death Eaters," Harry said, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"How do you know?" Hermione asked, brow furrowing.

"I saw him showing someone - Nott, maybe - his arm," Harry said. "What else could it be?"

"Maybe he's just got a weird mole," Ron suggested.

Harry shook his head. "It was something he was proud of."

"He might be proud of his weird mole," Ron replied.

"Did you tell Dumbledore?" Hermione pressed, skating over Ron's comments.

"I told Sirius," Harry said, "He said he'd pass it along, but nothing's come from it yet."

"That you know of," Hermione reminded him.

Harry shook his head, more from the frustration than disagreeing with her. He was sick of secrets. They just caused everyone problems. Besides, if they were letting Fred and George join the Order, they were at least as mature as those two and had all faced down Voldemort and his followers on more than one occasion.

"I'm going after him," Harry decided, beginning to hike up.

"We told Sirius we'd wait for Lupin and go up together," Hermione said.

"I want to know what's going on," Harry insisted. If someone got hurt because he let Malfoy just walk on by himself, or if they could have gotten some information that would help them in the long run and didn't, then that would be on their shoulders. "So I'm going. You don't have to come with me."

"Of course we're going," Ron said, who looked at Hermione.
Hermione looked torn. “We can’t get caught up here.”

Harry nodded. “We won’t. We’ll be careful.”

Regulus was browsing the shops in Iago - hoping with silent fervor (and little luck) that he would be struck with inspiration for a reciprocatory birthday present to give to Harry - when he caught sight of Draco approaching from the grasslands. Alone, conveniently enough, considering the potential for unbearable interactions, were they to speak with Narcissa present. Since learning of the boy’s existence, Regulus had entertained a number of circumstances in which he might meet his cousin’s son. None of them had involved a girls’ lavatory, fake identity, or Harry Potter, and Bella’s presence in Draco’s life made the reality of it even worse, but it was too late to undo what had already been done. If Draco was a Death Eater, time to wait around for problems to solve themselves was no longer an available luxury.

To himself, Regulus dryly acknowledged that asking anyone (be it Sirius or the other kids) for gift advice was embarrassing enough, but there was quite possibly no worse person than Draco. However limited his direct exposure might be, it was clear that they did not get along and may prove an even greater barrier than Narcissa and Sirius were.

As if summoned by thought along, Regulus spotted a familiar array of conspicuous hair - messy black, carrot red, and bushy brown - slipping through the crowd just as Draco disappeared into a bookshop. The three teenagers did not appear to have noticed Regulus himself yet, fixed as their attentions were on shop front, and though he might have expected that from Hermione, he doubted the other two were concerned about the books themselves. Harry had snuck off from Regulus himself, not so long ago, and there was a very apparent lack of supervision that he doubted Sirius had approved. (A jarring thing to think, considering his brother’s own rebellious tendencies.)

They were lingering outside of Draco’s destination with faces pressed to the glass when Regulus stepped up behind them, folding his hands neatly.

“Good morning,” he began, his tone as pleasant as it was aware. “It appears you’ve lost your Iago escort.”

There was a collective jolt throughout the trio of teenagers, who stepped back from the shop window with a mixture of contrition and stubbornness. They stole a glance at each other rather than answering, with Ron giving a shrug.

"We got side-tracked," Harry admitted.

“I can see that. You know, it's much easier to browse for books when you can actually read the titles and contents,” Regulus responded, lifting an eyebrow pointedly. “And it is much easier to spy on people when you have not carried out the same plan previously.”

"It wasn't a plan," Harry replied, a hint of defensiveness coming into his tone.

“The same non-plan, then,” Regulus granted, glancing between the three. “This is the Iago area up here, and although I do not have a problem with your presence and exploration, the fact that Sirius, of all people, has passed restrictions on an area really should be telling.”

"We're fine," Harry protested, though there was very little heat behind the words. Perhaps he was taking into account they’d gotten caught.

"And we were just going back," Hermione said. She locked eyes with Harry and lifted her eyebrows. "Aren't we?"
“Shall I apparate you back?” Regulus asked, glancing between them as he recalled the last spying attempt on his watch.

"We can manage," Hermione said, finally taking her eyes off of Harry when his shoulders slumped. "We're supposed to be meeting Lupin anyway, and we shouldn't be late."

For a moment, it looked like Harry might argue again, but he seemed to decide it wasn't worth the argument.

Coming from Hermione, the reassurance sounded a little more reliable, so Regulus granted a nod, lingering outside the shop for a moment longer as he watched them scurry back in the direction they had come. As far as Regulus could guess, that meeting with Lupin might have been a chaperoning trip up here in the first place, though he doubted Lupin would be particularly keen on spying, at least as far as safe activities went.

When the three teenagers were out of sight, Regulus slipped into the bookshop, and for a moment, simply appreciated the familiar rush of nostalgia. Though he never hesitated to pack half the shelves at home to drag up to the Welsh coast, he had spent a great deal of time in this particular shop. Whether Draco was a reader himself, or whether he was in search of a certain text in particular, Regulus could not say for sure; it still stung, no knowing much of anything about him, but he supposed the only way to get around that was to start finding ways to learn.

Striking up conversation felt awkward, considering their previous (rather humiliating) interaction, but he determined with little delay that it would be more prudent to probe for Draco's reaction before saying anything at all. Unlikely though it was, perhaps the interaction hadn't been meaningful enough to remember.

Draco did not seem as though he planned to immediately leave, so the rush to push forward faded into a more relaxed pause at one of the bookshelves focusing on advanced conjuring spells, plucking one to start flipping through.

Looking up from the book in hand - *Advanced Alchemy* - Draco seemed to notice him, before giving a slight shake of his head and looking back at the book. After a beat, then another, he finally piped up. "You're not even trying to be subtle," he said, eyes flicking up to him.

Biting back a comment about polite greetings, Regulus glanced over with a lifted brow. Narcissa's son had a bit of an attitude, he'd noticed, though it was difficult to say if it was a permanent state or if Regulus was currently in the designated attitude category.

“I'm allowed to browse,” Regulus responded pointedly. “I've been a patron of this shop since before your parents were even married.”

"It would be pleasant to be left to one's own devices, but it doesn't appear to be happening," Draco said, before giving the window a pointed look, then glanced back at Regulus. "Or did they finally give up and leave?"

“They've left,” Regulus confirmed with a little flicker at the corner of his mouth, shaking his head. “Window-shopping is a less convincing espionage tactic when you're doing so at a bookshop."

“What espionage?” Draco scoffed, shutting the book around his fingers. “They couldn't have been more obviously following me about if they’d slipped screaming off the cliffs walking up here and died.”

“Espionage is not everyone's calling,” Regulus granted with a nod. Presumably, Harry did not
realise Draco was aware of his spying attempts, though such a confirmation was not particularly surprising. Harry and his friends stood out in a crowd - especially this crowd. “Although I am sincere in my fondness for this shop, I will admit that I was, in part, motivated to clear the rather strange circumstances of our previous meeting. I was not particularly honest, though I expect you were keen enough to deduct as much.”

"Hiding in the girls bathroom with Potter," Draco deadpanned. "Those circumstances?"

“His presence was circumstantial,” Regulus began, which was true in a sense, as Harry would not have been present if he hadn't been required for the chamber. The subject was a risky one - Draco could easily report the details of his skulking - but the worst that could happen was already an inevitability. Arguably, it was better to spin some direction than to let the possibilities flail freely, though it was a poor and not entirely convincing comfort.

Steeling himself, Regulus continued. “As was the unfortunate location. Lavatories of any nature were not my intended destination, I can assure you of that. I was searching for a particular passage but was, in the end, unsuccessful. I have been away for some time, but stories of Slytherin's monster struck me as intriguing, being a Slytherin alumnus myself, and although I am not actually a reporter, my curiosity clearly gets away from me sometimes. Waiting until the term was over and reconnecting with Snape at that time would have been more prudent, but I must admit I was a bit curious about your High Inquisitor, too. Exceptionally poor planning, but at least some interest was sated.”

Draco looked at him with a measure of disbelief, but perhaps also a spark of amusement. "Those circumstances were breaking into Hogwarts and going to the lavatory to go looking for something from three years ago were because you were curious about it," Draco summed up.

“Essentially, yes,” Regulus responded directly, turning up the corner of his mouth. “I have since decided it is not worth the effort involved, but it was interesting enough, as far as diversions go.”

"If you find skulking around bathrooms with people who are soft in the head interesting," Draco muttered to himself before placing the book back on the shelf.

“Life has been very dull, lately.” Eyes flicking down to the book Draco had replaced, Regulus shifted the subject, feeling that the Hogwarts fiasco was slightly more contained. Even if Draco tattled on him, it was a story he could at least vaguely defend for long enough to deflect, which was all he could hope for, at this point. “You're interested in alchemy?”

Draco hesitated for a moment, before nodding. "There's not enough sign ups for it to be taken as elective this year."

A small, sobered smile flickered on Regulus's face as he thought of his grandfather - not the one he directly shared with Narcissa, yet it was strangely comforting, all the same, to see a flicker of it in Draco.

“An interesting subject, certainly, though it was not available for pursuit when I was at school, either,” Regulus began, and after a beat, continued carefully, “However much I might enjoy reading, I primarily heard about it from my grandfather when he saw fit to expand upon his own experiences. Reticent though he was, it was always fascinating. Come to think of it, you might have known him, considering he was family to you too, albeit more distantly. Arcturus Black?”

For a moment, Draco stared at him with an interested expression which slowly turned more neutral. "There aren't any Blacks left," he said with confidence.
“I understand how that misconception came about, but it is nonetheless a misconception,” Regulus responded, nerves twisting up and bundling, but he could not quite pull apart the anticipation from the anxiety. The lack of reaction suggested that Bellatrix had not said anything to Draco yet, at least, which was a small blessing... “Your mother and I are cousins, and I’m very fond of her, but I was assumed dead, making for a rather awkward situation to clear up. Do pardon my reservation on the matter.”

“My mother would never be seen with someone who socialises with traitors and filth!” Draco responded hotly. His tone lowered considerably, as if he did yesterday to be overheard.

“You ought to seek context before making assumptions. I relate to that sentiment more deeply than you are likely to realise, given the unfortunate circumstances of our meetings, but I am not some slumming traitor to be dismissed, whatever the current climate,” Regulus said, his tone firm and even as he held a more direct gaze. “I once took such hard lines for the unshakable truth, but the world is a complicated place.”

"It's not complicated," Draco said, a loftiness returning to his tone. "Either you associate with them, or you associate with us. You can't do both. I keep seeing you with them; I've never seen you associate with any of us."

“I'm associating with you right now,” Regulus said pointedly. “Just because you see something in passing does not mean that your understanding of the situation is complete."

"You're being condescending with me right now," Draco said, with his chin lifting a little. "My understanding is that they're the reason my father isn't here right now, and anyone who thinks they've got the right idea is no friend of my mother. She's not a traitor, and neither am I."

“I do not delight in your father's imprisonment,” Regulus countered firmly, though he wasn't entirely sure if that was as true a statement as it had been some months ago; regardless, whatever fate Lucius did or didn't deserve, Regulus knew he didn't like the determination he saw in Draco's eyes.

With a subtle shift, Regulus scanned the immediate area for other shoppers, but all he could see was a bored-looking cashier reading a book on the other side of the shop, so he continued in low tones. “The friends I grew up with are dead or in prison with him, with the exception of Severus, and I don't like that either. People I care about are suffering, and however it might look at a glance, I stand by my attempts to remediate that. At your age, I pursued a more conventional solution, but I'm afraid it only made things worse,” he said, gaze flicking down to Draco's arm, then up to his eyes again with a stubborn set to his face. “I don't expect that to mean anything to me, but that is the truth of it.”

Draco followed his eyeline to his arm, and pulled it close to his body with a look of tense frustration. He also seemed to glance at the shop worker, before setting his jaw. "Then you didn't try hard enough," he declared. "I won't be making any such mistakes."

“Presumptuous of you to assume,” Regulus said dryly, shaking his head and trying to calm the prickle of annoyance. “I merely want to communicate that I understand what it is like to have the weight of family and expectations on your shoulders. Perhaps it does not feel like much of a burden now, and this iteration of the war is bound to differ, but sometimes the idea is more grandiose than the reality. Do with that as you will.”

“For someone who keeps telling me I'm making assumptions, you're making plenty of them.”

Draco retorted coolly.
“I'm stating experiences,” Regulus corrected firmly. “If they sound like assumptions, it is merely because we have faced similar circumstances and made similar choices.”

"You're stating vague commentary about my life, choices, and family. You approach me on my summer holiday, around Potter and his ilk, then go around implying my mother is being disloyal while claiming to care about her, implying you know things about me and I've only seen you twice, once of which was coming out of a bathroom you found curious and interesting," Draco said. "I don't think you know what you're stating. I'd go get myself an appointment with a mediwizard if I were you."

“I know exactly what I am stating. It's vague because we're in public, and there are some things that are better not to state or show off when the environment is not private,” Regulus said with a hint of annoyance before his expression smoothed again, resisting the urge to glance at Draco's arm again. “You misunderstand the context, but there is evidently no point to arguing it further right now. You spoke first, and no one is forcing you to continue doing so, should you wish to stop.”

"I was done here anyway," Draco replied, and with it, pushed straight past Regulus with little courtesy or regard.

Mouth thinning in a flash of irritation, Regulus thought privately that the boy’s manners were surprisingly atrocious, but he said nothing, instead stubbornly sticking his nose in the book he had plucked off the shelf. He waited several minutes, ensuring Draco had sufficient time to depart before returning his own book and stepping out to apparate back to Aunt Cass’s house by the harbour. Boats peppered the coast, and throngs of people were still wandering about the surrounding activities, clearly enjoying much less annoying holiday conversation.

Sirius was stretched out on a chair in the back when Regulus dropped into another, just adjacent, and summoned a book through the open window without a word.

"Hello to you too."

Regulus glanced over at Sirius as the book flew into his hand. “Hello,” he said, shifting in his seat.

Sirius opened one eye to look at him with the barest hint of a grin, "Is that what it sounds like when I do that?"

Cringling his nose a little, Regulus supposed it was not his most polite entrance. “Similar, yes,” he admitted with a little huff. “I apologise for my poor manners. Perhaps they are contagious.”

Sirius snapped his fingers. "You've lost me there, I don't make apologies." Pushing himself up on his elbows, he did a visual scan of his brother. "What's pushed you to the point of ill manners?"

“Conversation with Draco could have gone better,” Regulus said, his expression still drawn a little as he opened his book.

That piqued Sirius's interest. "How much better?"

“He is willfully ignoring my sound advice and is convinced his mother will refuse to talk to me, even though she and I just had a perfectly lovely conversation,” Regulus said into the book with a mild twinge of annoyance.

"You foisted advice on him right after meeting him?" Sirius gave a chuckle. "No wonder it went badly. Did you forget what house you were in? Have you retroactively joined Ravenclaw? Or has all this time with blunt Gryffindors begun to rub off on you?"
Regulus leveled his irritation at Sirius briefly before looking down at the book again. “It wasn’t direct advice, per se,” he said a little defensively.

"But you launched right into what you thought instead of just talking to him and getting a feel for what to say first?” Sirius swung his legs over the side of the seat, turning to face his brother. "I'd expect that shit from me, but you? I know you're excited about meeting Narcissa's brat, but were you in that much of a rush? It's not as if he can join the Death Eaters twice."

“He started the conversation with an attitude. I wasn’t going to concede to insults,” Regulus said, lifting his chin a little as he leaned back in his chair.

Sirius gave a bark of laughter. "He's sixteen, Slytherin, and a spoiled brat. Of course he gave you lip!"

Slanting his mouth, Regulus made a little hmph sound. “I was merely trying to relate, with perfect civility, might I add. It was unnecessary. I was a more polite teenager than that.”

"Most people are tossers when they're teenagers, Regulus. Some people even grow out of it." Sirius huffed at him, with a grin. "Even you had your moments. You thought someone might insult you, or was beneath your attention, you were snotty with them first, probably so you could justify it as just reacting when they got shirty with you right back. "

The justification was more annoying than it might normally be. On some level, Regulus recognised that he could easily make that same argument if it had been someone else expressing annoyance with Narcissa's son, but it did little as a balm for the sting when all he wanted to do was shuffle the kid out of a disaster waiting to happen.

With a heavy sigh, Regulus stared hard at the page open in front of him.

Sirius moved, and pushed the ball of his foot against Regulus' knee lightly. "How bad was Narcissa?"

"Narcissa was arguably pleasant, actually,” Regulus responded with more finality, those little flickers of tension seeming negligible at the moment. Strained though it had been, it felt downright comforting by comparison.

"Then stop worrying about it," Sirius said, pushing himself back onto his chair. "You don't have any pull, so you'll just have to wait on her using some of hers before you try that again. Try to not to take it personally; he was enough of a brat to Buckbeak that he nipped him, and thought it would be exceptionally funny to go chasing down Harry dressed as a dementor when he realised they scare him. Needs a good kick if you ask me, but manners are the least of his problems."

"Yes, I'll just stop worrying." Regulus drawled in a tone that suggested he was unlikely to stop worrying, though some of the tightness loosened in his face. Once again, he sighed; Narcissa had been more noncommittal than he would have preferred, but she had come, had warmed, had not shut him down, and she remained still a hope to grasp at. "At least Cissa hasn't withdrawn."

Sirius sighed. “You thought she would?”

“I hoped she wouldn’t.” Though he stilled his tongue before saying as much, Regulus could not help but worry that he was overestimating her degree of caring - that society, Bella, her son and husband - would be too much. Her willingness to speak to him had steeled him when Draco said she would never, but the past was no guarantee of the future. Regulus knew he was supposed to be the one who was unshakably confident in their family’s ability to pull through, and even Sirius was
trying to be reassuring, but the sting of the day still lingered sharp.

What *would* she do if Regulus kept pushing? What would she do if her son wouldn’t follow?

“I know I'm just repeating myself at this point,” Regulus added with a shrug, still looking at the page.

“There's something to be said for consistency,” Sirius remarked. “But there is a chance - maybe just in the short term - that you could lose them. You gonna be able to handle that one?”

“How I feel about it doesn't have much bearing on whether it will happen or not. I must deal with it regardless,” Regulus responded dryly.

"If it helps, I don't truly believe it'll be a permanent state." Sirius sighed heavily. "Sooner or later, the truth always comes out. Whether that's Voldemort throwing them to the wolves, maybe literally since Greyback is kicking about, or if it's Bellatrix showing she no longer gives a shit, it'll show eventually that it's all just one big scheme for power and nothing and no one else matters at all. If you told her the truth, then Narcissa's not that stupid; she'll see the signs, and what she chooses to do with them is up to her. I want to believe it's grabbing her kid by the scruff and pulling him out of the firing line, but let's face it, if Druella had done that with Bellatrix, half of the problems would be solved already. Someone's got to break the cycle, but it also has to be her choice - as it was yours."

Regulus nodded, breathing out some of the tension. Though Draco had been more stubbornly committed to the Cause than he'd hoped, Narcissa did not seem to want him involved anymore than Regulus did. It was not a lot - it was not a guarantee - she would never leave the boy behind - but if they could drag Draco out of this mess, it might still be possible.

“I hope she'll make it,” he said with a nod.

"For your sake, as do I." Sirius gave a sudden laugh. "Try to remember they can't kick you out of a family you're the head of, last remaining of the name of, holder of the ancestral house, and in charge of the bloody tapestry."

Regulus lifted his eyes, a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. “I will remember. I cannot make them stay, but at least they cannot forcibly eject me, which is something.”

"Technically, that would make them traitors," Sirius chuckled.

The smile rose from Regulus’s mouth to his eyes. “I can appreciate a technicality. Especially an ironic one,” he said with some amusement, despite the sting. “That certainly turns the familial context on its head.”

"What did I tell you in January?" Sirius said, as he sighed in a hopelessly dramatic fashion. "I can never just do something without Bellatrix deciding she wants to do it too, but louder and more dramatically. Nothing is sacred anymore."

Sniggering, Regulus shook his head. “Well, the chance of her copying your defense of blood equality remains low.”

"What's truly frightening is if Voldemort decided muggleborns were the best thing ever tomorrow, I don't know how true that would be." For a moment, it looked like Sirius wanted to laugh at that, but there was a seriousness to his tone. "She might know it's all about him, and not about some bullshit purity obsession. She might be too infatuated to care." He glanced back at Regulus. "I told her that once, years ago; that I never thought I'd see the day a Black called themselves someone's
servant like it was a badge of honour. But she does, and if Narcissa's kid isn't that far gone, there's hope he'll wise up, yes?"

“There is,” Regulus granted with a nod. The accusation of servitude had been slung at Regulus, too, many years ago - an aggravating and upsetting blow - and the point had not been wrong, which had only made it worse at the time. Truthfully, he found it a little baffling to think that Bellatrix could hear a point like that and not care in the least - yet even then, she had been exceptionally fixated on the Dark Lord, and it seemed to have only grown worse. Unsettling though it was, his own mind, too, had been resistant for a time.

Those days were behind him now, however stubbornly the ramifications might stick to his feet like a shadow, and it was not a memory he wanted to stew in. Instead he tipped his head and brushed off the thoughtful distance from his expression. “Perspective is a strange thing.”

"For example, from most people's perspective, taking a werewolf, muggleborn, blood traitor, and Harry into the mess for an afternoon sounds insane, when in reality, Hermione wants to go look at the castle, and it will probably be so boring that I'll wish I brought books everywhere like you do," Sirius replied. "Death from monotony would be a terrible way to go at this point. Still, got to find out if your girlfriend's just a gossip or if something's actually going on with Remus."

“She isn't my girlfriend,” Regulus said, conspicuously walled off by his book and trying to ignore the way he could almost physically feel his attention sharpening inside his head. (He still had a time-loop to explore, and annoying though his brother’s prodding might be, it did spark a thought to ask how she felt about skipping work for a Day That Won't Exist. He had intended to roam about by himself, but it felt a bit lonely, today.) “I do, however, have the right idea about bringing books everywhere, it’s true. I rarely find myself in mind-numbingly boring situations.”

Sirius snorted. "Keep telling yourself that."
Chapter 7

There was no noticeable indication of the time-loop when Regulus arrived at the designated location at (or rather, just before) the designated time, nor did he see Emmeline right away, despite her confirmation-by-fire-call the night before. He was a little unclear on how to initiate the loop beyond roaming around the spot and hoping he hit the correct spot. The horrible mess of thinking you triggered it when you didn’t was just starting to creep into his mind when he saw Emmeline slip from a stream of people and start walking towards him, effectively fending off the creeping anxiety and instead drawing up the corner of his mouth.

“Good morning,” Regulus greeted when she reached his side.

“Good morning,” Emmeline replied warmly. “Have you initiated yet?”

He shook his head. “I decided to wait until you arrived. We simply walk into the space, and it will trigger, correct?” With one hand, he gestured towards the area before them.

“That's the gist,” Emmeline confirmed, though with a flicker of wistfulness, she added, “I can't enter it with you until Friday, or I'll not be here when the shutdown supplies arrive. While a lost few days sounds nice, I suppose you'll have to make do with me resetting for a few days too.”

Disappointing news, he had to admit, though she had still come, so that was something. “No consequence-free neglecting of your responsibilities today, then?”

“You have an entire consequence free time, you can do whatever you like, and you choose to spend it with me?” Emmeline shook her head, barely hiding a smile. “Ask me once you’re in the loop. I might not remember it; I’m not sure if the memory will return when I enter on Friday or not, but either way, I’d be honoured to have a day of neglecting my responsibilities with you.”

Regulus considered pointing out that he enjoyed spending time with her when there were consequences, so naturally he would value doing so when there weren’t, but instead he nodded with a smile in his eyes and shifted to pass through the spot where the time-loop was supposedly active. No discernable change crept over him, no visual markers were in place, and once again, he felt a little unsettled about whether it had actually worked or not.

“There's not supposed to be a noticeable change, correct?” He glanced around him then back to Emmeline.

"No, we can tell everything is slightly out of sync, but it's so miniscule, it isn't noticeable without diagnostic spellwork," Emmeline replied. She reached over to pat what looked like a person's garden wall and tapped it. "It starts just beyond that, and once you're in it, you're out of sync with the rest of us. Did you expect to feel something?"

Regulus shrugged. “I suppose, though it is more a matter of not knowing what to expect, rather than expecting something specific. If people seek them out, I wondered if perhaps it was obvious once you were in it, though I suppose they must figure it out in hindsight when their day loops back, and it is the second time that is intentional.”

"People tell each other." Emmeline shrugged, clearly not thinking much about it. "I can show you the diagnostics if you like, but I suppose the easiest way would be to use a pocket watch. You should find yourself a partial second off, so the longer you're in it, the more off your watch will be. Assuming you have a watch, but you do seem the traditionalist sort that would have been given
"I do," Regulus confirmed, patting at his pocket where his father’s pocket watch was nestled. Traditionalist, indeed. It had been given to him on his seventeenth birthday (as dictated by said wizarding tradition) and with him ever since, though the cave had been a nightmare he hadn’t expected to survive, much less a delicately attached accessory. His chest twinged sentimentally, but he brushed it off. “Seems reasonable.”

"I'm a terribly reasonable person," Emmeline said, though her attempt to stop smirking clearly meant that she didn't really think so. "Loops are a strange phenomenon. You would think, if you were reliving over several days, you would end up tired, as it'd be over twenty-four hours at one point; but generally, one's health is restored to the entry point. You can imagine how dangerous that knowledge would be, so we don't spread it around."

“That is fascinating,” Regulus said, shaking his head as he eyed the spot where the time-loop supposedly began. “And quite convenient for the one utilising it.”

"It's harder to break out of than in. The poor muggles have no idea they're stuck in the same time frame, but I suppose it's no harm done, really." Emmeline gave him a tap on the shoulder. "You'll be fine; I've done it a hundred times or more, and this is wizard made, not an anomaly. People know they shouldn't mess with time, but they still do, and this is a spectacular fluff up that's taken down a residential estate."

“They can do that?” Regulus lifted his brow. “How does it work?”

"They don't do it on purpose." Emmeline made an ambiguous hand gesture. "Or, I suppose, some might, but when people try to mess with time, it's usually either to turn it back to prevent something, the desire to be in two places at once, or some stressed mother with four kids under five who doesn't have enough hours in the day. But time is difficult to control, and the consequences can be unpleasant to say the least. There's always a price, which can be a little loop in the neighbourhood you were attempting to go to, aging several centuries in hours and dropping dead, or in one case, a Tuesday that lasted thirty-six hours. You can't control the consequences; magic is not cast in a vacuum."

“Hm.” Regulus eyed the trigger point thoughtfully and shook his head. “Well, hopefully the residential estate was not too terrible a loss. I cannot help but look forward to the curiosities of exploring the loop, nonetheless.”

"It's not a dangerous one. It's just a bit...stuck. You're perfectly safe, so I do expect you to have fun." Emmeline gestured ahead as well. "It's an adventure."

“It is,” he said, a light smile returning to his face. “I have been wondering at how to spend that adventure, and though I know your department has been crawling with Aurors in weeks past, I cannot help but wonder if a consequence-free day would be an appropriate time to sneak about in a place I am not strictly permitted to be sneaking. What do you think? Would you be at risk of any lasting trouble?”

Emmeline laughed. "You always make it sound as if I own the department. Do you do the same thing with all Ministry employees?"

“Well, I’m admittedly less concerned about how your boss feels about it, which is probably a contributing factor,” he responded with a tilt to his mouth.

"I'm not entirely sure I have a boss," Emmeline said, her tone dropping to a conspiratorial whisper.
"I do submit paperwork, and it's gone when I look, but I could be working for a mutant Norwegian Ridgeback for all I know. However, if you have an interest in draconology, we can certainly take a look. The Aurors, the ones still with us, have vacated."

A smile flickered on his mouth. "I might be concerned about the opinions of a mutant Norwegian Ridgeback, but it is hard to say. I am interested, nonetheless."

Emmeline appeared to consider it for a moment. "No brains."

"I can agree to that. Curious as they might be, they certainly gave Ron Weasley a hard time, and I would prefer not to experience it firsthand," Regulus agreed with a nod. The peek through a door had not truly felt like enough, but he imagined there would be other equally interesting rooms to investigate…

"Mind magic is not something I feel so proficient in that I could intervene if things went squirrely. I'm not willing to risk your safety if I can't intervene myself." Emmeline looked over him, then looked back at the street. "Locked doors are off-limits, and for good reasons. If I say stop, as much as I enjoy our debates, stop, then we can talk about it. Otherwise, we can look into others - Space, Time, perhaps Alchemy or Experimental if there's time and limbs left."

"I consider myself well suited to relevant mind magic, though I imagine that room is quite a different matter," Regulus said with a wry shake of his head, and not for the first time, he wished the Department of Mysteries was not so aptly named. There were endless fascinations that were out of reach by definition, though little breaches such as this were of some comfort, at least. "Even so, I concur that a exploration of Space, Time, Alchemy, and Experimental magic will be sufficiently enthralling."

"Someone’s got a diverse knowledge. What mind magic are you thinking of?" Emmeline asked, curiously.

"Though it has been some time since I last had suitable means and circumstance to test it, I took well to Occlumency when I was initially exposed," Regulus explained with a slight tip of his head. The Imperius Curse, too, was a spell of will and mind, but even with the possibility she wouldn't remember, it didn't seem appropriate to bring up. Instead, he continued, "I like to have a broad range of experience."

"Impressive," Emmeline admitted. "What other subjects catch your attention?"

"I enjoyed Runes, Charms, and Transfiguration the most, as well as their relationship to various objects and artifacts," Regulus responded simply. "Beyond that, I had some interest in the idea of Alchemy, especially in light of my grandfather's involvement with it, but I did not pursue it with much intention. However, Narcissa's son is apparently intrigued by it, which I found interesting."

Following a brief glance back at the loop’s initiation spot - he did hope it worked - Regulus turned back to Emmeline again. "Though perhaps we can discuss further as we make our way to the Ministry? I have little concept for the best approach. Perhaps disillusionment might be sufficient, or perhaps Harry would lend his cloak, but I suppose you would have a better grasp of it."

There was no other term for it. Emmeline cackled to herself. "Do you really think if you walk in with me, anyone is going to bat an eye? The only reason we ran into trouble before was the attempted removal of a prophecy and a bloody great snake."

"It's not an unreasonable assumption," Regulus defended pointedly. "Your department is kept very shrouded. I would be more paranoid about breaches, were I overseeing it; but if you insist, I
suppose I will just benefit from their lax approach."

"That's cute," Emmeline smiled, before putting her hand out to be taken. "I don't mind that you thought that; it's better everyone thinks that. But I also think it's rather telling no one thought a group of teenagers running about was cause for alarm."

"Precisely. I would expect that to be more concerning," Regulus commented as he took her hand for the apparition process, experiencing that familiar tug for a only a moment before they appeared with a *crack* in front of what appeared to be the entrance to a public toilet. An unspoken question lifted his brow as he glanced over at her.

"You seemed preoccupied with being seen, so I thought the back entrance would be more appropriate," Emmeline reached for her wand again, but then stopped in her tracks. "Have you been inside the Ministry before? Other than the mad dash last month."

Regulus shook his head. "Only for the mad dash. I never had much reason to visit as a teenager."

Emmeline smiled at that. "Then for basic layout, we'll come out at the very far end. It's more discreet than the middle of the atrium. We're on the next floor down, but there's no direct lift access to the floor below because it's the courts, so we get people passing through the entrance chamber to use the stairs all the time. We might see Dedalus - I think he has a case today - but we won't look out of place." She then gestured towards the toilets. "However, this way involves flushing in - which sadly is exactly what it sounds like."

Without bothering to hide his pinched expression, Regulus eyed the toilet with no small amount of displeasure. "I suppose an elaborate jest is too much to hope for."

"Just step in and think of England," Emmeline said, giving his a shoulder pat before heading into one of the stalls.

"Revolting. Let it go on record that I think whoever dreamt up this entrance was a terrible person," he complained as he stepped in to the stall beside hers, "with no concept of dignity or hygiene."

When a flush sounded in response, Regulus scowled down at his own toilet bowl and wished that apparating straight into the Ministry was more safe and feasible. On a workday morning, it was bound to be teaming with employees roaming about the atrium, and there were no other places he could picture clearly enough to successfully pop over.

"A veritable monster," he muttered to himself as he cast an *Impervius* spell, hoping it would repel some of the water. Just a beat later, he stepped in, wincing at the slosh, but a swift flush brought the dreadful experience to a close within seconds.

Following a thorough round of drying and cleaning spells (*Impervius* charm or not), Regulus stepped out to find Emmeline waiting. "The Ministry ought to consider a new entrance," he commented.

Emmeline snorted. "Given the time period, you can thank either Lestrange, Milliphutt, or Orpington. I'm not sure which."

"I will not thank them."

"Don't be pedantic." Emmeline gestured to the nearest lift, which was thankfully only housing stragglers rather than the teeming numbers that were descending in the middle of the lobby. "We can leave via the floo, and you won't have to do it again. Level nine?"
With a nod, Regulus stepped towards her to stride towards the lift, eyeing his surroundings as he walked, though this particular corridor was less dramatic than the atrium had been with its massive statue. Of course, the Dark Lord and Bellatrix had been more dramatic still, but it did not actually lessen the impact of the statue.

It was a short ride to level nine, and a more familiar one as they neared her department. The night of their break in had been chaotic - a rather different sort of chaos from the morning bustle - and he could feel his curiosity mounting as they drew nearer.

Emmeline moved close to him, and spoke quietly. "The entire walls are tiled black to be disorienting. You have to know the right sequences to get in the right doors, and then ask for the right area. Even those can be restricted. The love room is always locked."

Regulus nodded, taking in the dark, nondescript design more carefully than he had been able to the time before. "Lead the way."

Emmeline stopped in front of one of the doors in the poorly lit hall. It looked no different from the other doors peppering the hallway, but she tapped it thrice and said, "Magical origins." The room seemed to heave for a moment, but then the door opened to another chamber. She then looked at Regulus with a swift smile. "Shortcut."

With a little smile, he followed her through.

The room was long and dark, lit by green flames about halfway up the towering walls. There were several tanks, each with what what looked like a variety of body parts of both magical creatures and (more worryingly) people. The room appeared silent and empty, cast in the eerie glow.

Emmeline did not seem phased at all, and beckoned him onwards. "I don't think biological magic is quite your area of interest, but this is the way through to the experimental sections."

"I see," he said, staring down a free-floating eyeball for a passing second before turning his attention to the front again. "This department certainly does address a variety of topics."

"We're hoarders, we keep everything." Emmeline pointed off to one of the preserved things on the far side of the room. "Back about the time purism really became vogue - it was practiced before, as your family tree will attest, but not considered the norm until around the seventeenth century - they wanted to look at what made something magical or not, and was it possible to transfer magic from one thing to another. If you're curious, it's not - when you're born, you're either magical or you're not."

Regulus could recognise a part of him that would have once felt very frustrated by that news, however inconsequential it might have become once he had left home. That muggleborns stole magic from squibs had never been a point of debate, growing up, and he supposed it was not exactly a point of debate now, though for very different reasons. Muggleborns could clearly perform magic, but muggleborns in muggle families and squibs in pureblood families had never made much sense in isolation of an explanation. "Have they made progress in settling on what does cause it, or only what does not?"

"Not in the last four centuries." Emmeline tapped once again on the wall, until another set of doors appeared. "The prevalent theory is that it's genetic, which leaves us with two uncomfortable ideas: one, that it is simply a random set of genetics, and if both parents have the gene, it happens regardless of if the parents are magical themselves. More likely if they are magical, but in no way a guarantee." She raised another finger. "Or perhaps even more uncomfortable, that we were an magical species at one point and muggles are simply the result of genetically anomalous squibs"
having generations of children without magic and muggleborns are throwbacks to an ancestry long before their families living memory."

"Uncomfortable, indeed." Neither option was a particularly palatable solution for those he would hope to sway, and Regulus truthfully could not decide for certain which one was more uncomfortable. He thought that perhaps the second one made more sense because at least then he did not have to think of his own magical status as some random collision of chance, but he was nonetheless relieved when they came to what he assumed to be the experimental room.

The experimental chambers were in a wide corridor, with some sections in bright light, and others, dark enough that you could see no one. They appeared to move a variety of things - glowing orbs, wands, sceptres. The witches and wizards running around it, absorbed in their work, had little regard for the two of them. Emmeline gave him a wry look.

"This is where most of the smaller questions are addressed," she whispered. "But they still don't know what a star being born looks like."

There was a crash that made the floor move, but once again, no one seemed to take notice of it, nor the bright flames off to one side. Emmeline took a wander up to one of the stations, which proclaimed it to be investigating the effect on taste of refilled food and drink. "I'm not sure what burning question everyone has this week."

Regulus stepped close, thinking it to be sufficiently interesting, despite how hectic it was. "I would guess there are more than one."

Striding across the room, Emmeline pulled some parchment down and began to look over it. For a moment, she said nothing, then gestured for Regulus to come and join her. She gestured to the list, which looked as if it were written in gibberish.

"It looks like the major experiments today are dream manipulation, skill transference, and..." she gave a snort. "Whether crystalised memories have colours. I think someone just dropped one, memories are tricky. Is there one in particular you want to go have a nosy at?"

"Dream manipulation," Regulus responded with interest piquing at the back of his mind. Although he was quite confident in his developing horcrux theory for the strange visions Harry had experienced in the past year, it rang a bit personal, too, if he was honest (though he would rather not be).

"That'll be over..." Emmeline trailed off, before pointing to a cluster of people who seemed to be popping bubbles. "There." Upon their closer inspection, there were images playing in the bubbles and they were emanating from an Unspeakable who appeared to be asleep. Another Unspeakable, seemingly oblivious to the extra presences, clashed two of the bubbles together, which caused them to ripple and attach. "It's a job for the socially awkward," Emmeline confided. "We get a bit absorbed."

A smile flickered on his mouth as he watched the Unspeakables prodding at the bubbled dreams, a subtle shimmer flickering in the spotty light of their corner. "I think it’s wonderful," he said as another dream popped, and he had to resist the temptation to reach out and pop another himself.

"I don't want to hurry you, but the longer we linger, the more out of place we shall look." Emmeline gave him a reassuring smile, then began to walk over to the wall and reveal the doors again. "What about Alchemy? I know a couple of Spagyrics working on some new medicinal potions with elementally transformed plants. They've got some silly stuff they probably won't mind someone playing with."
Regulus nodded, and though his curiosity lingered, he knew that he could not. “Going from one interesting thing to another interesting thing is not the worst problem to have.”

"Welcome to my life," Emmeline said, before beckoning him forward. "You have a familial interest in the subject?"

Regulus was still looking around the room as he nodded, responding in low tones, “My paternal grandfather. He received an Order of Merlin for it, following the Global Wizarding War, when the Ministry required resources to get back on its feet.” Sparing a glance at her, he added wryly, “Sirius tried to throw it out last summer, but it yet remains.”

Emmeline ducked her head. "Is that reflective of your grandfather, or just almost a casualty of Sirius's war on familial objects?"

“I rather liked him, but from Sirius’s perspective, I suppose it was a mix of both,” Regulus admitted.

Emmeline stopped in her tracks, brow furrowed. Then she smiled, as is suddenly realising something. "He gave them a lot of gold," she said, with a laugh. "Of course he did, he was an alchemist, gold wouldn't be in short supply at all. That's quite funny, and I suppose true from a certain point of view. That was a little bit Slytherin archetypal, but I don’t think I ought to tell Sirius that - I don’t imagine you’d find the opposite complementary either."

A subtle amusement tugged at the corner of his mouth as Regulus met her eyes. “All of those things are true.”

"I do find it strange, if I think about it," Emmeline said, as the smell of metal and smoke filled the air from the Alchemy chamber. "Being judged on one's potentials long before the chance to live up to it, which does not take into account how much a person changes in those years, but also being judged on family seems rather common. Look at the Weasleys. Though you could also look at Fabian and Gideon; they were twins, but sorted differently. I don’t understand why one potential is chosen over another. I'd love to get a closer examination of that hat, though I think telling it so cemented my own sorting."

“A lot can change in seven years. It’s true,” Regulus agreed, his tone thoughtful. Being in Slytherin had been so important that he’d scarcely eaten or slept until the whole ordeal was over, though it felt a little embarrassing to admit as much. “It sounds as though you were an easy student to sort, and an accurate one.”

"Oh, I decided at the age of eight where I would go." Emmeline waved it off dismissively. "I had pro/con lists, navigated a focus group, made graphs, and researched the first hand accounts for a more qualitative view."

With a sniggering laugh, Regulus eyed her again. “Of course you did. I did much of the same, though my sources might have been a little bit biased. The correct answer was established prior to starting.”

"You considered another house?" Emmeline asked, skeptically. "You."

“I would not go as far as to say I considered another house,” he corrected, tipping up his chin in jesting haughtiness, “but that does not mean I did not research the projected experience thoroughly.”

"You didn't just ask around?" Emmeline inquired. "What is the use of siblings and cousins if not
“They were the aforementioned first hand accounts,” he said with a quirk of his mouth, “hence why I said they were biased.”

"I see," Emmeline sniggered. Once safely in the room, it was much darker than the others. There were green and blue floating orbs and the occasional flame that stretching into the high, buckled ceilings. There were a few stations, but it was already quieter than the previous room. "I suppose I thought you meant your parents or grandparents."

“I received a great deal of information, both first hand and not, from many people in my family. Parents and grandparents were among them, as well,” Regulus said, eyeing another burst of flame, then turned his attention to Emmeline wryly. “We had a very large family with very strong opinions on the matter, if that is not obvious.”

"I have yet to meet anyone in your family who has anything but a strong opinion on everything," Emmeline remarked. She made her way over to one of the tables, where a variety of mutated plants were lying in disarray.

“We are none of us short on opinions and convictions,” he agreed with a little smile, shaking his head, though it was a short leap to a very depressing line of thought in that subject, so he instead turned his attention to the plants. “Any particular notes on this one?”

"A cure for everything," Emmeline said, before shrugging. "Flamel's elixir of life is, of course, now gone. As such, we muddle on trying to find alternate routes to optimum health. Immortality too, if that's your pleasure, but I've never liked the idea."

“I can think of some individuals in particular that ought not be made aware of this particular line of study,” he commented, sharing a significant look with her. “As for myself, curious though I might be about generations to come, I do not actually want that, either.”

"I can think of one who likely already knows. Thanks for nothing, Rookwood." Emmeline looked thunderous for a moment, but only a moment. She picked up one of the plants from some of the containers. "It does lead to discovering new things. I heard a rumour that Bertie Bott's started here, and kept finding flavours. Of course, that could be up there with evil assassins in the footnotes, so take it with a grain of salt. It takes a special sort of person to put one of these in their mouths just to see what'll happen. I think I'll stick to anachronism labelling."

“That does sound less risky,” Regulus agreed, and privately he thought that tampering with such a thing was perhaps one way to attempt the assassination of one particular seeker of immortality, though there was probably some ethical concerns in the likelihood that someone else would probably try it first. Shaking off the thought, he asked instead, “Will we be visiting your corner of the department today?”

“I thought we would go there last,” Emmeline replied. “Because it's the one place you can ask questions I can actually answer.”

Eyeing the room, Regulus took in the little stations and corners of alchemy research for a moment longer. It continued to baffle him that they had just strolled in without consequence; his own day was going to reset, regardless of what they did or did not do, but even if this had been a normal day, the witches and wizards holed away in this space had taken no notice at all. In truth, he had expected Emmeline to be exaggerating on the matter.

“Where shall we go next, then?” Regulus ask, pulling his eyes from his surroundings and
reminding himself that lingering and staring would attract their notice.

“Space. The department, sadly, not the atmosphere.” Emmeline gave a pronounced pout. “It’s not as fun as the muggle one, as it’s mostly about the effects of planetary alignment on magic. Oh, and don’t inhale too much. You might start to feel a bit giddy. Please excuse my saying so, but I don’t think you have any tolerance built up.”

“Tolerance?” Regulus lifted his brow; the Space Room sounded intriguing, even if it was more about planetary assignments than stunning photographs, but it was the warning that stood out. “Is there something in the air?”

"Ah." Emmeline made a screwed up face, with her lips beginning to twitch with mirth. "A lot of experimentation with it involves the intake of certain plant life with some mind-altering effects. It's a little stuffy, and you might feel a little light-headed, but as long as we don't linger and you don't inhale deeply, you shouldn't get any of the effects. Excellent place for snacks, though."

“Altering your mind is necessary for observing the effects of planetary alignments, then?” he said wryly, thinking that she looked far too amused - smothered or not - for it to be a legitimately serious method. “Makes the stars twinkle brightly enough to see them better?”

"Did I mention the lack of oversight? They want solutions, answers. They don't care how it happens," Emmeline pointed out - to which Regulus sniggered - before tapping the doors to once again appear. However, someone walked through one, almost bumping into the woman and looking rather startled. They sidestepped, then Emmeline shrugged. "That saves me the trouble. After you."

The smell of fruity smog filtered through the door, and through it, the night sky was visible and shifting on the ceiling, casting an eerie glow. There were a few Unspeakables at a variety of what looked like telescopes, while others were lying on mats on the ground.

“Beautiful,” Regulus remarked as he stared up at the ceiling-sky. “Have the studies determined anything of note?”

“You get a lot of people muttering ‘Mercury in retrograde’ if something goes wrong,” Emmeline admitted, with a forceful shrug. "Without the telescopic lenses to see as far away, I think it's stuck. I had the exceptional pleasure of visiting one of the institutes in Uganda a few years back as part of some ICW work, and their department on space must be three times the size. We can describe the atmosphere of Phobos all we like, but the priority isn't there to go and see for ourselves. In contrast, in the seventies, muggles sent up testing equipment and did all of these tests and took full colour photographs before we'd even finished school. They found water, volcanoes, and discovered there could have been life on Mars, just like the exhibit. You can go and see the visitor centre in America, which is about to go on my 'to-do' list."

“So you were saying.” His eyes lingered on the ceiling, a small smile forming. “It seems there is quite a lot out there. It's fascinating.”

“I get a little obsessive,” Emmeline admitted. “Not that you’d relate to that.”

“Not at all.” Regulus met her eyes with a little smile. “Have they made any determinations about the effect of space movements on magic, or is it still a series of shots in the dark?”

"Total oblivion,” Emmeline confirmed, with a shake of her head. "Or they do know and aren't sharing, which is equally likely around here."
“I cannot fault them for that,” Regulus granted with a tip of his head. “I don't much like to share either.”

"You're not doing so badly with me," Emmeline pointed out. "I'm not so innately wily that it's all me."

“You are an exception,” he said to the ceiling, eyeing a swath of twinkling stars as he leaned into a slight bump, nudging her shoulder with his own.

The subtle haze seemed as if it ought to make it harder to do one’s observational duties, but it was atmospheric, he would grant it that. As recommended, he tried not to breathe too deeply, despite the calming nature of the dim, night sky, magically contrived or not. Contentedness had settled over him, and with it, far more relaxation than he thought he ought to have, walking freely through this particular Ministry department. Although it might’ve been managed just as easily on any day, the way that anxiety peeled away with each retractable moment was worth the choice.

With a little smile, he added, “I trust your dependability and your contributions, which is a favourable mix.”

"I don't believe anyone has ever referred to me as favourable. I'm flattered." Emmeline stepped over the legs of one of her co-workers, who grumbled something unintelligible. "Don't lie in the middle of the floor if you're bothered by people walking over you. Be thankful I'm wearing flats."

"Whozat?" The Unspeakable replied.

"He's a constellation," Emmeline said, without missing a beat. "We're taking a quick walk around the sky."

"Yeah, alright."

Emmeline gave a nod towards the other side of the room. "Think we should move."

When they were well past the man on the floor, Regulus leaned in to whisper, “Technically, I’m a star,” punctuating the correction with an amused smile.

"A binary star." Emmeline rolled her eyes. "And when you're willing to twinkle, I'll say as much."

Shaking his head, Regulus responded, “I don’t think I’m the twinkling sort.”

"Where’s your sense of adventure?" Emmeline scoffed. The door once again revealed, and she began to work on it. "You could be and have no idea. You didn't seem the camping sort either."

“Perhaps it depends on what twinkling entails,” Regulus granted, and a beat later, the door had opened before them to reveal what he assumed to be the Time Room.

Inside the time room was a giant, golden clock hanging from the ceiling. On the walls, several time pieces hung from golden chains and displayed a variety of different times. They also seemed to be moving at different speeds, and some didn't have numbers, but rather symbols that had no immediately discernible meaning. There were several shelving units down one side of the room, which held a variety of different time groupings and names like 'lost in time' and 'unusual anachronisms'. On the far side of the room was an open doorway, but it was dark inside. As they moved away from the entrance, the wall sealed behind them with large mechanisms. Everything was in muted grey, silver and brown tones.

"I hope this isn't too anticlimactic," Emmeline said. "I won't expect any twinkling."
"Not anticlimactic, no," he said with a tone of appreciation, watching as one of the brass-armed clocks spun lazily backwards in the far corner.

"We've got our time objects over there," Emmeline pointed to the shelves. "Then we've got the different times each person is experiencing. The parchment over on the tables are the maps showing where different anomalies are. The room on the far side used to house time turners, but since they were all smashed, they're working on some experimental ones but aren't at the testing stage yet. Oh, and the desk over there with the fairy lights is mine. It's very dark in that corner, but it does mean I get left to it more."

Regulus eyed the map with particular interest (though there was no way to make much sense of it from the distance they were at), then shifted his attention to her desk with a little nod. The surface was controlled chaos, for all her put together appearance, and amusement flickered as he recalled her admitting to a tendency of that sort.

"I think something exploded on your desk," he commented mildly.

"I get backed up a lot!" Emmeline said, with a hint of defensiveness. "Especially when I go gallivanting up to Wales for a certain someone's birthday party."

With a smile in his eyes, Regulus tipped his head in a little nod. "That is an acceptable excuse."

"Is it always an acceptable excuse if it allows you to get something you want?" Emmeline whispered.

"That is the typical way of it," he confirmed in quiet tones of his own. "Convenient, is it not?"

"Very cheeky," Emmeline replied, though she did not sound as if she minded in the slightest. "There's your loop over there. I think you're about halfway through by now."

"Thus far, it has been a good experience," he said, eyes flicking over at her indication. "I can see the appeal."

"Thus far, it hasn't been that exciting for you. Just wandering with me on my way to work."

Emmeline shrugged. "Isn't there anything more fun you'd want to do?"

"You say that, but I find all of this quite fascinating," he admitted, pulling his eyes from the surroundings again to look back at her. "If I accomplish anything too successfully, I won’t want it to reset, and I don’t want to specifically bait death, either. Surprisingly enough, that cuts out a fair few options."

"Perhaps you missed your calling. I suppose I thought you'd take a day off. See a show. Break and enter. You know, fun things." Emmeline gave him a quick smile. "I owe you Shakespeare at some point, in addition to camping. However, the best time to go for the Lights isn't for another month or two."

"Any day can be a day off, but not any day can remove even the vaguest concern about there being any lasting consequences, should I be noticed in a place I am not strictly meant to be," he responded easily, and as he began to turn over ideas at the back of his mind, he added: "However, breaking and entering is not a terrible idea either. I can be patient for the Northern Lights and this Shakespeare you speak of."

Emmeline made an undignified snort in an attempt to keep in her laughter. "That might be the most Port Out Starboard Home thing I've heard in quite some time. Alright, I suppose being disciplined must help with getting things done if you have no direct need to do so, but if there's something
you're not doing you want to be, don't let me keep you."

"You aren’t holding me back from anything, worry not," he assured. "The loop repeats throughout the day, does it not? However, if you have actual work to do-" He paused. "If I am within a loop that is going to reset, I assume any work you do is automatically undone as well, even if you did not enter the loop yourself?"

"No, we're out of sync now because I didn't crossover into the loop." Emmeline explained. "Life outside the loop remains as normal, with only events you're involved with - or people in the loop in general are involved with - being consistently rewritten. Time is malleable."

"Hmm. Interesting," Regulus said thoughtfully. "I suppose you do have actual work to do, then."

"Yes, buying a house in London is expensive, so I'd like to keep the job," Emmeline nodded. "I can't impose on you forever."

"I do not consider you to be an imposition, nor do I think Sirius feels that way," Regulus responded with a little smile, "but I will leave you to it. Thank you for the tour."

Emmeline gave him a nod. "Thank you for the company. Just ask the wall for the exit."

There were several hours left in this particular iteration of the time-loop when Regulus had disentangled himself from the Ministry corridors and the throngs of people within them. Though he had made light of the ‘day off,’ the series of events to follow was exceptionally normal. An early lunch, then back to Iago again with an itch for unanswered questions, both important and unimportant.

He had thought first of the prophecy, presently off limits to him, though he had not yet asked Dumbledore himself. Harry was likely to know, but it somehow felt like a guilty sort of deception to convince the boy to tell, only to have him forget he told at the loop’s end. It was a solid plan as far as execution went, but he did not want it to rain down on Harry (or himself) should that information be put to actual use. If he was to ask Harry, it was probably best if Harry was at least aware of it, though Regulus maintained hope for Dumbledore’s willingness to be reasonable.

Emmeline’s ‘recommendation’ of breaking and entering had brought to mind his eldest cousin’s home - the Lestrange Manor, where he had itched to investigate shortly after returning to England, but it was a near-guarantee for trouble, whether from the Ministry or the Death Eaters. To pursue that was perhaps more dangerous than deceptive, but at least the stakes were arguably less high if they were impermanent. There were few Aurors that he was on any sort of speaking basis with, and only one that he thought would probably comply with providing some insight on the matter..

It was Sirius who provided the location of the Tonks household, though she would soon be leaving for her late-day-to-night shift, and sending a formal call would do no good when the day was just going to reset anyway.

With time to fill, he thought again that a plan for well-utilised breaking and entering was not a bad use of his time at all.

At two o’clock, the time-loop had set him back in the same place he had started, and this time, he parted ways with Emmeline more immediately (though it was for the second time that day). The six hours felt slower, that time, slogging through the same morning, and he assumed Sirius did not remember anything about the Tonks-related questions because he did not bring it up when again
lunch rolled around, hours later. Conversation was instead centered on Harry and the other children, who seemed to be enjoying their vacation quite a lot. He hoped they were not attempting to repeat the previous day’s spying attempts, but tattling on them felt to be in bad form, so instead he let it lie, listening to Sirius relay the tale of what they had done once they were actually with Lupin, rather than scampering off without him.

When again two o’clock was nearing, Regulus returned to the time-loop, approaching it more confidently this time. Tonks first, and then perhaps a peek at the Lestrange Manor. His cousin’s home was undoubtedly being watched, but a bit of creativity was likely to do the trick.

(If it did not - at least he would only suffer the trouble for a few hours at most.)

With the loop initiated, he apparated straight to the Tonks residence, and though he knew the time-loop would spare him the need to admit to either the visit or the nervousness, that nervousness was nonetheless swift and jarring as soon as the house appeared in front of him.

His (previously estranged) cousin’s home looked exceptionally normal and well-cared for, backed by what he assumed to be a gated garden, though he could not see past the high fence. The path was lined with thick foliage - mostly flowers and well-trimmed bushes - and flowered ivy decorated the face of the house. Steeling himself, he rapped three knocks on the door and waited.

For several moments, there was silence on the other side of the door. However, the noise of rustling came from behind the fences, along with the sounds of metal clanging and finally, part of the fencing swung open to reveal Andromeda. She was holding her wand in one hand, and a large bucket in the other. Her wand lowered, though she kept a firm grasp of it still.

She blinked at him owlishly from beneath her comically large sunhat. "Good morning," she said, mildly.

“Good morning,” Regulus greeted in return. “Normally, I would call ahead before arriving, but I’m afraid it’s a bit impromptu today. I was wanting to speak to your daughter for a moment, and Sirius directed me here.” Trying to smother the awkwardness (and reminding himself it would not endure past the day), he added, “I hope you are well.”

"Discretion of a town crier as per usual," Andromeda sighed, before stuffing her wand in her pocket. "She's run upstairs to get changed, but you're welcome to wait if you want to come through."

“Your visit to Grimmauld Place was not so different,” Regulus pointed out lightly. “All the same, I don’t mind waiting.”

"I fully admit that Nymphadora gets it from my side. She's got the subtlety of a sonorus charm too." Andromeda sounded amused, and rather fond of it. She took a couple of steps back, revealing the lush and colourful garden behind her. "I thought you went on holiday."

“I did, but I thought it might be better to come here, rather than ask her to visit Iago, all things considered,” he said with a tight smile as he slipped past Andromeda - into the garden and around into house.

Regulus was not sure what he had expected from his rogue cousin’s life beyond the Family, but the inside of the house appeared comfortable, thick with plants and photographs and peppered with little piles of clutter. The ceiling hung low, and though it might feel snug in other circumstances, he could not help but feel a little claustrophobic, thinking that this was the space Andromeda had run to so long ago. If not this building, then perhaps one like it.
Andromeda walked up two stairs, and leaned on the wooden bannister. Behind her, shifting colours indicated pictures of Tonks through several ages and looks respectively that peppered the stairway.

"Nymphadora!" Andromeda called.

"What?" came a muffed reply.

"You have a visitor," Andromeda called back.

"I'm in the loo!" came the reply.

Andromeda's shoulders slumped, and she muttered, "Indisposed, you're indis-oh, never mind," she raised her voice again. "Hurry down. You have to leave soon."

"I'm coming now!"

Andromeda dropped down the stairs with a sigh. "I've attempted, but she's stubbornly rejected anything close to polite vocabulary. Half the residents of Iago would faint within half an hour of her being there." Andromeda looked him over curiously. "How did you get on?"

"With Iago? It remains a work in progress," he admitted, shaking his head.

“Oh dear,” Andromeda quirked an eyebrow. “I suppose that means you got the ‘looking everywhere but you’ problem.”

Regulus sighed heavily. “I did. Narcissa is still agreeing to meet and talk to me, which I am grateful for, but progress beyond that is currently stagnant.”

Andromeda gave a heavy sigh, and then pulled off her hat. "I'm afraid things tend to be as they always were, or rather, the facade is always that things are as they always were. I'd be more prone to nostalgia for it if I'd stayed there with Nymphadora when she was little, but it would be wrong to blame a perfectly lovely village for ongoing familial dramas."

Upstairs, there was the sound of something crashing, but it didn't seem to phase Andromeda. "Then again, I don't know if I'd have quite the confidence to have flaunted traitors and half-bloods and then invite the society princess for high tea. I'm surprised she agreed to do it again."

“She’s perhaps the only one within that crowd that I do have any sort of confidence in, at present,” he admitted, tipping his head to the side with a little frown. “Clearly enough, it’s making her uncomfortable, and I wouldn’t expect positive results if I were to corner her in public… but something must be connecting with her, I suppose.”

"I wish you well," Andromeda said.

At the sound of the door, Andromeda took a few steps out of the way as Tonks clambered down the stairs. She took one look at her mum, then Regulus, and quirked her eyebrows. "Am I in trouble?"

"Have you done something you should be in trouble for?" Andromeda asked.

Tonks pointed at her. "I'm not falling for that one. What's up?"

“There is something I wish to discuss with you, and Sirius pointed me in this direction,” Regulus responded. Not for the first time, he thought her brown hair made her look strangely like Andromeda, if different in manner. Less so than Andromeda’s resemblance to her elder sister, but
far more so than when a spiky mop of pink had been on Tonks’s head. “If you have a moment?”

"Sure," Tonks shrugged. "You want to sit outside? If it's private, like."

Regulus nodded, trying to resist an uncomfortable shift as his eye caught a grouping of family photos just off to his right. He didn’t let himself look too closely. “Outside would be perfect.”

Tonks pushed past the furniture, slipped out of the back door, and stopped. She then went over to the seats furthest from the house and flopped on them. "No guarantee, but it's decently private."

“It seems like it should work well enough,” he appraised as he sat down in the seat just across from her, offset slightly. After casting a quick spell to obscure their speech to any potential eavesdroppers beyond the fence, he felt quite satisfied. “I hope you will pardon me jumping right into it, but I wanted to ask about the Ministry’s surveillance of the Lestrange Manor. I assume they are watching it?”

"A bit, but they don't know if they'll go back to it," Tonks admitted. "They clear houses out when they go to trial; anything Dark gets used as evidence. Still, if I remember right, that was back in ‘81, and there were some places they couldn't get into."

Thoughfully, Regulus nodded as his hands folded neatly in his lap. Could there be a horcrux within Ministry evidence? If the Dark Lord had given one to her, would she have been bold enough to leave it out where it could be seen? Most likely not, and asking for examples of what the Ministry had cleaned out would be a list long enough to last all afternoon, even if Tonks did personally know in detail. Truthfully, he doubted that she did. Regardless, those tucked away holes were familiar to him, and his search criteria would be different than an Aurors…

“Any alarms that you are aware of?” he continued.

"Why," Tonks asked. "You want inside?"

“I do,” he said with a nod, and once again felt a settling relief that the time-loop would wipe away these particular hints. “There is something specific I want to investigate but would rather not have Aurors rain down upon me. I prefer to be discreet about the specific goal, but I’m in occasional contact with Dumbledore about it, so it is not completely rogue.”

"It's nothing to do with case evidence for your upcoming thing, right?" Tonks clarified. "I heard Dedalus was about to get into the nitty gritty."

Regulus winced a little but shook his head. “I’m not looking forward to that, but no, I’m not tampering with evidence.”

"Then I can probably drop you off," Tonks admitted. "It's probably just a couple of trainees. We can't spare more than that. We're getting attacks or finding bodies nearly every day now."

With a frown, he nodded. The sweep of arrests had locked away most of the people significant to Regulus on a personal level, but there were always legions of more. It seemed that had not changed, even will all the years that had passed. “I appreciate it.”

Tonks ducked her head. "Try not to get arrested in your first month of vigilantism. I'd appreciate that."

With a wry huff, Regulus slanted his mouth. “I will try not to. I would rather not be arrested at all, but the irony of being immediately arrested for acts against the Death Eaters would be unbearable.”
"If you blew your secret identity before Fred and George, you'd never live it down," Tonks snorted.

"If that isn’t motivation for discretion, I don’t know what is,” he said dryly.

"Listen," Tonks said, growing a little more serious. "We have our own watch schedules. If you're about to start trying to go about different Death Eater places looking for something, if it's a noticeable something, you could check with whoever’s watched the place. They'll have seen it more than you have in the last fifteen years."

“A valid point, but that’s part of the problem. I’m not exactly certain what it will be, and I cannot say if it would have even been noticeable.” Regulus said with a slightly pinched expression. “Besides, I’m trying to limit the number of people who contact this particular search.”

"You know you're going to get shit for that, right?” Tonks said.

With a firmer set to his mouth, Regulus shrugged. “The information is sensitive, and Dumbledore knows about it. I would like for everyone to trust me, but I’m not going to compromise what I’m doing to achieve that.” A brief pause, and then a press forward to a related curiosity: “Do you have any insight on who does take issue with my presence? Sirius and Emmeline have both indicated the vote was not unanimous. I would not have expected it to be, but with the exception of Alastor Moody, who I already know has a problem with me, the others are hard to read.”

"It's not all personal," Tonks admitted. "Despite you being you, the whole Death Eater moniker - even left behind by a couple of decades - it makes you a little scary for people. You're just going to have to keep your nose clean, and deal with it for a while ‘cause they got every right to be afraid."

“I know,” he said with a sigh, trying not to feel aggravated when it wasn’t Tonks’s fault, specifically. “However, I’ve kept my nose clean and have gone out of my way to be helpful for a year now. Everyone except for Moody is polite enough to my face at this point; I am just trying to get a concept for who is still concerned so I can take particular care.”

"Okay, but you find out who's not real keen on you," Tonks started. "What do you do with that information? Try and talk to them more? Convince them that's just not who you are anymore?"

“When appropriate, yes,” Regulus confirmed, though he thought it seemed a bit obvious. “As well as take greater care in what I say, if someone is likely to be more sensitive about certain issues. I can moderate it blind, but it helps to have context.”

"You know that's going to make them even more freaked out, yeah?” Tonks said, skeptically.

“I'm not planning to declare it randomly,” Regulus said a little defensively. “There is nothing strange about better-informed context.”

Tonks looked him over critically, before seeming to decide on something. "Don't think Kings knows what to make of you. He's on board with the leaving the Death Eaters, but I don't think he's comfortable with a purist being in the Order. Even a dead polite one.”

Regulus nodded thoughtfully; it sounded accurate to his expectations and consistent with what the others had said about the group in general. “Sirius and Emmeline did mention something of that sort, as well. I am trying to work on that,” he said, though it was hard to say exactly how when the concerns felt a bit intangible to him. He was at least thinking about the concept of working on it. “Any other concerned parties of note?”

“Nah, think Vance has changed her mind,” Tonks replied.
“I’m glad for that,” he said quite sincerely as some of the tension lightened, if only a little. Emmeline’s skepticism had been arguably more apparent than most when it chose to show - the Gaunt shack flickering in his mind as one such moment - but the trust extended had been more apparent, too. A complicated balance from the start, but Emmeline, at least, was among those he felt confident in, even without Tonks’s report. (Nonetheless, it was a nice reminder.)

“Yeah, we know,” Tonks said. “But it’s not your past that’s causing you a bit of a tiz - you’re doing better than Snape, since he acts like a real git and half a decent human being thirty times a day, and you don’t know what you’ll get. It’s just being the new kid, and being the new kid when you obviously still have a load of crap to work through. Nothing wrong with being posh or having a bit of ego; you don’t treat people differently, and I’ve said as much, but if we’re being dead honest here, I’m every bit as related to you as Draco Malfoy, and you don’t think of us in the same way. I didn’t expect you to; I didn’t expect to even think you were halfway decent as a person, and I do. I’m still amazed you’re decent enough to me, but the difference is really noticeable. Stuff like that, makes people talk. Talk doesn’t mean they’re right, does it?”

“No, it doesn’t.” Regulus agreed, shaking his head with a little frown, and though he itched to defend his particular dedication to Draco, there was little point in debating family matters that were going to unravel in a matter of hours, forcing him to debate it again. He felt a little guilty that she was so aware of that distinction, even if she was not exuding any bitterness about the matter. Huffing a small sigh, he continued, “There are many factors at play. It’s not just a matter of blood, though I know it looks it. I appreciate your willingness to be understanding on the matter.”

"After the Department of Mysteries, we're cool, alright?" Tonks said, giving him a lazy mock salute. "And you don't go about calling me my stupid name, so you're stand up in my book."

A little smile flickered on his mouth, and he nodded. “That sounds reasonable.” With a little quip, he added, “Truth be told, I wouldn't want to be called Nymphadora either.”

"You're a bloke." Tonks winced. "You'd have gotten Oberon."

“That would not have been so bad. Oberon is a moon, I believe, so at least it's still thematic,” Regulus granted. "Even so, I prefer my own name.”

"I think mine's hairy butterflies, bright multi-coloured ones," Tonks said, though she still made a face at it. "I think I started changing colours within an hour, so maybe that's why."

“That is quite apt, then, I will grant her that,” he said with a little smile as he shook his head. “I should, however, move on to the Lestranges to maintain my schedule. Does that suit your own?”

"Yeah, just give me a sec to make sure Mum isn't ear-to-the-door, and we can clear off," Tonks agreed. She stood up and wandered over to the kitchen door before turning and giving him a thumbs up. She then instantly tripped over one of the potted plants and let loose a string of swearing as she hobbled back over.

Wryly, Regulus shook his head. If anyone had the discretion of a (very clumsy) town crier, it was that one.

Ivy and grime had crept over the face of the Lestrange Manor in the decade and a half that it had stood vacant, and no matter how many times he had stepped inside as a teenager, he felt a wave of discomfort to stand before it again. Tonks had left shortly after dropping him off, and though he saw no indication of other visitors, he recalled her warning about the trainees. They were unlikely to be a great deal of danger to him, especially if the Ministry had made little progress with breaking
into the more hidden areas of the manor, but if he wanted to make the most of this time, he would nonetheless need to keep his wits about him.

Once he was through the slew of protective charms and wards, he apparated immediately from the grounds into the manor itself; in just a crack, everything was dimmer, dustier, but equally quiet. The Lestrange Manor had never been a bustling place, but not even the manor’s house-elf was likely to roam these halls now, if he were to make a guess at it.

For some time, he scaled the various stairs, roamed the halls, examined the cabinets, and for a time, even gave into the temptation to slip into the library for perhaps a little longer than he ought to have. As Tonks had indicated, the manor had been picked clean of artifacts and texts to such a thorough degree that he actually felt a little pang of regret that he had not gotten to the place first.

It was not until he reached the disguised entrance to one of his cousin’s outsider-inaccessible rooms that he had any real hope of finding information of substance. Tonks’s report that the Ministry had been unable to break through did not surprise him, but when he stuck his hand through the illusion of a portrait, he was met instead with the sharp, prickly stab of the wall hooking his fingers and palm against it for an uncomfortably long second before releasing. Retracting his hand, he winced, then slipp[ed through the portrait into a pitch-dark room. Bitterly, he thought that Bellatrix’s expression had never indicated that it was going to hurt quite that much when last he’d followed her inside, but he stone-faced the thought away and felt grateful that there had been no one present to witness the cringe. He wondered if she numbed her hand first, or whether she had just willed herself not to mind the wall’s invasive analysis of her blood.

At the moment, her approach was a moot point, and after lighting the oil lamps hanging on the walls with a series of wand taps, Regulus began examining the room. Much of it was a collection of particularly illegal items that he wouldn’t care to take home to Grimmauld Place, however rare they might be. He was not even entirely sure what some of it was, but it looked vaguely familiar enough that he was pretty certain it had all belonged to the Lestranges when he’d seen inside as a teenager - with the exception of a dusty box sitting on small, square table tucked in the far corner.

At first glance, the box was wholly unremarkable, but when the light of the oil lamp caught its glistening insignia, Regulus saw that the lid off this particular box had the same design as he'd seen on Slytherin’s locket. He scarcely spared the time to check for curses before pulling it open, but inside was arguably the most unremarkable set of objects he could have imagined. A thimble, what looked to be a plastic toy with a string, and several other things that he would not expect Bellatrix to find worthy of hiding away. For a hopeful moment, he thought there might a horcrux among them, hidden amongst the most unnoticeable objects, just as his (or rather Bella’s) old tome had suggested to be most practical... but there was no indications of a curse on any of them, nor did they buzz with that eerie, otherworldly energy that made his skin crawl.

He had been studying the strange box and its Slytherin insignia for several minutes when a heart-stopping crack ripped the air behind him, startling the box in his hands - and to his disappointment, sending its content scattering to the floor. Heavy footsteps sounded from the open doorway - still disillusioned but nonetheless unlocked - as a gravelly voice boomed out, “Enjoying a bit of family nostalgia, are you?”

Regulus scowled at the table in front of him, then set to forcing his face into something calmer before twisting a stiff look over his shoulder. Trainees would have been preferred, but if Auror Alastor Moody was going to show up unannounced to interrupt his investigation, at least he was alone.

“It isn’t a matter of nostalgia. I’m conducting an investigation,” Regulus said, trying to bite away
the urge to say the situation was not what it looked like - the thought sounded guilty even to Regulus.

“Alone, in the dark, holed away in your nightmare of a cousin’s manor, where apparently you can just stroll in at any time? Never thought to mention that, did you?” Moody said with a little more leading accusation in his tone than Regulus thought was entirely necessary.

Bristling, Regulus sat the box aside and took a steadying breath, leaving the older man’s words to simmer for an uncomfortable beat before he responded. “I don’t have to clear everything with you personally. I am in contact with Dumbledore about the matter, which is enough.”

“With Dumbledore, is it?” Moody asked, skepticism suddenly thick in his tone. “So he knows you’re down here, then? Could fire call him in now?”

Regulus crinkled his nose. “Well, not specifically here; he’s just privy to my investigation in general.” With a slightly bolder annoyance, he added, “I know you would love an opportunity to shove me in front of the authorities, but I’m not breaking any laws. I opened everything as the residents would have, and I’m doing this for the sake of our mutual acquaintances.”

“You used what I assume to be blood magic to open a secret chamber full of illegal contraband,” Moody said, his creepy eye swirling around the room before locking on Regulus again. It was immensely unsettling.

“I didn’t touch any of it. Feel free to check,” Regulus argued, though the eye was now flicking down to the box.

“And what is that?”

“It didn’t have anything interesting in it. Just some junk,” Regulus said, despite his own curiosities about the innocuous contents. “Unless thimbles are illegal now.”

“You expect me to believe that, do you?” Moody narrowed his normal eye, which was perhaps even creepier because the overly large one didn’t narrow at all.

“It’s true. Search the floor, if you must.” Being assumed to be a liar when you were actually telling the truth was perhaps more aggravating than being caught in an actual lie, and for a moment, Regulus’s expression communicated as much. “How did you even know I was in here?” he asked, acknowledging that it was the mostly blatantly suspicious question he could have asked, but the irritation was mounting, and at least it was information for later purposes. (Were it not for the interruption, he could still be looking-)

“This door is rigged to alert me the moment some bloody idiot successfully opens it,” Moody said, quite rudely, as far as Regulus was concerned. “You just weren’t the bloody idiot I expected.” Jabbing a wand at him, Moody added, “Let’s go, then.”

“No need to hold me at wandpoint,” Regulus said defensively, shifting uncomfortably on his feet. “Just tell me where we’re going.”

“To sort this out,” Moody answered, unbearably vague, and Regulus wished privately that this particular room permitted apparition like the rest of the massive manor did, even if it was restricted within the bounds of the wards. Getting to the grounds would have been enough.

“There’s no need,” Regulus argued, not sure he wanted to know what ‘sorting it out’ would entail. “Tonks knows I’m here, if you can bite down your accusations long enough to-”
A jarring whoosh tugged at him, and for a moment, everything went blurry and whirry around him; when it sharpened again, he was again standing before the time-loop, surrounded now with London sounds instead of judgemental Aurors.

Shaking his head (and trying to calm the thunder in his chest), Regulus let out a huff of a breath, as if in some attempt to breathe out the tension stringing up his limbs. Emotional exhaustion had set in far too deep for two o’clock in the afternoon, and though he could still squeeze one more time-loop into the day if he waited until that evening, he instead apparated straight to the house in Iago and made haste for a sofa to collapse on.

He had half a mind to tell Emmeline about the strange box he’d seen, and talking to Tonks had reminded him that he ought to thank her for the book she’d gifted him earlier that week - but the activities of his actual timestream could wait a little bit longer.
A certain steel was required to weather Iago gossip, and even before everything began to fall apart in her late adolescence, Narcissa had known well that tongues were sharp and eyes were sharper.

Morning tea at the cafe had only just started when Persephone Avery approached, starting the day with a furtive murmur that Narcissa decided quite immediately that she could have done without.

“What are you implying?” Narcissa responded stiffly as Persephone shifted back in her seat.

“I’m not trying to imply anything. I just thought you should know, if you had not heard already-”

“Who was it?” Narcissa interrupted firmly, smoothing the pattering panic in his chest and holding her face like carved marble. “When was it?”

“Earlier this week, I believe. Clary said she saw him walking with some woman she didn’t know but wouldn’t admit why she was there,” Persephone said with a little sigh, “Probably slipping off with Ernest again. I don’t see why she doesn’t just marry him or move on. Second marriages aren’t a thing to drag your feet on, you know, and Ernest may not be the best, but-”

“I don’t care about your sister-in-law; I’m asking about Regulus.” Narcissa tightened her mouth a little. “Does anyone know who it was?”

“No one else saw, and ‘woman with brown hair’ is hardly a distinctive description. Honestly, I’m not even sure if Clary did. She does enjoy a good story,” Persephone said with a shrug, mouth twitching down subtly at the corner. “I don’t know what to make of it. He seemed normal enough when I saw him, but the stories are unsettling.”

The look Persephone leveled at her held an unspoken question - 'What do you make of it?' - and a cornered sort of discomfort clenched in Narcissa’s chest.

“I wish Sebastian was here. I’m sure you wish the same about Lucius,” Persephone continued, shaking her head with a frown, seeming to catch on to Narcissa’s disinterest in commenting on the matter.

“I do,” Narcissa confirmed, punctuated with a sip of tea, but her uncertainties about her incarcerated husband combated with her uncertainties about her free-walking cousin, and it was hard to tell which aspect was more frustrating.

Years had passed since last their family had a scandal - Lucius’s arrest was not truly a scandal, not in that respect - but how predictable it was that Sirius ret-enters the picture of their family, and their name starts getting tarnished again. Regulus had begun to mix with that embarrassment’s associations, and if this was not proof of the way it was going to drag Regulus into the muck with him, she did not know what further proof she could get. Regulus would know better to pursue anything with some random woman, and in that respect, she did not truly worry that he required reminders on the matter; yet it did trouble her that she would not have thought he would argue the justification of the traitors’ company, either, before the events of this summer. That Regulus knew the sort of keen harshness that Iago could breed made it quite a bit more frustrating that he was not even bothering to hide these associations.

Persephone had moved on to talk about the Jugsons, and Narcissa tipped her head politely, trying to re-center her mind on the conversation. Perhaps Regulus could use another brush of reminders, but she half-worried it would be some approximation of Sirius’s justifications that she would hear,
just as she had the two times before.

This needed to stop.

With the end of his time at Iago drawing nearer - and Harry’s birthday drawing nearer still - Regulus was again wandering the shops, but this time, it was without such specific hunting purposes. He and Sirius had ultimately decided to split a gift, but when he saw the bookshop, Regulus felt a little pang. Regulus had not initiated contact with Draco since last they had spoken, nor had he done so with Narcissa, but the echoes still lingered in his mind.

For the past few days, he had felt as though there were more sideways glances in his direction, but whether it was a positive or a negative change had yet to be determined. The villagers running the shops didn’t seem to mind him - the older man running the bookshop even remembered him, when at last he initiated conversation - but the migratory Society seemed to be taking its time in deciding the verdict. A month later, it was not so terrible as it had been that first day, as far as frustration levels went, but this study in exclusion had been significantly less riveting from the receiving end.

The magical items and artifacts shop had supposedly received a shipment he was curious to poke at, in case it inspired any connection to the useless spread of items he’d found at his cousin’s. Within the shop, he could see a fuller spread on the shelves, even from the cobblestone walkway, but he had not yet stepped through the door when a vaguely familiar voice cut from behind him:

“You have a lot of nerve, showing up here after what you did.”

Regulus stiffened against a startle, pausing for a still moment before turning around to see Corban Yaxley. The older man’s expression was demonstrably chillier than most of the social shutdowns, and Regulus did not much like the way his hand tapped casually near his pocketed wand, but it was no different than Regulus had expected from the start.

Tipping up his chin stubbornly, Regulus held the stare.

“As is my right,” Regulus argued firmly. “I’ll come for as long as I deem it an enjoyable diversion.”

“Assuming you live to see another,” Yaxley said dryly.

Yaxley’s threat was jarring against the backdrop of subtler ostracization, and Regulus steeled himself against any reaction with cold grey walls behind his eyes. Though escalation was perhaps not the easiest way to diffuse this particular interaction, he felt a defensive sort of irritation bubbling up. “I’ve been doing a stable job of surviving, but the lot of you seem to be struggling to stay out of Azkaban. I would worry more about that, if I were you.”

“And how long will that last when your new vigilante shields determine you to be a security risk?” Yaxley inquired mockingly, to which Regulus’s nose crinkled in distaste. “For someone so determined to burn bridges with his previous friends and allies, you are putting a lot of trust in a scrambling lot that resents what you represent, and even if they did not, stands no chance. The Dark Lord’s defeat was a fluke last time.”

“It won’t be a fluke this time,” Regulus countered coolly, and though Yaxley jerked forward a step with his fingers folding around his wand, Regulus held still as a statue. He could not tell if Yaxley was out of the prophecy loop or if he was purposefully misrepresenting the complexity, but it was irritating, nonetheless. To hold back another unpleasant remark, he focused on silently counting the seconds until Yaxley responded.
It was five very uncomfortable seconds, in the end. “You’re going to regret running,” Yaxley began, eyes narrowing slightly. “You know what will happen. What always happens, eventually. It’s a waste of blood, but the Dark Lord doesn’t suffer traitors, and I’m already tired of suffering your lip.”

“I would rather not fight you - any of you - but I’m not going to drop to my knees to beg or to die, so I suppose that brings us to a bit of a quandary, as it is.” Regulus again lifted his chin, trying to ignore the anxious nerves webbing in his chest. “If anyone wishes to debate it like a civilised person, I am amenable to such a thing, but if we’re talking matters of preference and annoyance, I’m already tired of suffering threats, myself.”

“You ought to get used to them if you intend to mix with traitors and run your mouth like some short-sighted child. You have a good family, and you were a good kid, but don’t think that will be enough to make this go away.” The line of Yaxley’s mouth was hard and flat, his eyes dark and fixed, and Regulus felt the sharp truth of it, as fresh as ever.

“That is the way of it now, isn’t it?” Regulus said, narrowing his own eyes. “Killing off bloodlines as soon as questions are raised. Is that what we do now, as purebloods? It’s one thing to ostracize and quite another to eradicate a name.”

“This isn’t about raising questions. It’s about betraying blood,” Yaxley said sharply.

“I’m not the one betraying pure blood,” Regulus countered sharply in return.

“That’s how it looks from this side.”

Regulus pursed his lips, holding the stare for a beat before speaking again. “We have been used, all of us. If you feel otherwise, I recommend spending some time thinking about who is losing the most on the the Dark Lord’s side of the war.”

“I don’t take recommendations from traitors,” Yaxley said, tapping a finger on his wand in an unsettling manner.

“I think you’ll find that is your loss, in the end,” Regulus said, fighting to keep his tone even (and more confident than he strictly felt), “but do as you will. I mean what I said about civil debate, but ‘you are a traitor’ - peppered with threats - is not something I consider to be a valid or compelling argument, so I will excuse myself for the moment.”

Yaxley’s scowl was darkening as Regulus shifted toward the artifact shopfront, and though he did not think Yaxley would actually curse him right there in the street, it was not until the shop door had closed behind him that he let their locked gaze break.

Despite no longer being under the threat of arrest, Sirius had still found himself on the outskirts of socialising throughout the holiday. He couldn’t complain; there was a full moon tomorrow night, and Remus seemed to struggle even more now with the upcoming approach than he had when they were young. Regulus had never been the most social person, so they did their collective socialising in small increments. Harry had his friends, and he didn't want to intrude on that. They'd headed down to Colmon Pier and spent most of the morning doing a wave riding lesson, then tried it for themselves. It wasn't them alone; there were a smattering of other kids, a couple they seemed to vaguely know from school and others that either went elsewhere or were homeschooled.

He could see them from where we was, half running into the water and occasionally tripping one another. The beach was warm enough that he'd consider swimming later, but he made do with a
large drink and a view of the trio’s shenanigans. No one seemed to be paying them much mind - something he doubted Harry had much experience with - so Sirius was determined to let them enjoy themselves. Everyone was doing their own thing, with a few small children trying to fly brooms or small, winged horses. There was a mixed background of the WWN and what he was pretty sure was Radio One, playing a variety of songs with nonsensical lyrics.

There was a movement behind him. Everytime the adrenalin spiked in his veins, Sirius tried to tell himself to calm down. There would be plenty of time for the fight, but he’d scurried about these beaches or ones like them half his childhood and once or twice when he was old enough for it to be immature. Making a good memory was useful too. Remus had brought news of more dementor attacks, and to his own embarrassment, Sirius was having trouble keeping a corporeal patronus. However, this particular approach required no patronus.

“You could have woken me,” Remus said, as he sat down on one of the plastic chairs with an old-man sound.

“I tried,” Sirius replied. “You were out for the count.”

Remus was glancing around the place, as if everyone could take one look at him and see some bright sign saying ‘werewolf’ above his head. Thankfully, no one paid him any mind any more than they had Harry. “Any problems?”

“Not since they decided to go stalk Malfoy,” Sirius said. He supposed he probably should have said they shouldn't have done that, but he wouldn't have listened at their age. They were about the same age that the lot of them had started guerilla fighting with Death Eaters, so why would he have expected Harry and his friends to be any different?

“You're sure nothing happened with that?” Remus said.

Sirius reached to hand him one of the drinks from the box, which he took gratefully. “I’m sure. By the sounds of it, they were taken for a long walk to nowhere, so Malfoy might have had an inkling he was being followed. Either the boy inherited more from his mother than the tendency to wail at the top of a hat or Harry has about as much subtlety as his father.

Remus cracked a smile. “Or a little of both.”

Sirius returned it. “Probably both.”

A shift caught his eye, and Harry and Ron launched themselves up to them. Harry downed half a pumpkin juice while Ron, who was beginning to look a little toasty, half threw water on himself. Harry gave him a skeptical look, and if it’d been him, that look meant his friend was about to get mocked. Sirius was a little surprised when he stopped himself. Somehow, Remus still seemed to come under adult territory for them, so they tended to behave a little more controlled around him. Probably a callback to his teaching days.

“No Hermione?” Remus asked.

“She wants to go diving,” Harry said, breathlessly. He gestured over to where one of the instructors was indicating some breathing spells.

“Don't fancy it?” Sirius asked.

“Had enough of it with the Triwizard.” Harry made a face. “We were going to take the brooms out?” He sounded almost as if he wasn't sure if he was telling them, or asking for permission.
“Try not to go into trees,” Sirius said.

Harry huffed at him, amused.

“Don't stay in the sun too long,” Remus said.

“We won't,” Harry promised. He grabbed a groaning Ron by the arm, and the two of them legged it back up the beach.

Remus turned back to look at him. “Should we move to see the green?”

Sirius shook his head. “It's close enough that if they run into trouble, we'll hear it. There'll be people in Ireland that'll probably hear it.”

Remus quirked another smile at him, before settling back into the chair. “I don't know how they can run like that,” he said. “Or perhaps I've just gotten old.”

“You could still run like that,” Sirius said. “Given proper encouragement.”

Remus's eyes flew open. “That was not a challenge.”

Sirius lifted his hands, and in higher pitched tone, he said, “I know.”

Remus narrowed his eyes. “I'm serious.”

“I wouldn't recommend being,” Sirius replied. “The family situation alone makes being me very awkward.”

“I'm too tired for puns,” Remus told him.

“Then you must be tired of life,” Sirius replied. “It seems like it's one giant, cosmic joke right now.”

“Jokes are funny,” Remus said, quietly. Then he added, “Not your jokes, but most people’s.”

“Don't blame my jokes for your shirty sense of humour,” Sirius sniffed at him. “Besides, I'm not the one who just warned them not to stay in the sun. You sound like a mum. Not mine, of course, you'd have to be a few more nuts short of the fruitcake for that, but someone who actually gives a damn about their offspring kind of mum.”

“I don't imagine Molly will appreciate us returning them resembling lobsters,” Remus replied, a hint of defensiveness to his tone.

“No, I guess not,” Sirius said.

“Is Harry going back to the Burrow?” Remus asked.

“I'm not sure yet,” Sirius admitted. He hadn't asked. Of course, he wanted Harry to stay so he could see more of him before he went to school, but if he wanted to go and play with his friends, Sirius couldn't begrudge that.

“Have you talked to Dumbledore yet? About Lily's sister?” Remus clarified.

“Not yet,” Sirius admitted. It was a conversation he was dreading, because he knew they weren't going to see eye to eye on it. But if Harry was only safe there for a couple of weeks a year, and no where else, what was the point of it? He'd be safe at Grimmauld Place. Dumbledore himself was
the Secret Keeper there. He didn't want to send him to people who didn't want him there for the sake of that, and Harry was old enough now to have a say in his own life and where he stayed. “I haven't seen him.”

“You will,” Remus said. “An owl came in: usual place, usual time, in four days.”

“Meeting?” Sirius inquired, even though he knew the answer even as Remus nodded. “We'll probably pack up and just stay, then. We can't stay out of the game too long.”

“Truthfully, I thought you'd be stir crazy for a fight by now,” Remus said, sheepishly.

“I am,” Sirius said, with a flicker of a grin. “But the last year was absolute shit for everyone. A break is good too.”

“There'll be no shortage of fights,” Remus replied. “Try to make them all with Death Eaters, and not the Order?”

“I'll do my best,” Sirius said, but even at that moment, he was thinking of a certain greasy-haired prick. “But I make no promises.”

Then, without warning, he tipped his drink onto Remus' legs. Immediately, Remus squeaked and moved swiftly up and out of the way.

"Sirius!" he hissed at him, trying to wipe it away with the edge of the beach towel.

Sirius shrugged, and went to grab another drink. "See, you can still move pretty fast when you want to."

Twisting and turning her quill in place from side to side over her desk was unlikely to be considered productive by even the most loose definitions, and Emmeline had never been much of a fan of those. Having to vanish the dripping ink every few minutes was already becoming tedious. There was nothing to do. Perhaps not nothing, but nothing that would feel like an accomplishment and nothing that would work towards her socialisation quota for the week. Paperwork done, project proposals submitted, further supplies and input required. She'd already asked for expedition, but Harper had looked at her as if she'd grown another head and instead told her to take some time off if she was done with everything.

Taking time off would mean return visits, owls, fire calls, opening the pile of cards that still sat on the table at Number Twelve. She needed to find somewhere else to live; she didn't like the idea of leaving her life stained all over the Order safe house, or someone's home. In this case, both. She'd made a few inquiries, trying to find somewhere she could feel at home in, but thus far, nothing had felt right. Perhaps it wasn't destined to. Perhaps she ought to rent until You-Know-Who was destroyed, as she might once again lose a place.

Unwilling to go down that rabbit hole, Emmeline made a split-second decision and found herself apparating to Laburnum Gardens. It was a quiet little housing estate, red and cream houses and cars parked by what seemed like every home. Through a set of large black gates, you could find several fenced off garages. If she had any money wagering where Sturgis would be, it was beyond that gate. However, she had not been raised an animal and marched up to Number Two's door. She rang the bell, hoping that the rendition of Auld Lang Syne in July (how it was still July, she had no idea) would alert Sturgis to her presence. He'd never been able to get it to play anything else.

The door opened, much to Emmeline's surprise. Sturgis was, as he often was at home, in what were probably technically pyjamas and barefoot. For someone who tinkered with small parts and was
slightly accident prone, she was surprised he didn't get things embedded in his feet more.

“I thought you'd be out the back,” Emmeline blurted out, before adding a, “Also, good morning.”

Sturgis squinted at her. “It's morning?”

Emmeline turned to the sky. “I think that's the sun, which would indicate as much. I can't give you proof. Am I interrupting?”

“No,” Sturgis said, taking a few steps backwards into his hallway to allow her to enter. “You're not at work?”

“You need coffee,” Emmeline told him, gesturing to herself.

“I need coffee,” Sturgis agreed.

“I'll do it,” Emmeline offered, stepping over the clutter to get into the kitchen. The main lights were still broken from the last time she'd been here over a week ago. “We can drink from cups like civilised people.”

“S'cuse the mess,” Sturgis added, as if she'd ever seen the place without things strewn here, there and everywhere.

“That light needs fixing.” Emmeline remarked, when silence followed.

“Yeah, cheers, Mum.” Emmeline caught sight of him long enough to see the flush of red hit him. “Sorry.”

Was this what it was going to be from now on? Everytime one of their lot tried to talk about their parents, they'd look at her under a scope to see what she would do with it? Regardless of the stab to her chest, she slammed the thought away and gave him a quick glance of displeasure. He shied away from it, and she immediately felt guilty. “Do you have cups?”

“Yeah, I reckon so.” Sturgis said, without meeting her eye.

Emmeline put them down on the counter with more force than rather was necessary; she refused to be pitied and handled over something she'd seen happen again and again. At least Mulciber was in jail. The vile boy had become a vile man, and he could bloody rot there for all she cared. She poured the coffee in, and shoved it over to him. “Why aren't you in the garage?”

“I got in late,” Sturgis said, swallowing down the hot coffee without so much as a wince.

“Partying all night?” Emmeline tutted.

“Rani had a show,” Sturgis said, by way of explanation.

His younger brother had been in the year above Emmeline at school, but she was unlikely to forget him even if she and Sturgis had not met through the Order. Ranulf had, as far as she knew, always been endlessly dramatic. She'd once seen him tear an entire cushion apart at the seams, sending the fluff everywhere, just because he didn't believe it properly expressed the anguish of the scene he'd been working on. Not for a play or anything. He just worked on scenes. Life was a show, at least according to him. It didn't surprise her to learn he'd gone to the WADA, nor that he was still performing.

“Better than the last one?” Emmeline inquired.
“A bit,” Sturgis admitted.

He could act, certainly. The problem wasn't talent. The problem was his ability to go into a tone only dogs could hear when he was getting annoyed. As far as Hufflepuffs went, he was rather highly strung. Especially considering Sturgis was the living opposite of that. They had another sibling, Bertie, but he'd gone to Australia back in the seventies. Young children and war were not meant to mix. Others had not been so lucky.

Emmeline forced her mind to a screeching halt in that direction. “Perhaps you can take Sirius along to translate.”

Sturgis chucked into his cup, making a gargling noise. Emmeline counted that as a job well done. “He's a bigger snob than you are,” he said, as he took the half empty cup away from his mouth. “He wouldn't go.”

“You go to the after party?” Emmeline asked.

“Yup,” Sturgis nodded.

“You get plastered?” Emmeline added.

“A bit,” Sturgis said, before flushing again. A little embarrassed about it, but for no really good reason.

“He'd go,” Emmeline said, shortly. “Maybe even I'd go for that.”

No matter how much she wanted to huff at him for the look he gave her, she oughtn't. She knew, somewhere down below the icy numb that took over her whenever she thought about that night, that he was trying to be respectful. She was suddenly aware of the fact she had likely done the same thing to him after Azkaban.

“That's not the WWN,” Emmeline said, a peace offering and a change of subject.

“Toad the wet sprocket,” Sturgis replied.

Emmeline wasn't sure she heard him correctly. “I beg your pardon?”

“The music,” Sturgis offered. “Song six on the cassette, so it's by Toad the Wet Sprocket.”

“That's the band name,” Emmeline took from the context.

“I like it.” Sturgis admitted. “It's weird.”

“You do like weird things.” Emmeline had seen her share of weird things in the Department, but there was a mundanity to this sort of thing. The weird normal, she supposed. She remembered thinking his tinkering with the deconstructed electronics, useless within Hogwarts, was downright peculiar. But he was simply a boy three years older than her then. For a moment, she longed to be back there more than anything. To know they could walk down to the Great Hall and see Marlene, or James pulling one of his stunts, or Lily or Mary. She supposed she could go and see Mary, but what would she tell her? They had fallen out of regular touch, aside from Christmas cards. She'd gotten married, had a career away from the war. A part of her wanted to commiserate about the prick Mulciber had been, but she could feel a humiliating prickly to her eyes at even the thought, and the only thing worse than awkward silences would be awkward mascara running.

“Like your lizard,” Emmeline forced out, pushing her thoughts back to Hogwarts.
“Milly wasn't weird,” Sturgis protested. “She was a cat.”

“She was weird,” Emmeline insisted. “She was feral.”

“She was a hairless cat,” Sturgis shrugged. “She was different.”

“What's the point of a hairless cat?” Emmeline made a noise of disapproval. “The point of a cat is it's furry and cute. Otherwise, get a lizard.”

Sturgis rolled his eyes at her before glancing at the bulky box where a cassette tape was playing. “I don't like to listen to the radio if I don't have to,” he admitted, quietly. “Not since they started on it again.”

Emmeline couldn't fault him for that. Bloody Death Eaters ruined everything. “Do you want to show me what you're working on?” she asked, instead.

“Aye, lets go out the back,” Sturgis said, putting down the now empty cup.

“Put on shoes,” Emmeline insisted. “There's glass outside, and if I wanted to go sit with someone doing themselves an injury, I'd have gone to Tonks's.”

“I'm not that bad,” Sturgis said, but he was trying not to laugh. She could see it in his eyes.

“No, you're not,” she admitted. “Besides, I'd only go and see Tonks if I wanted a serious and depressing discussion. If I wanted to look at misery, I have better places to go. Home, for example.”

Sturgis looked caught, and she hadn't meant to put it to him quite that plainly. “Still house hunting, eh?” he said, instead. He still wasn't looking at her, but at least he was treating her half normally by speaking to her.

“Nowhere good,” Emmeline replied.

“There's some down here,” Sturgis offered, “A little glass aside, it's a very respectable area.”

“It's rather not,” Emmeline contradicted.

“What's wrong with it?” Sturgis asked.

“There's a convict for a neighbour,” Emmeline pointed out. “I've already got that staying at HQ.”

For several heart-slamming moments, Emmeline feared she had overstepped a boundary. Neither of them said anything, but then Sturgis finally laughed at her. “Says the Unspeakable,” he said. “If Law Enforcement knew half the stuff you get up to down there, you'd get locked up too.”

“We're vigilantes,” Emmeline deadpanned. “We're all technically breaking the law.”

Sturgis raised his empty mug again. “To breaking the law, then.”

Emmeline leaned over and clunked the cups together, “Yes. And to one day, not needing to.” One day soon, she hoped. Then again, when it was over, what would on earth would she do then? “But possibly still doing so, for harmless fun and social outing purposes.”

One of the worst things that you could do with Sirius was leave him to his own devices. He could stir up enough trouble for twenty, given an hour and boredom. However, he was at least attempting
to pass himself off as an adult and semi-suitable guardian for a teenager, so this was how Sirius found himself with a morning of absolutely no consequence. Remus had safely volunteered to play escort up to one of the historical castles that Sirius had been to so many times that the thought of going again made him want to carve his own eyes out. Regulus had cleared off, likely buried beneath his longest and least terrible relationship with the books in the little bookshop. Sirius didn't know if it annoyed him more, or less, that everything still seemed stagnant, right down to the bloody bookshop. Nostalgia was one thing, but this felt like a timewarp.

A timewarp where he wasn't as agile as he used to be, judging by the fact that he slammed his hip into the narrow doorway twice. Only once was clumsiness, however. The other was the sound of a deep clanger, the unmistakable sound of a visitor bell that that probably hadn't been used since before he hit puberty. It was the shock more than the sound, though it sounded every bit as ominous as he could dredge from the recesses of his mind.

Maybe Remus had forgotten something; maybe one of Hermione's millions of leaflets had come loose, and she was all a tither over its absence. She was an exceptional young woman, but if she was wound any tighter, she'd bounce. He clambered down the stairs and flicked the door open with his wand, largely because he could.

However, it was not Remus on the other side of the door. It was someone who looked suspiciously like Narcissa, and therefore, probably was Narcissa. "He's not here," he said, before she could utter a word.

Narcissa's face tightened to a pinch as she lifted her chin to peer at him through her nose - a feat, considering he was noticeably taller. “I see you are. I thought you hated this place.”

“Every last brick,” Sirius replied. It was the first time he could remember seeing her up close since her wedding, though he knew they must have seen each other here, that summer. “But it's where he wanted to be, and if it carries on as horribly as it is, I won't have to do it next year.”

“I think it's evident that he doesn't know what he wants,” Narcissa said coolly with a brief glance down the alley. “It does not have to be like this, but you are only confusing him.”

“Nah, he knows exactly what he wants, and he can't have it,” Sirius corrected her. Regulus wanted some mythic idea of what he thought his family would be, and it was something they'd never been. “But he's stubborn and is going to try anyway. I'm just letting him get on with it.”

“'Just letting him get on with it?' You can't possibly think it isn't obvious, what you're doing,” Narcissa said through a narrow expression.

Sirius shrugged animatedly. "Letting him find out first hand that people would rather grovel before a megalomaniacal prat than deal with his desire not to become a mass murderer? Again?"

“Misrepresenting, as always,” she said with a fresh scowl, holding her face with an unnatural tightness. “These ideas you're putting in his head are far more dangerous to him than just leaving well enough alone, but of course, you've never had qualms with prioritizing chaos over what is best for the rest of us.”

Sirius could barely contain his snicker. Oh, if only he could have managed to put any of this stuff in his head, but Regulus was a stubborn prick who dug his heels in until he made up his own mind. "I wish I could take the credit, but when he showed up, he informed me that he refused to ever be subservient again. I'm not saying I'm not enjoying his discovery of his backbone. Did you know he's got a set of pipes on him? All these years, I had no idea he was capable of even raising his voice, let alone yelling."
"He isn't acting like himself at all, so although every word out of your mouth sounds like a bold faced lie, I suppose yelling is not the most unbelievable," she said tensely, holding herself a little taller.

Sirius leaned his shoulder against the frame of the door. "He's acting exactly like himself. He's just not willing to compromise at the cost of his soul. I can accept his terms, and if you can't, you can just chalk yourself up to being one more person on the list of the people he loves who puts their own needs above his. We gather for brunch on Sundays, always RSVP."

For a fleeting beat, Narcissa looked almost surprised before she chiseled it away. "Don't compare what I'm doing with what you did. I'm looking out for his safety."

"His safety," Sirius repeated. Who was she kidding? She couldn't possibly be quite that stupid. She had to know that the only safe way out of the Death Eaters was to eliminate their leader, or be forever stuck as his whipping boy or running off. "His safety is Bellatrix calling dibs on his murder? It's forcing Unforgivables on fifteen-year-olds, is it? It's having them murder people without ever knowing why? It's having teenagers incriminate themselves so completely that they can't go to anyone at the Ministry for help or they'll get locked up?" An edge crept into his tone unbidden, but he did nothing to control it. "He wasn't safe; he was so trapped that he thought himself better dead, and you want him to go back to that? You're being selfish."

Narcissa's mouth quivered slightly before she could stop it, and she paused a beat too long before speaking again, voice tight. "Bella promised she would not hurt him."

"She won't," Sirius said, simply. "Until she's told to, then she will. Or she'll have someone else do it, and claim it's for his safety or your safety, or anything really that's not 'didn't worship the ground her master walks on'." He could see it so clearly in his mind's eye that he felt a shiver come down his spine. He pushed the image away. "The only safe place for him is never being in the same room as Voldemort, and he traded that safety in to make sure no one had to go through the same shit. Because he didn't want your bloody kid to end up facing the choice to kill or be killed! No one should have to face that choice. If anyone who claims to care about him had pulled him out of the fire, told him he was too young, or that compassion is not shameful, or even that they need to keep him breathing long enough to get his leg over and spawn, then he wouldn't have had to go through hell. If you think you're not as complicit as the rest of us in not protecting him, think again. He may not blame you, but he loves you, so of course he doesn't blame you. He blames himself, like he always does. But you, you're getting a chance at a do-over. Try not to fuck it up this time. Don't trust Bellatrix to look after him, because she's made it clear she'd rather see him dead than put anything above Voldemort - even her own blood."

Once again, an uncomfortable silence seemed to wrap itself around Narcissa’s throat, sharpening each point as it landed. “I don’t have to stand here and suffer a lecture from the likes of you, of all people,” she began after a moment, her tone more brittle than it had been a moment before. “I would not have wished this situation upon him, then or now, but-” She shook her head, seemingly interrupting herself. “I did not come here to talk to you Just pass along to Regulus that I need to speak to him.”

Up until now, Sirius had to admit: he hadn't been sure if there really was a ghost of a chance, but he found himself smiling. Not over any ridiculous nostalgia; they had not known each other or liked each other enough for that, but he couldn't deny it would help. She hadn't lost her mind completely. "No lecture, but merely a reminder of what it felt like last time. That was hard enough. I'll pass it along, but don't be surprised if he won't go to you without assurance it's just you. I don't think he enjoyed meeting your son.”
With a twinge of suspicion, Narcissa narrowed her eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, would you relax. I'm sure he'll end up thinking he's wonderful and can do no wrong,” Sirius sighed.

“Hm,” she said stiffly. “Of course.”

Was it possible she hadn't heard as much from either of them yet? There was absolutely no communication going on that was meaningful at this point. "I'll leave him a message if he's not back," Sirius said, slowly. "Satisfied?"

“Well enough,” Narcissa said more firmly, stepping back. For a moment, she seemed to hesitate, mouth pursed to a line, but without another word, she lifted her chin and disappeared with a crack.

When Narcissa next saw Regulus no more than an hour later, it was seated under a tree, nose tucked in a book. The image of it was a jarring spectre, a fully grown echo of himself, and she felt her throat tighten again; but whether the tightness was born from nostalgia or from the frustration that Sirius had heard something before she had, Narcissa had yet to determine.

She did not stop to draw him over as she passed, though she thought she saw his eyes flick up from the page for a moment. From the corner of her gaze, Priscilla Yaxley and Ava Parkinson seemed to be trying to pull her aside just a few paces past, looking ready for a spiel. Narcissa could muster no patience for conversation when just a few minutes with the traitor had drained her so. Instead, she pretended not to notice as she apparated back home to the summertime manor.

This felt unfair - all of it. Narcissa hated the feeling of relief that she'd felt when Regulus had the sense to stay where he was, sparing them both the Parkinson tongue. She did not fear them; dramatic goings or not, she yet held more clout than either, but she had grown used to a spotless reputation, and the way the smudges were touching her again had her more on edge than she liked to admit. Guilt, too, pricked at the acknowledgement that Regulus (of all people) could trigger such a feeling; and when the snotty side of her thoughts tried to snip that it was his own fault, she saw in her mind's eye a sixteen-year-old boy, sitting across from her at tea, rubbing at his arm without saying a word until she pulled it out of him. (She'd told him about the peacocks, that day. When he had straightened up, she’d convinced himself he was fine, distracted, strangely interested in her white-feathered lawn birds.)

The way Bella had stepped in to take over had made her a little jealous, at the time - with Evan, too - but the three of them had some grand destiny she had not wished to interfere with. Now, the way Bella was pulling Draco aside made a sick nervousness twist in Narcissa's stomach.

Two ropes tugged, pulling her son and her little cousin away from her in two different directions: her son towards a destiny that would kill him, and her cousin towards a rebellion that would kill him. Regulus had told Sirius about meeting Draco, saying nothing to Narcissa. Draco, too, had said nothing.

(Did her sister know?)

Draco was nowhere to be seen, as was the norm, now. Perhaps he was with his friends, roaming the beach, but she thought he was probably with Bella again, just as he had been the day before, though he said little about that, too - as if she could not figure it out. More than once, she had been tempted to say as much, but she worried it would only make him slip further into the waking nightmare if she were to speak too plainly of his absence.
An hour had passed when a tap on the window drew her attention to a small owl, black and copper and clenching a note in its talons. She was unsurprised to see the note was from Regulus - responding to her request, it would seem. For a passing moment, she considered inviting him to come, but she did not know when Draco intended to return, and she was not ready to approach that without a better understanding of the situation.

They met in the back garden of the Blacks’ summer home, instead, following the reassurance that Sirius had since left.

Whether Sirius had prefaced her visit with any air of concern, she did not know, but Regulus’s manner had some subtle edge of uncertainty. She wished that she could tell him to relax, but she did not feel particularly relaxed, herself.

“You were seen wandering about with one of your traitor friends - a woman, at that, which you must understand was foolish - and you failed to mention meeting my son,” she began, and to his credit, the wince in response was only noticeable because she knew from experience that it was most likely happening. “Which would you like to start with?”

“There is nothing legitimately scandalous about walking,” he said. Without leaving room for argument (and her lips were poised for argument, because there very well could be something scandalous in it), he continued with a more apologetic tone. “As for Draco, I did not intend to keep it from you, but he did not take to my presence very well. It’s not that I can’t recognise the delicate nature of this situation, but I just… wish I could help him.”

Closing her mouth to a line, Narcissa watched him for a moment, and some degree of annoyance started to dispel. She had been prepared to defend her child - after all, Sirius had made it sound as though some level of animosity had sparked - but her heart softened again at the earnest look in his eyes.

“I wish I could, too,” she said, and more than the guilt, she hated the feeling of helplessness. How proud, her boy looked, and how pleased, like he was trying to stand too tall. “And I wish you would let me help you too. You’re being careless, strolling about with a woman, however harmless your intent. You know that.” The uncomfortable look on his face confirmed it, even if he kept whatever words he was thinking to himself. “If you must mix with them, be more mindful about it, at the very least.”

“It was the outskirts,” he defended..

“It’s Iago,” she countered.

Shaking his head, Regulus’s mouth turned down a little at the corners. “She’s a friend.”

“I don’t suppose you intend to say which one?”

“Not if Iago intends to criticise her, no.”

It was a fair point, though Narcissa could not help but feel a little grumpy about the evasiveness. “I’m only concerned for you.”

“I know you think I’m just trying to make it all worse, and maybe I am making it worse,” Regulus began, mouth tugging down more. “It is not what I expected out of life, but that is not always a bad thing. If you decide you want to get out…”

The frown on his face made him look younger - or maybe the stress behind his frown had always made him look a little older. She was deeply uncomfortable with the possibility that he could be
more relaxed when he was so blatantly courting ostracisation at best and death at worst, but he was not holding himself like the strung up child she remembered. He could not possibly enjoy the traitors’ company that much - not truly. Perhaps his brother’s, as he’d been a child prone to sentiment, but he had loathed Potter and the other Gryffindors. He had never reached beyond the friends around him in Slytherin, never shown a modicum of interest. If they were kind to him now, he had to know it was false, yet if he didn’t...

Perhaps the confidence in his eyes was an even more frightening prospect.

“I know,” she said after a moment. She knew she needed to leave before the madness rubbed off and started sounding like something reasonable.

Upon his return to the summer house, Sirius lingered around the doors for longer than he ought to have. While it was always fun to tempt the fates and wagging tongues to say something, the purpose had been to see the viability of maintaining something with Narcissa while her sister lost what was left of her mind. No matter what his issues were with her, Sirius had no intention of jeopardising that for Regulus. He wanted to be sure she’d left. When he listened for voices, and heard none, Sirius slipped into the garden.

Regulus was alone, sitting under a patch of shade and absorbed in his book. Nothing unusual there in the slightest. "Is she gone?"

“Yes,” Regulus answered, then glanced up.

How informative.

"Did I narrowly avoid weeping?" Sirius asked.

“No weeping,” Regulus confirmed, marking the place in his book before shutting it loosely on his hand. “She expressed some concern about my associations and made it clear that she was aware that I did not mention speaking to Draco; but her initial manner led me to expect it was going to be harsher.”

"By associations," Sirius started. "Do you mean me?"

“You were not specifically mentioned this time,” Regulus said, shaking his head, “but don’t worry, she is horrified about you, too. Even so, it wasn’t actually the most unpleasant conversation I’ve had today.” Wryly, he slanted his mouth down. “Yaxley approached me this morning, which was the first approach all month, with the exception of Narcissa. As expected, it was not to express supportive sentiments.”

Alarm lit a fire in his stomach. “Are you alright?”

“It was an unpleasant conversation, not an attack,” Regulus responded, indicating his unmarred frame. “Baiting, for the most part, sprinkled with the air of a threat, but he’s a Death Eater, so it’s not exactly surprising that he would do so. In hindsight, I was perhaps less polite than I ought to have been, but I don’t think he is likely to act on his frustrations immediately.” Regulus lifted a shoulder in a small, half-shrug. “All the same, I thought I ought to mention it, in case his annoyance maintains.”

Yaxley being a Death Eater wasn't a surprise, but confirmation was still good to have. It struck Sirius as odd for a moment, as he could remember when Regulus returned that he had so carefully omitted any names unless Sirius had brought them up first. He'd put money on it being not wanting to confirm anything they didn't already know. But now he seemed to say it so casually, the distance
between himself and the Death Eaters. He wanted to help so openly these days. Sirius had to duck his head to the hide the smile threatening to break out, because he was not at all ready for the mocking that would ensue.

Sirius cleared his throat. "You're only polite when someone is polite to you. It doesn't sound like he was being polite."

"He was not being polite at all, no," Regulus confirmed, expression souring a little. "I told him I was willing to debate it when he muster some civility because I don't find threats to be a compelling argument, but he has not taken me up on it yet."

"Then fuck him, you've got better things to do than cater to the likes of him," Sirius shrugged. He didn't expect many positive reactions, but he couldn't be sure. In terms of being predictable, Iago had delivered exactly what he expected. "Are you alright to pack it in on Thursday? Meeting call went out for Friday, and it's probably better to stay down afterwards to give everyone an idea of the schedules."

"Thursday is fine," Regulus responded with a tip of his head. "Morning?"

"Not early," Sirius scowled, as his brother’s idea of morning and his own were two different things. "There was another unauthorised Kiss yesterday, so I'd prefer to blend in as much as we can."

The mention of dementors seemed to catch whatever petty remark Regulus had been intending to return regarding Sirius and early mornings because his expression fell from haughty to a frown. "Consider it noted. Do we know who it was?"

"They weren't magical. Taking their kid to Diagon when they got set on, by the looks of it." Sirius replied grimly. That made the third one in the last few weeks, along with at least two more disappearances. "I'm going to mention Hermione taking some back up when she goes with her own. They're going to be targets."

Regulus frowned, lowering his chin in a slight nod. "That seems like good advice."

"We may just do it as a group," Sirius said, thoughtfully. It might be a bigger target, but more people meant it would be harder for an attack to be successful. Especially somewhere like Diagon. "I think shopping trips will be on hold, at least until we can get a better idea of the movements. We're up to three attacks in Diagon, and five more in London since we left. Time to get back to reality."

Regulus nodded his head, punctuated with a huff. "The Dark Lord’s Cause has never been particularly respectful of the holidays. Back to reality, mess that it is."
When Regulus strode into the dining room at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, he saw several of the Order members already milling around, split between the near corner of the room and a patch of chairs at the table. Emmeline was already seated and chatting with Hestia, Bill standing just beside them. When Emmeline’s eyes caught his own, he felt a mirroring smile start to tug at the corner of his mouth, and with it, a wave of reassurance. The uncertainty of facing his first real meeting with the members of the Order had been twisting in his stomach since morning - he could still feel Moody’s judgemental eye, even if that timeline had been written over - and however motivated he was to know what happened on this side of the dining room wall when ‘the vigilantes’ met, it had been strangely hard to force himself to set his book aside and walk down, even though they had been well-settled into the house since arriving back from Iago.

The Weasley twins were huddled conspiratorially by a cabinet - a point of some mild concern. However, converse to the normal way of things, it was their father who wrangled Regulus’s attention into action. Arthur and Molly were paired up just a few paces away from the door, absorbed in their own discussion. Roaming the halls of his home - and seeing the Weasleys wandering within it - had brought back to his mind the scattered burn marks on the tree. Narcissa was unlikely to approve of that series of questions, but there were yet a few living lines to tug.

Blotches of family had been obscured from his history for any number of reasons. Arthur’s mother, presumably, had been disowned for marrying the wrong kind of pureblood, and however much that might have made sense when he was a rapt child, the logic seemed a bit strange, from a blood perspective. Somehow, the Weasleys had stayed pure longer than some of the neutral families, yet he didn’t even know the name of the sister between Callidora Longbottom and Charis Crouch.

Emmeline had caught his eye again - a silent invitation, so as to not interrupt Hestia’s story - but following a subtle indication that he needed a moment, Regulus instead walked over towards the Weasley parents.

“Might I have a moment, Arthur?” Regulus asked, his tone carefully casual, despite the mix of immense discomfort and curiosity pressing at the back of his skull.

Arthur’s eyes darted over to his younger sons, perhaps wondering if it was something that they’d done that he was about to hear about, but with no obvious infraction, he gave a nod. "Of course. How can I help?"

Pausing for only a beat, Regulus gathered his thoughts to a point, mentally steeling himself for what probably seemed a simple question, however heavily history and expectation might weigh on his shoulders.

“I would like to ask you about your mother,” he finally said after a few seconds (which had felt as though they lasted so much longer).

Arthur looked flummoxed, but seemed to recover quickly. "My mother? I'm afraid she passed away some years ago."

“My knowledge is quite limited on the matter,” Regulus continued, trying to maintain an even tone despite the obvious reason behind the statement. “When was that?”

"Must’ve been '83, '84?” Arthur looked to Molly, giving his chin a scratch in thought. "It was just before Charlie started school. We weren’t sure if we’d have trouble."
"Twelve years ago," Molly provided, with a wistful sort of look.

"Ah, then yes, '84," Arthur confirmed. "Why do you ask?"

“I expect you have noticed there are certain voids on the drawing room tapestry,” he began, but before Molly could share her brewing comment on the matter, he continued, “I know nothing about them, not even their names, but - should you be so obliging - I have decided I would like to start.”

For a moment, Arthur looked quite speechless. "I can give her a name, if that's what you're after. Cedrella. She had two sisters, as I recall, though never much spoke to either when I was young. She and my father were teenagers when they got married, eloped right after graduating. She was a bit of a romantic, believed that once you had met the right person, then it was just silly to prolong it."

Regulus nodded, lips pressing to a thoughtful line. It seemed rude in the moment to pull out his parchment and take notes, but at the very least, he committed the information to memory for later. He could still ask Great Aunt Callidora, but there was no telling how she would react to questions about her sister. He did not have a particularly good read on her, and Cedrella sounded like her exit had not been completely unlike Andromeda’s. Romantic, perhaps, but clearly not well-received, in light of the disownment.

“I see,” he said, focusing his attention on Arthur again. “Thank you. For the sake of reference, do you know how old she was when she passed? I assume she was born between 1915 and ‘17, but the numbers were burned off with the name.”

"It was ‘17," Arthur confirmed, but if anything, he seemed more confused. "Why do you ask? Are you trying to find out about the missing name dates?"

Again, Regulus nodded. “Some names are likely to be lost to time, but for those that are not, I am attempting to fill in the gaps.”

"I can't be much help, other than that." Arthur admitted, apologetically. "It'd been about fifteen years since they'd last spoken by the time I was born. Mum is the only one I really know of."

“I expected as much,” Regulus admitted wryly. “Though I intend no offense, I frankly would have been surprised if you had known of many others, given the isolation.” Behind him, Regulus heard the door open and close, and with a slight twist, he saw Tonks slink in, looking glum as ever. With a glance back at Arthur and Molly, he nodded with a shift towards the table. “Thank you all the same.”

Making a beeline for the seat next to Emmeline, Regulus ran through the Cedrella birth and death dates in his mind again, then settled down beside her.

Hestia gave a half-hearted wave. It could be construed as a lack of enthusiasm, but the darkness under her eyes indicated that it may simply be tiredness, "Are we a full house tonight?" she asked.

"I'm not sure about Hagrid," Emmeline admitted. "But I think Arabella is coming. If she can rise to throw cauldrons at Fletcher for falling asleep at his post, I'm sure she's well enough."

"She'd rise from the grave to do that," Hestia replied.

Emmeline shifted her focus to Regulus, her curiosity unspoken by obvious. "I don't think you'll have seen Arabella. She doesn't get 'round very easily, and her surveillance spot requires near constant monitoring."
Regulus shook his head. “I don't think I have, no. Where is her surveillance spot?”

“Usually Harry,” Hestia interjected. “But currently his relatives.”

“We do mix and match spots, but ever since Dung left his post for a job, she's been diligent,” Emmeline clarified. “I did offer, but we're waiting on the replacement spy - imperiused or otherwise - to show up among Unspeakables. A uniquely qualified task for me.”

“I imagine it would be,” Regulus noted. “What other places require monitoring?”

"It varies," Emmeline admitted. "The major places are, of course, within the Ministry, St. Mungo's, and Diagon Alley. They're the historical hot spots."

"Don't forget Tinworth," Hestia added. "They were making jokes about it by the end of the war. Who in their right mind would want to live there after, what was it, four attacks in two years?"

"Diagon needs to be stepped up," Emmeline replied grimly, before she leaned back and raised her voice. "Tonks, any sign of Ollivander or Fortescue?" Tonks looked back, but shook her head. "Damn it."

Discomfort had settled in Regulus’s bones, and it was with great care that he kept his face neutral as the subject of Tinworth pricked and faded with a hot and crackling flash, tugging his attention from their continued conversation. Ollivander and Fortescue were concerns, no doubt, but he had taken some part in one of those four strikes against Tinworth, and he doubted that the mood would remain quite as accepting with that in the air. If there were those in the room that had a problem with him politely and quietly holding onto tradition…

Behind them, the door open and shut again as a stream of people entered, catching his eye again. Most of them were familiar; he assumed the unfamiliar woman walking behind Sturgis was the ‘Arabella’ they had mentioned, though it was not impossible that others had gone unmet and unmentioned. A long beat later, another wave washed in, punctuated with Dumbledore’s arrival.

Across the room, Remus approached Dumbledore, but whatever he said, it was quiet and quick before he resumed his seat next to Sirius. Emmeline, Hestia, and Tonks must have continued talking about the missing persons, but it only felt noticeable as the hush fell.

"My friends, welcome. The Ministry has now set up a taskforce, upon which is - recently torn from his retirement - Alastor Moody, and Nymphadora Tonks. Along with several other Aurors and hit wizards, they'll be drawing up target areas and homes. Thankfully, we will have access to the list and can be alert when required." There was a general tone of assent. "Surveillance will change accordingly, and Kingsley has drawn up the list to keep as much checked as can. However, we can already see that some attacks are coming without warning. We have five instances of muggles who have been killed for no discernable reason, two family homes among them. There appears little reason to remain hidden, and this is being thoroughly illustrated."

The headmaster looked briefly to Remus. "I must also inform you all that it appears Fenrir Greyback is up to his old tricks, as one of the houses has a surviving child who has been infected. It is likely he will be looking to rebuild that army, by creating it if need be. We must be available to help when we can, but also, remember our own safety. Portkeys must be retained, and safe houses must be used."

Emmeline tapped Regulus's shoulder lightly before whispering against his ear. "Have you gotten yours yet?"
Leaning into the whisper, he shook his head. At a mirrored volume, he responded, “No. I wasn't aware of them, actually, at least not outside of specific circumstances.”

"I thought as much," Emmeline replied. "We'll talk to Sturgis about the portkey, but safe houses change; we'll see what's easiest if you have no preference."

He tipped his head in a small nod then turned his attention back to the meeting.

"We'll open the floor to other concerns," Dumbledore said, as attention was drawn to the other members in a sweeping gesture.

Sirius spoke up. "We'll have to do a Diagon run soon. With the attacks, I think we should do it as a group. Hermione's parents will be a target as well."

"It'd be a large group," Kingsley said, thoughtfully.

"I know it won't be subtle," Sirius admitted, as if he'd ever been subtle. "But it will be safer. Molly?"

"What about the Ministry escort?" Molly asked.

"They can come too if they really want to," Sirius said in a tone that indicated he didn't think much of the idea. "But if they can't keep up, it's their own fault."

"Or if you deliberately lose them, you mean," Tonks said.

Sirius just winked at her in response.

"That's settled," Dumbledore nodded. "Are there any other concerns that have yet to be raised?"

Something in Regulus’s chest seized at the question - and with it rippled the temptation to quash the rising thought. As much as they had been present in his home for the past year, the Order of the Phoenix was nonetheless a relatively unpredictable entity. What they would do with his contributions was uncertain - but what might happen if he sat on it was no less unsettling.

Silence hung for an uncomfortable moment, broken after a few beats when several other members peppered in their reports and concerns. Dumbledore was starting to shift towards what Regulus assumed would be the close by the time he had fully mustered control over his own voice to speak his own piece, forcing the words out of his mouth as.

“As of late, I have been troubled by the issue of recruitment within the Death Eaters’ ranks,” Regulus began; even saying the words ‘Death Eater’ within this gathering made his insides twist again with buckled nerves, but he steeled firm against it. There was one other individual in the room who knew the truth of it well, and his eyes flicked briefly to meet the unreadable expression on Severus’s face, but he still had trouble knowing where his old friend now stood on the issue, caught as he was between the two. As he returned his attention to Dumbledore, Regulus added, “Particularly in respect to those still in school. I have no confirmation on the matter, but it happened in the previous iteration of the war, and there is reason to believe it is happening again - or will, if it has not already.”

"A grave concern," Dumbledore allowed, with a thoughtful nod. "If a difficult one to caution against. While we can watch over the more likely targets, we all know from experience that we can have difficulty identifying that successfully."

"We keep our eyes open and intervene when we can," McGonagall said, before her eyes flickered
towards Moody. "As well as checking for Polyjuice."

"Yeah," Tonks added. "Not hiring another Death Eater for Defense would probably be a leg up."

Sirius snorted. "Whoops, a bit late for that."

McGonagall gave him a sharp look, to which he shrugged but didn't elaborate further.

"It is something we will try to be more vigilant of," Dumbledore allowed. "Above all else, Hogwarts must be a safe haven for all of its students, regardless of their circumstances."

Nodding stiffly, Regulus thought it all sounded a bit vague and noncommittal, and he pressed his lips to a line to stop himself from saying as much. What could be done from an action perspective was hard to say - short of abducting the high risk children in question - yet a simple ‘we’ll watch for it’ struck Regulus as a cop out with little conviction to it.

More than likely, Dumbledore and McGonagall were watching those students for the good of the other students - not with the intention of helping the children who had fallen deep into something they could not escape, even if they decided to on their own. A strange bitterness stung in his chest, but to say as much would accomplish nothing, however much it troubled him to think of Draco falling deeper than he must already be. Perhaps school would be a reprieve from assigned tasks, but with Harry in the school too, Regulus could not help but fear there were more uses for a student than once there had been.

Young Death Eaters did not want the help of Dumbledore or McGonagall, and he was not naive enough to think that was the solution when he himself would have scoffed, but the response had rather missed his point, nonetheless. Perhaps it was better that they had missed his point, but it stung no less. He glanced to Severus again, thinking that he was likely to prove a more productive line of conversation in that respect, if he could catch Severus before the other man had the chance to dart out of the door.

“Something to say?” Moody cut into his thought, and when Regulus flicked over a glance, he saw that creepily protruding eye swiveling to look at him.

Nothing that is likely to accomplish anything was the thought that rose in Regulus’s mind, but instead he shook his head and said, “Just thinking.”

Dumbledore interjected. "Then I suggest we adjourn for the evening. Alastor, if I might have a word on the way?"

Behind him, Emmeline tapped the back of his shoulder again. "Never play cards. You’re a terrible liar."

Twisting to meet her eyes, Regulus resisted a huff. “I expect he would not have cared for my commentary, and I concluded that there is more to be lost than gained from verbalising it.”

"You have other places to voice it," Emmeline gave him a consolatory pat on the shoulder. "Until some of the friction loosens."

Pressing his mouth to a small half-smile, he nodded. “Too true. So, how do I go about arranging for that portkey? Are they associated with the safe houses mentioned?"

"They’re different, in case someone grabs it." Emmeline explained, as she flagged down Sturgis. "Usually, we’d pick somewhere you feel safe, but I’m not sure if there is one for you. Aside from here."
“This is it, yes,” he admitted, slanting his mouth as he shook his head. The little village in France sprang to mind, then, though it seemed a bit excessive for the average scuffle escape route.

"Then we'll do some pot luck," Emmeline shrugged. "Unless there's someone you want to be with in case of injury?"

As it was, the people he would want to be with when he was injured were more often present in this particular house rather than other houses, though he could not speak to how the Order distributed in such a situation. More than likely, this was not where anyone else felt safest, but within this house, at least he could always rely on Kreacher.

“The list is a bit shorter than it once was,” he said wryly. Or rather, the names on the list had changed. From the corner of his vision, he spotted Snape starting to shuffle towards the exit, and with a slightly pinched expression, flicked his eyes first to Dumbledore - who he also hoped to catch before leaving - then back to Emmeline. “If my presence isn’t required, I trust your judgement on the matter, but if it’s better to be present, I will be back shortly. There is something I would like to speak with Severus about, and he is a bit slippery in leaving these gatherings.”

With a motivated stride, Regulus crossed the room and stepped out, seeing that Severus had not gotten very far down the hall yet.

“Severus, if I might have a word?” As he approached, Regulus pressed his mouth to a thoughtful line. Again, a strange discomfort prickled at the back of his mind, aligned though their overall goals might remain. For a year, Regulus had been in this house, yet only a handful of those days had occasioned a visit from Severus, and even fewer had resulted in conversation; even so, at least he was not dropping threats or aggressive ultimatums, for all his distance from the rest of the Order.

“Yes?”

The man’s familiar drawl was dry. Without the benefit of history, Regulus might have assumed it to be bored, yet closer inspection revealed a keen interest behind his eyes. Regulus was opening his mouth to speak when the Weasley twins bounded from behind, past the two of them and up a flight of stairs to where the other children had likely closed themselves off in some room or another. For a moment, Regulus paused, waiting for a door to shut above before returning his attention to the conversation. Tipping his head to the side, the two slipped into a room, and though Regulus did not wish to miss Dumbledore before he left, either, there were too many ears about to speak openly.

Severus lifted his brow in a subtle flicker as the door shut behind them. “If the intention is to avoid suspicion, your execution is a bit lacking in subtlety.”

“In this moment, I would prefer privacy over the avoidance of suspicion. I wish to speak of Draco.”

“I thought you might,” Severus said, elaborating no further.

“Whatever they might say in respect to the school as a whole, I have my doubts as to the protection that would be afforded to him, given his particular situation,” Regulus said with a subtle crinkle of his nose. “I do not know what the Dark Lord’s plans are for Draco, what his plans are for young Death Eaters within Hogwarts in general, but it troubles me greatly.”

“I suspected as much.” There was a little curl at the corner of Severus’s mouth. “There is a certain measure of bias one experiences in that room, as you will come to learn. Rest assured I will protect Draco, just as I have in the years you have been absent. His mother begged it of me weeks ago.”
A stab of jealousy jabbed in Regulus’s chest, but with a measure of care, he kept it from flickering on his face. “She is very concerned; as she should be. I’m surprised you did not talk him out of it.”

“He did not come for permission,” Severus said curtly.

“I’m sure you subtly discouraged it when appropriate.” The snip slipped out before Regulus could wrangle it back down his throat, and though Severus did not bristle, a certain sharpness narrowed in his eyes.

“I maintained my cover.”

“Of course,” Regulus responded, and though an edge of sarcasm was burning in his mouth and behind his teeth, he filtered it out in favour of neutrality before he again permitted himself to speak. “That is very important,” he said, though it did not feel very important to Regulus at all when it meant throwing Draco to the un-mercies of the Death Eaters. There were non-traitorous ways to encourage him to wait, but now that he had joined… “I am merely disappointed to see history repeating itself. I want something better for him.”

“Do not presume to think I wanted for this to happen, but if you are referencing a life of rebellion, do you truly think that would be better for him?” Again, the tone was dry, and Regulus did not much like the leading nature of the questions.

“I would have settled for finishing school before throwing himself into a cause he cannot safely step back from,” Regulus correctly firmly.

“Have you not done the same? Twice, at that,” Severus pointed out, to which Regulus crinkled his nose.

“Only once,” Regulus countered.

“You are naive if you think the Order’s ‘leave at will’ philosophy applies to you too,” Snape said in a stinging, lofty tone that Regulus did not like much at all. “You are here with conditions, as am I, and those conditions are protected by Dumbledore. You know better than most in that room why this is a problem,” he said with a sweeping gesture, and Regulus felt a guilty pang as he thought of Dumbledore’s curse-blackened hand. “While they are unlikely to murder us for choosing to withdraw, the promise of protection is contingent upon continued cooperation. They coat it in sugar to preserve their moral high-ground, but now that you have been brought in, they will never trust you, should you want out.”

“Some of them are beyond any hope of trust, but not all of them,” Regulus said, a little defensively.

“They are not your friends, even if you think they are,” Severus returned sharply, and again, Regulus fought a bristle. “If the tides were to turn against you, do you really think they would prioritise you over one of their own?”

The sting wriggled deeper, a trail of punctures as Regulus stiffened against the point. Sirius, perhaps, would stand for him - maybe even Emmeline, though if it were at the expense of another, he could not be so sure. He could not even be so sure that they ought to, in such a situation, yet the thought was no less hollow.

“Why are you pressing this? We are meant to be on the same side, all of us, but this is not the first time you’ve extended to suggest otherwise,” Regulus responded with a furrowed brow.

“The same side, yes, but you can pursue a common goal without mutual trust,” Severus said in turn. “They do not trust you without reservation, and you should take care in the same manner.”
“I do not blindly trust them,” Regulus countered with a frown.

“But you would like to.” The words were a statement, rather than a question. “Your growing closeness with Vance is nauseatingly obvious, as is your willingness to ignore the continually contemptible existence of your brother. Consider the risk, and what you must give up, should you continue an open rebellion.”

Suddenly, Regulus wondered if Narcissa had said anything to Severus about their conversations, or whether Severus was merely putting forth a perceptive guess - or perhaps a little of both. “I am taking these things into consideration, but you ought to know better than anyone that there is more to tentatively trust in the Order right now than there is for me in the Death Eaters.” Locking his gaze more firmly, Regulus added, “I did not come back to isolate myself from them both.”

As Severus’s mouth thinned, Regulus continued, “I consider you to be part of that.”

“Of which one?” he asked dryly.

“Of the Order,” Regulus clarified with a slightly stubborn expression. “No one else in that room understands what we have experienced and what we continue to experience. A continual frustration, might I add, but one that I am trying to accept for the truth that it is. Perhaps you don’t trust me either, and I will not pretend that I have not experienced a degree of uncertainty about whether I might find myself the subject of a loyalty test, now that the Death Eaters know I am alive. Even so, I recognise the similarly delicate nature of our situations. Considering the overwhelming amount of Gryffindors I now interact with on a regular basis, I must admit I do value that, however sparse your visits might be.”

“When it comes to obnoxious Gryffindors, I assure you I am subjected to far more,” Severus deadpanned.

The tension loosened a little, and Regulus quirked the corner of his mouth in a little smirk. “I suppose you are. A teacher. Somehow, I have failed to express just how surprising that news was.”

“It was not my occupation of choice.”

“I suspected as much.” Regulus shook his head, smothering his mouth to a line again. “I will leave you to it, then.”

Severus tipped his, and the two lingered in place for a moment before slipped back out into the near-empty hallway, one after another. Most of the Order seemed to have cleared off, and Dumbledore - now finished with his own conversation - looked ready to vanish out the front door as well when Regulus set his feet to rapid steps again.

“Before you go,” Regulus began, and Dumbledore turned his half-moon spectacles back. “There is something I have been meaning to ask.”

“What is on your mind?” the elder wizard asked as the rest of his body turned to match. Severus passed them then, taking his exit instead, and Regulus waited until the door had thunked shut a few long seconds later before speaking again.

“It’s about the prophecy,” Regulus said in a lower tone. “I think it would be...beneficial to our collective purposes if I could listen to the contents in their entirety.”

“I’m afraid that is not possible,” Dumbledore said in a regretful tone, though Regulus did not think he could feel too regretful about it if the ball remained as intact as Regulus had last seen it.
“The prophecy survived, did it not? Why is it not possible?” Regulus asked, trying to filter the small, demanding rush into a more even delivery.

“You recognise the value of limited information distribution, do you not? There are certain things you have kept to your own chest, as I understand it.”

Regulus thought it was a rather unfair point when they were talking about something that could very well help in the consideration of the horcruxes, and this time, he did not bother to filter the annoyance from his face. “With the others, certainly, but you are aware of my ongoing... task. The prophecy may well inform it.”

“If it does, I am certain I will catch it,” Dumbledore responded with a smile, but Regulus found it more grating than comforting, in the moment. “The pursuit of your pardon will begin soon. Ensure that you are ready for that, and I will attend to concerns of the prophecy.”

The reminder of his case for freedom (and present lack thereof) was skillfully, if blatantly, implemented. Perhaps it would have felt less like a threat if the conversation with Severus had not already put him in a mood, or if the prophecy wasn’t being held back from him for no discernably good reason, but he arranged his face into something neutral.

“I will be ready,” Regulus said, despite the dread pooling in his stomach, and without further word, apparated straight to the top floor. As far as politeness went, he knew the exit could have used some work, but he had started to grow attached to the prospect of knowing the full extent of the prophecy, and to try and go about that with official channels and be cut off so immediately was more irritating than he had expected.

With a huff, Regulus dropped into the seat at his desk and tried to focus his mind, pulling out parchment to start scribbling down the new points of information. At least his first meeting with the Order had not been a complete loss.

A long-standing eye for details came in handy when trying to have an incognito meeting. As Sirius reached the top of the stairs to the hallway, he noticed the telltale burn marks of an attempt to burst through the silencing charms that’d been set up prior to the meeting. The top landing was empty now, but he could well imagine the younger Weasleys – no doubt irritated by their brothers' inclusion – trying to break through to listen in, no matter what their mother told them. He didn't imagine Harry was taking too well to the exclusion either, but there was nothing he didn't know already, or they were things he had no gain in knowing.

Behind him, Remus came to an abrupt stop just shy of bumping right into his back. They exchanged a look, one of both exasperation at the continued efforts and a little nostalgia-infected pride that they were every bit as stubborn and creative (if not more so) than they'd been at the same age. Harry was sixteen now, the same age Sirius had been when he'd left home, older than Regulus had joined the Death Eaters, only a year younger than when he and James had first started getting into fights with Death Eaters.

“Are you planning on coming to Diagon?” Sirius asked.

Remus shook his head. “There'll be enough attention on you as a group without me adding to it.”

“Despite what you seem to believe, no one can automatically tell you have a furry little problem,” Sirius said. He wasn't sure if that was true; with werewolves coming more to the forefront of the war again, the signs of infection would make the rounds, and no doubt, Remus would know that. “I'm not asking anyone else. I can't stomach any more lovesick stares. I went through all of that
with James, and I didn't have the patience for it then either.”

Remus winced. “So I remember.”

It had been a bit of a sticking point when Lily had first been added to the group, but they'd gotten over it. Or he had, because they could spark off an argument between each other easily, but he didn't think that he could remember Lily specifically starting one.

This was different. He wasn't one to stand in the way of something that made people happy, but the limbo was making him feel crazy. You could cut the tension with a knife. “I'd never advocate anyone I like, let alone an old friend, getting involved with someone I'm related to. However, the pining and flirting is so much worse. Either have at it, or don't. The tension is driving me crazy.”

“It's not on purpose,” Remus said, with a hint of defensiveness slipping into his tone.

“I know that,” Sirius pinched the top of his nose, and sighed heftily. “It could all work out. Even if not, we could all end up dead, and there's no reason not to try and grab a little joy where you can. I don't begrudge that at all.”

“It's dangerous,” Remus said. “She deserves better.”

Caught in between the desire to defend his younger brother (he had gotten considerably better, and he was still growing, so people could lay off and let him find his feet, ta very much) and the surprise that Remus would say so, given that he had been under the impression they were getting on. Besides, it wasn't the point. “She's a grown woman,” Sirius insisted. “It's her choice who she chooses to like. It's got nothing to do with being better or worse. Give her some credit.”

“I do. She is a remarkable woman,” Remus agreed. “But she's young, and it would only drag down the rest of her life.”

“She's not that young,” Sirius insisted. Vance was older than him, a fact she enjoyed lording over him from time to time.

“She's twenty-three.”

Something stuttered in Sirius's brain, as he opened his mouth to argue. Walking back into his mind was the sudden realisation he hadn't been particularly specific as to Regulus and Emmeline's ridiculous whispering in the corner like a couple of gossiping hens, and remembering Emmeline putting forward the idea that Tonks had a crush on Remus. He hadn't paid it much mind; Tonks reminded him a lot of himself at that age, and he'd had crushes that lasted all of an hour before fading. Especially so that he wasn't entirely sure where Remus stood on it.

Self-pitying, apparently. Sirius had to laugh at that.

“It's not funny,” Remus insisted, sounding more hurt than Sirius had truly meant for him to be.

“I wasn't actually talking about you, mate.” Sirius admitted, with a grin. “But I did hear the reason my baby cousin is moping is because she wants to get her leg over you.”

“Sirius!” Remus hissed.

Sirius paid him no mind. “It's a bit weird,” he admitted. “But not ‘cause you come over a bit furry once a month. She can change into whatever shape she wants; she can be hairy any time she fancies. Point stands, grown woman with her own choices. Except her mum might chase you and hex you one if you upset her.”
“She deserves someone whole,” Remus said, sadly.

“Got bits missing, have you?” Sirius glanced over him in an obvious way.

“There's a whole me missing once a month,” Remus replied.

Sirius wanted to argue that too. Being a wolf was part of him, and while it was dangerous, that didn't make it an automatically bad part. Dangerous didn't always mean bad. If Remus didn't look ready to wallow in his own pit of pity or fit to argue with him till sunrise on the matter he would.

“Do whatever you want to do,” Sirius said, with a shrug. “But I've got two sets of adolescent romantic dramatics and none of you are actually teenagers.”

“You don't understand,” said Remus. “I wouldn't wish you to either.”

“Sure,” Sirius said, rolling his eyes. “You've got someone who not only knows your deepest and darkest and not only accepts it, but still wants you? This sounds so terrible.”

“She's your cousin,” Remus said. “It's weird, you said yourself.”

“It's not as if it was you that met her when she was a nipper, is it?” Sirius pointed out. How he went from feeling awkward and not sure how he felt about the idea of Remus and his cousin's kid shacking up to actively saying to get it was beyond him, but he couldn't stick watching people be miserable when they had the power to change it. “If you like her, she likes you, just don't bite her, and get the hell on with it. If you're running off and she's looking like Snape when you could both talk about it and decide one way or another, you're both damned fools.”

For a moment, Remus said nothing. Then a small grin flickered. “It worries me when you're the rational one.”

“Me too.” Sirius shuddered. “But in for a knut, in for a galleon. I'm not going through Lily and James again.”

“What about when Harry starts dating?” Remus asked.

“He had a girlfriend,” Sirius said, struggling to remember the brief mentions of another quidditch player. He hadn't heard much about it, he realised, given that he'd gotten a tendency to bite Harry's head off last year when they did talk, and half the time, they couldn't because of bloody Umbridge. He despised the thought, but it was hard to think of it through the fog that he'd felt weighing on him when stuck in this house for what seemed an eternity. He still shouldn't have taken it out on Harry. He wanted to know what was going on in his life, not just the bad parts. “I don't think he still does.”

“There'll be others,” Remus said.

“Probably,” Sirius allowed. “But I think I'd rather deal with Voldemort than any more bloody pining.”

It didn't take long realise that the twins, thick as thieves, had met up with their younger counterparts and were whispering away in Harry's room to their siblings, Harry and Hermione. Normally, discussing anything of the Order would be cause for concern, but this was more a simple case of defying their mother, and it was not as if doing that was in any way unusual in this house. Sirius decided to leave them to it; there was nothing sensitive this time, and they could make a note if there was something they really shouldn't be saying next time. Sirius made a look
for Dumbledore, but he’d flitted off to parts unknown, forcing his conversation with him about Harry to another time.

On the top landing, Sirius hesitated. He was starting to feel like an agony aunt more than a vigilante, but at the same time, it was all going on around him, and he still woke up in a night sweat remembering the horrors of James's pining-induced poetry. He’d been exceptionally lucky to find friends, even some family by blood and otherwise, that cared for him, and that had always been enough for him. That wasn’t the situation he was witnessing, though. He was watching his brother faff about, not knowing where to be at and not giving any clues to his eventual decision in the last month other than allowing continually sickening displays of flirting. While he seemed to be finding his voice in the Order (though restrained, if tonight was anything to go by), and even against his old allies, he seemed to still be stuck floundering at the idea of a relationship.

It better be because he'd decided to he wanted to, because Sirius in no way wanted to believe he'd let this awkwardness escalate over the last month simply because he couldn't say no. Maybe that would have been the case twenty years ago, but he hoped that Regulus had grown and learned a lot since then. Everything was always so insanely complicated when you make everything contingent on a set of bullshit rules and enforce it on your kids.

Trying the door, Sirius found it wasn't locked. "I wasn't sure you'd be up here," he said.

"Yes, of course, Sirius, you can come in. Thank you for asking," Regulus said without looking up, scribbling something on the piece of parchment that he was hunched over at the desk.

Sirius huffed at him. It wasn't entirely unexpected to find him with his wand in a knot over Moody calling out the fact he was obviously biting his tongue, and that Draco Malfoy's involvement with the Death Eaters was a lot less hypothetical than he was letting on.

Sirius opened the door further and walked in before shutting it behind him. "I wasn't planning on coming in, but since you said it so nicely."

Seemingly done with his parchment - at least for the moment - Regulus folded it and slipped it into his desk drawer before turning his attention to Sirius. “How can I be of assistance?”

Formalities and all. This was going to be considerably worse than he thought. "It went that badly?"

"Not in every possible respect, but on the whole, today has been less cooperative than I had hoped," Regulus responded.

"That would explain why you look clenched tight enough to make diamonds," Sirius replied mildly. He sat down on the bed, before being struck by how funny it felt to do this. They'd spoken this way many times, but there was just something about the frustrating level of formality, the impeccable and irritating neatness, and their positions that brought to mind the fact they used to do this quite often. More specifically, Sirius coming in and sitting cross-legged on the bed while Regulus either tried to read, write, or do things that were other than paying attention to him before giving up on such a vain endeavour. It even looked the same.

No, Sirius realised with a start. It didn't. Something had changed. He looked around the room with a frown, as he couldn't quite put his finger on it. "Did you redecorate?" he asked. Was it the colour? He was sure there used to be more silver.

"Yes," Regulus confirmed as he gave into the pattern and twisted in his chair to face Sirius. “A couple of months ago.”
"Is that when you removed the heads?" Sirius asked, in a distracted sort of way. They'd barely spent much time here in the last two months, between Iago and France. He hadn't really had the chance to check for possible changes.

“Around that time, yes.” Regulus dipped his chin in a little nod.

"What else?" Sirius asked. However, no sooner had the words left his mouth did he realise that something else was missing. This exclusion caused a jolt to his chest he couldn't quite identify. "You got rid of your murder board!" he exclaimed.

“Stop calling it a murder board,” Regulus said with a subtle strain in his voice, followed by a soft huff.

Sirius waved off the comment. "It was a board of newspaper clippings of a variety of murders. Thus, a murder board. I thought you wanted to keep that."

“I decided that I didn’t,” Regulus responded, waving his hand at the jarringly empty spot on the wall. “Clearly.”

"You're about twenty years late with that attitude," Sirius replied evenly. "Have I done something extra special to annoy you or are just in a mood?"

This time, Regulus let out a heavy sigh in place of his huff. “It’s not you - just residual irritation.”

Since he wasn't throwing anything, Sirius could respect that. He was handling a bad mood (residual irritation, his giddy aunt) better than most if he was just being a little snippy. "Because you got a brush off from Dumbledore?"

Furrowing his brow, Regulus opened his mouth to say something, paused, then closed it again into a thin line. Confirmation enough.

"If your concern is Narcissa's son, he already knows." Sirius shrugged. Harry had tried to raise the issue, after all. "Since he hasn't expelled him, I'm guessing he has some sort of plan, but the man is annoying inscrutable right when you don't want him to be."

“So it seems,” Regulus huffed, shaking his head.

Sirius sighed heavily, and leaned back onto his elbows on the bed. "I was going to bust your balls, but it's no fun if you're already miserable."


"Precisely my point," Sirius huffed. "You realise you've let it get to the point where literally everyone has noticed your little entanglement? You better have decided you're actually alright with it, or this is about to become exactly the humiliation I warned you about a month ago."

Pressing his lips to a line, Regulus leaned into the back of the chair. “Entanglement? That’s dramatic.”

"It's the noble and most ancient house," Sirius said, letting some of his sarcasm drip into his tone. Much as he was loathe to admit it, this particular affliction tended to get him too. "There's nothing about you, or I, or anyone else we're related to that's not bordering on melodrama."

“That seems to be the consensus,” Regulus said, crinkling his nose. “But to your point, barreling into things isn’t exactly the best option either.”
"How many Death Eaters are you related to now?" Sirius could also bring up that Narcissa was endlessly dramatic even without the branding, but it seemed a little divergent to his point. "I'm not suggesting barrelling, but you better have decided you're alright with the flirting because you've had a month to tell her you're not, and you haven't. It's getting worse than dramatic. It's...cute."

Regulus rolled his eyes but shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "I'm capable of handling my own situation."

"A month ago, I believed you," Sirius pointed out dryly. "But I still have no idea where you stand. Does she?"

"You seem to be much more concerned about it than she is," Regulus said dryly in return.

That was likely fair. Part of it was undoubtedly the rules and regulations of good manners which prevented her from going up and giving him a good shake, but the more Sirius thought about it, the more he realised he did actually care about the entire situation. Sirius had very few old friends whom he’d been close to that were still alive; and from their age group, it was now just himself, Remus, and Emmeline. They were both still very noticeably them, even after all these years, a few more grey hairs and scars aside. With being reliant on people coming here, he hadn’t really had a chance to socialise much, but he did see them both most of the time.

Then there was Regulus himself; he’d managed to connect with Sirius’s oldest friends now in a way that he didn’t when they were young, much to his younger self’s chagrin. He didn’t seem out of place around them, and if he was honest with himself, he thought he was currently spending more time around Emmeline than Sirius himself was. Just like the Order meeting, they liked to hole up and talk. That was a minor miracle - Regulus hated talking about anything of consequence.

Could he really blame himself for being invested? An old friend and his brother dancing about each other for months, when it was obvious to anyone that they actually liked each other. He’d seen it before with Emmeline, but he’d been busy then, and no doubt Marlene had busted her metaphorical balls back then too. He’d never seen anything close to it with Regulus. He still wasn’t sure what shape a relationship would take for him, but he had the awful, sinking suspicion that it would probably make him happy. Familial relationships, for him, would always be tied up with honour codes and expectations, but a new relationship wouldn’t have the same weight in the baggage if he could get over the hump of blood purity. A lot of things would become simpler if he could get past that.

(A few things more complicated, too.)

“The longer you let it continue, the more likely it is to turn into something real rather than a fleeting crush. Then if you’ve decided against it, it’s going to be harder.” Sirius forced himself to shrug. “I don’t want to see you get hurt. Or her. But I also don’t want your anxieties to be the only thing standing in the way of two people I give a damn being happy, for as long as they can. I don’t want you to think that you don’t deserve to be happy because of your past, because of old family motto, or because you still feel like you let everyone down by not being a merry miniature mass murderer.”

With a heavy sigh, Regulus shook his head, finding a floorboard to stare at. “I know.”

"I don't want you to end up like that portrait," Sirius said, unable to keep the shudder from his voice. "Stuck in the past, or worse, like Dad, stuck in this routine you think you ought to be in because it's expected of you. I know you don't hate it, but being stuck here, doing the same things as everyone else, it won't change your past or absolve any of that guilt. Sitting in the past, going over it again and again, is no way to live. I want you to have a future. I don't think a relationship is
integral to it, but if you're denying yourself not because you don't want it, but because of the crap that's still floating around in your head from being a teenager stuck in a shit situation, then yes, that bothers me."

Regulus slanted his mouth downward, frowning at the floor. “I wish I could just pluck out the complications; but it isn’t just about me - thinking that it is would be selfish - and I recognise what that means in this situation.” Again, he huffed a sigh. “Part of me is tired of caring about what is selfish in that respect, but at the same time, just because I’m tired of feeling selfish doesn’t mean that I don’t… I’m simply trying to reconcile that. It’s very frustrating.”

“Being tired of feeling something doesn't mean you stop feeling it.” Sirius let out a slow, steady breath. He understood that. One day, he was going to set Regulus down with a list of screwed up thoughts he had managed to glean from their upbringing and just have him tick off all that apply so he could actually tell what he was dealing with instead of it smacking them both in the face like this. “Doing something that is good for you, rather than some collective we, doesn’t make you selfish. People who care about you will want you to be happy, even if it’s not what they imagined for you. I realise you’ve always had trouble with that one, but I don’t want it to wreck your life when you’ve fought hard to have one. Other people's happiness shouldn't come at the cost of yours. Whether or not you decide you want a relationship is about you. She's a big girl, and she hasn't run screaming yet, which doesn't bode well for her being sane, but you won’t know till you try, or explain you’d rather be friends.”

"I want to be insulted that you're suggesting a relationship with me is a sign of insanity,” Regulus began with a pinched expression, leaning an arm on the back of his chair and resting his chin upon it, “but it's likely to paint a target on her back, so I suppose there is some truth to it, even with other issues aside.”

"You're taking too much credit. Emmeline's already got a target on her back, and she put it there all by herself," Sirius reminded him. It wouldn't make any such difference if they already want her dead; she can only die once, and it doesn't particularly matter which perceived infraction would do it. "Besides, you shouldn't take it personally. I think anyone who voluntarily gets involved with anyone with Black blood must be barking. The Death Eaters, Slytherin obsession, emotional constipation, insanity, difficulty havings kids, cursed objects everywhere, mental house-elf, and pureblood mania is a big price to pay for excellent cheekbones.”

Again, Regulus rolled his eyes. “You make it sound a lot worse when you phrase it like that.”

"I'm making it sound exactly what it is.” Sirius absolutely dared him to even indicate any of that wasn't true. It all was, to some degree. "When you find someone who looks at that huge list of crap they'll have to put up to be with you, either as a lifelong friendship or something else, and sticks around? I can't explain how brilliant that truly feels. That there are people willing to be screamed at by Mum, or the rest of the judgemental dead, or anyone else who's opinion they have to deal with, and they still want to be there with you, even though they don't have to, there's nothing binding them to do it, it's just that that they think you're worth dealing with all of that...” He thought of how Harry always seemed so pleased to see him; that Remus, who was always so fucking careful, let his guard down around him; of sitting on top of some empty tomb in High Gate with James, who just obviously knew he'd be there, and felt his throat constrict.

Pressing his lips to a line, Regulus nodded, though the thoughtful expression on his face did not seem to indicate an immediate intention to respond, instead leaving the words to hang thickly.

"You are worth that, and fuck anyone who says otherwise, alright?” Clearing his throat before he did something horrible and embarrassing, Sirius laughed nervously to himself. "Besides, people are
going to start making bets soon on whether you get over it, or Remus does it first. I intend to win."

"Is the bet why you've been pressing this point?" Regulus asked, though a flimsy smile was starting to crack through his pensive frown. "I knew there had to be an ulterior motive."

"Of course," Sirius deadpanned. "That you're my brother and I care about what happens to you is all a clever ruse."

"And elaborate, at that," Regulus returned evenly, shaking his head with the flickering hint of wry amusement. "I expected as much."

"Yes, convincing Mum to have another baby when I was eleven months old just so I could make a series of bets on you was particularly challenging since I don't think I'd gotten on to double syllables yet," Sirius said. "But clearly, it all worked since you're here."

"I wasn't aware your special skills involved convincing Mum of anything," Regulus quipped, "but I cannot argue with results."

"You're right," Sirius had to agree that he'd never managed to convince her of anything. "I don't think anyone's managed to convince Mum to do anything since 1925. She's been dead eleven years, a sentence I never thought I'd say since I never thought she was capable of doing something as mundane as popping her clogs in the first place, and I still don't think anyone could. Not even you."

"Probably not," Regulus said with a tight smile. "The odds are not in my favour, as far as betting goes. I prefer to win my gambles."

"Me too," Sirius replied. "So before Bellatrix decides to come and smother us in our sleep, try and make a bloody decision, will you? Or we'll have-" Suddenly, he stopped and thought for a moment. He wasn't sure whether or not Regulus would count Tonks. Sirius would, but he'd always been close to Andromeda, and the tree meant little to him, so it didn't matter that she wasn't on it. "Do you count Tonks? In terms of blood-as-family."

Regulus donned a thoughtful expression, hesitating for a moment before tipping his head in a little nod. "I was not sure how to interpret or categorise her at first, and it was admittedly difficult to connect her with Andromeda when her hair was blindingly pink; but yes, I do recognise that she is blood-family, even if it feels a bit strange." He shook his head. "Actually, 'very strange' is probably more accurate."

"I would have thought connecting her with her mother would make it harder, not easier." It did seem consistent with how he seemed to categorise them, even if that meant that made things more difficult with Bellatrix. "She's not that weird; I'll change my mind if Andromeda ends up with a bunch of pink and purple furred grandchildren, but other than that, she's just a bit colourful."

"That would be strange in quite a different way," Regulus said wryly, sitting up straight in his chair again.

"Is it being an Auror?" Sirius asked. Admittedly, he found that quite strange.

"There is more than one factor, but that is certainly among them. I really had not spoken more than a few words to her until shortly before Bella broke out of Azkaban, which was a bit uncomfortable, to say the least," Regulus began, shaking his head. "In general, she has felt more like a friendly Order member than Andromeda's daughter, but not always - it's difficult to explain."

"I hadn't seen her since she was about seven until that first Order meeting, when you saw Dumbledore," Sirius admitted. It had been a pretty strange experience. "I don't see much of either
of her parents in her. It's not like Harry, or the Weasleys, or you. It's easy to pin down where a sense of humour or something they think comes from. Tonks has me at a loss."

"I can’t speak to her father’s personality, but I would not have thought her to be related to Andromeda,” Regulus said, shaking his head.

"No, but And's not cheeky around you," Sirius pointed out. "You were still a baby when she got up the spout. It's like seeing Tonks now; it's hard to reconcile her with the seven year old, but I wouldn't have talked to the seven-year-old in the same way."

“Children and adults are two very different things, it’s true.” Regulus tipped his head in agreement. "Even the perpetually-forty ones." Sirius replied.

“There is nothing wrong with maturity beyond one’s age,” Regulus sniffed.

"There is if everyone expects them to be an adult when they're not one," Sirius replied. "Children deserve to be children, and not have to worry about making a few mistakes or worrying too much. Or being side-alonged to Death Eater gatherings for that matter."

Regulus stiffened at the remark, the muscles in his face pulling tense for a beat, but his frame loosened again just a moment later as he nodded, more solemnly. “I can agree with that.”

"And even if you don't want to hold them accountable for doing that, I sure as hell do." Sirius thought maybe it was easier to be angry about the current generation being dragged in, so Regulus didn't have to think about how he'd done personally.

“I realise that it isn’t okay,” Regulus said with a frown, though his tone held a measure of discomfort, and quite predictably, he added: “I don’t want it to happen to Draco.”

"I think you know it's not okay happening to your youngest relative," Sirius elaborated. For others, of course not, but for Regulus himself, he'd make excuses, rationalise it, say it was complicated. "I just don't think you know how much it wasn't okay that it happened to you."

“I know it wasn’t… I left, didn’t I?” Regulus pointed out with a slightly pinched frown.

“you didn't do it for yourself.” Sirius replied evenly. “You made yourself suffer through inferi to try and stop Voldemort. That's not the same thing as leaving to save yourself.”

“I did want to stop him - but I wanted out, too,” Regulus said to the floor.

"You didn't just want to stop him. You tried to." Sirius insisted. "There would have been nothing wrong with leaving for yourself, to save yourself, but you could have done it quietly at any time. You didn't. You retraced those steps knowing you wouldn't likely survive it to get a shot at helping save lives without any credit at all. That's not leaving to save you - it's trying to save everyone, and I'll bet that rattling around in your brain,you'll have still managed to brand that as selfish instead of heroic."

Eyes flicking up to Sirius again, Regulus thinned his mouth and huffed softly through his nose. Again, he folded an arm on the back of the chair and propped his chin just shy of the wrist. “It depends on the day. Perhaps it was a bit of both. Heroic might be pushing it when it was only a partial success, and leaving was thoughtless towards the people left behind, regardless of intention; but the sentiment is appreciated all the same.”

“A brave act you don't intend to benefit from for the benefit others is heroic by definition,” Sirius
pointed out. It was true, regardless of how he felt about it. “True heroics always include sacrifice. What bigger sacrifice is there for you than family?”

“That doesn't feel like the heroic part. It just feels like the miserable part,” Regulus said sardonically, the sleeve rustling beneath his chin as he shook his head.

“If brave acts were easy, everyone would do them,” Sirius said, because that was true. The right thing often felt terrible at the time. “You did a spectacularly stupid thing, but you were also young, far too young, and when you could, you tried to make up for it at great cost to yourself. You're willing to give everyone the chance to do the same. Merlin forbid, I think if Bellatrix decided it wasn't worth it and packed it in, you'd forgive her in a heartbeat despite being half the reason you ended up in the Death Eaters in the first place! In fact, I think you'd want her forgiveness for not doing more to bring about the impossible realisation.”

But that was what growing up in this house did to you. You were better than everyone else, but still not good enough, and nothing you could do would ever make up for any failures. “You have to recognise that you're capable of great things, you've even done a few, and that you don't have to apologize to everyone for the rest of your life for that. You're owed a lot more apologies than you need to give.” Including probably a few more from him, especially if this one wasn’t yelled across a room.

“It doesn’t always feel that way,” Regulus said with a thin smile. A little more lightly, he added, “Regarding the apologies, that is. I know I’m capable of great things, of course.”

Sirius plucked one of the pillows from the bed, and threw it at him. "Piss off. The role of arrogant prick has been taken."

Regulus caught the pillow and tucked it under his arm, resting his chin on that instead. “No need to assault me. I was just doing what you said,” he returned, though his mouth had lifted to a slant.

“It needs work,” Sirius said dryly. “That's an A at best. You'll have to practice.”

“I will practice. An A is not sufficient,” Regulus responded lightly, shaking his head. “Whoever designated A as 'Acceptable' had low standards.”

Sirius laughed at the parody of it. “Cheers, Dad, nice to see you, losing the chin ferret has really made you look a decade or two younger and considerably more alive than I last recalled.”

“The point stands,” Regulus pointed out, only half in jest. “Even if ‘chin ferret’ would not be my recommended descriptor for his facial hair.”

“Chin kneazle?” Sirius suggested. “Perhaps ferrets should be limited to Narcissa’s boy.”

“You’re terrible.” Tapping a finger on the pillow beneath his chin, Regulus added, “If this pillow wasn’t so comfortable, I would throw it back at you in an act so uncommon to my disposition that you would not see it coming. Consider yourself lucky.”

“I must be being a bad influence,” Sirius puffed proudly. He hadn't been able to be an appropriately terrible influence since before they'd gone to school. “I know you've been a horrible one. I was downright polite to your adoring cousin when she called in.”

“So it seems,” Regulus noted, shaking his head with a touch of amusement. “Who knew it was possible?”

"I can make an effort when I want to, and I'm in a situationally inappropriate good mood." Sirius
admitted. "I wouldn't bet on it lasting."

Even so, he'd had trouble moving out of it. There was something about flitting between countries, being able to sit on a beach, mucking about with his oldest friends, hanging about with Harry - and if he was honest, feeling a little like his brother didn't absolutely hate him - helped things. He had no idea what Regulus was saying about them getting on to Narcissa, but for now, he was enjoying it. Despite the war, he was feeling as if he could do things again. He could keep an eye on Harry; he could go down the pub for a pint if he so chose; and the war seemed so much more close to being over. The idea of having a future was terrifyingly possible in a way that wasn't being consumed by grief in the way it had been. It was still there in the background, but it felt less. He felt a little guilty about that; it was his fault, and his choice, and he should still feel it, but it was hard to hold onto that guilt in the face of the possibility of seeing Harry grow up, of fighting with his friends again, and this time, not losing his younger brother in the process.

It felt hopeful, nauseating, and exciting all at once.

“That is good enough for now,” Regulus said wryly, but a little smile remained, despite the tone.

It was, wasn't it?
To wait for the Dark Lord’s arrival was an agony that Bellatrix never took with ease, no matter how many years had passed since first she joined the ranks of his trusted warriors. Spread along the line of Cissy’s banquet table were her comrades in arms, many of whom were familiar from the first war, ignited so long ago. Peppered among them were a mess of embarrassments who Bellatrix assumed the Dark Lord must have some use for, disgusting though they might be, and Pettigrew was chief among the embarrassments. She relished the twitchy way he cringed and looked away when she met his eyes. No longer did the Death Eaters meet in masks as they once had, but she could not decide if it was more satisfying to see the nervous expression or more annoying to see his face at all.

(Whatever her thoughts, the Dark Lord knew best.)

“Your cousin has been running his mouth,” Yaxley grated at her from across the table.

“I have told you not to call him that,” Bellatrix countered sharply, feeling a stirring of anger in her stomach, clawing its way up through her chest to beat at the base of her skull. “And you say that as if it is anything short of his life’s purpose.”

“I don’t mean that one,” Yaxley corrected, but when she turned a pointed glower, his stiffening posture suggested that he had noticed his repeated mistake in phrasing. Collecting himself again, he continued. “Regulus. That kid barely used to say a word, but he’s getting mouthier. When do you plan to do something about it?”

“Do not presume to dictate my timing, Yaxley,” she sneered back, feeling a very different sort of anger pressing in her skull. “I said that I will deal with him, and I intend to.”

“I just want to make sure you aren’t feeling soft about it. If that night at the Ministry wasn’t-”

A loud slam cracked through the air as her hand slapped firm on the table. “I am not SOFT!” Bellatrix shrieked, the words bubbling out through a curling snarl.

Beside her, Rodolphus shifted forward in his seat. “What she means to say is that he was a pliable child, may now be a pliable adult, and the intention is to confirm whether or not he can be made useful for the Dark Lord’s purposes. If not, he will be eliminated, as is the fate of traitors.”

“I do not need you to speak for me,” she snapped hotly at her husband, but Rodolphus merely sat back in his chair with a dark-lidded look and turned his attention back to his brother beside him. With a fresh wave of annoyance, Bellatrix shook her head, fingers curling to a fist against the smooth surface of the table. “I will deal with Regulus, should the need arise.”

“I only meant to point out that he’s not sounding very confused,” Yaxley said with a defensive edge. “Gibbon might have reported a man by his description visiting Crouch, but if he had any doubt that night, he isn’t showing it now. Gibbon, has he gone back?”

“Not that I’ve seen on any of my shifts.”

Gibbon had been new to the Cause when the Dark Lord fell, and Bellatrix had yet to settle her opinion on him, but his support of Yaxley’s drivel was doing little for his case. Whatever annoying habits Lucius might possess, Bellatrix almost wished her brother-in-law were among them because at least he cared about Cissy’s state of mind regarding the whole thing. Rodolphus was being mostly useless about it, as ever. “Whether he is stupid enough to visit a hospitalised Death Eater
twice is not the point. It is not your call to make.”

“No, it’s yours. But you have to admit there is some bias to consider. I wouldn’t want my old mentee to reflect badly on me either, especially not if I was related to him,” Yaxley said flatly.

In a flurried sweep, Bellatrix had sprung to her feet flung out her wand in a jagged arch that ended with a perilous point. Yaxley, too, had pulled out his wand, his posture reactive, though neither had cast on the other as of yet. “Suggest I am biased one more time. I dare you.”

“I can appreciate a good brawl, but that’s enough from you, Yaxley,” Rodolphus said dryly, cutting off the other man, even as he was bristling. “Speaking of mentees, has Draco indicated any progress in his task?”

“His options are limited at present, but his enthusiasm is well making up for it,” Bellatrix said tightly.

“Would not want another-ergh-” Yaxley grabbed at his throat with a coughing croak, a panicked flash flickering to a scowl as her wand had finished its cursing flourish. Holding it aloft, she stared him down, the wordless spell still ringing in her skull for several tense seconds.

To her right, a few more Death Eaters trickled in to the banquet hall, sparing brief glances at Yaxley as they passed. She let the curse linger a moment longer to emphasise her unspoken point to the new audience before she swished a nonverbal countercurse, releasing Yaxley’s sputtering cough into the silence. He seemed to have decided that finishing his unwelcome commentary was no longer a priority, and Bellatrix considered that accomplishment enough as she sat back down.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Rabastan’s smirk, and based on Yaxley’s scowl, she guessed that he probably could too.

At the back of her mind, Yaxley’s remarks about Regulus yet burned. The little king, ever compliant and so eager to please them all. How vastly out of character his behaviour had been at the Ministry, and the reports in its wake were even more troubling, but Cissy was holding firm to her plead on his behalf. How much easier it would have been, were the defector tied to anyone else, but her own blood was spitting in the face of all she had done to guide him to glory.

Bellatrix did not feel particularly patient, and her little cousin was running out of chances. As her eyes flicked over to Gibbon, Bellatrix thought of her other protege - more successful in many respects but no more than a husk now. Though Crouch had presumed to make an attempt at usurping her position as their master’s most loyal servant, drumming up a great deal of contention during his brief return to the fold, as a boy, he had always seemed a source of motivation for her soft-willed cousin.

Around her, the room fell quiet in anticipation of the meeting’s initiation, and her mind yet buzzed. There was not much to be done about Crouch’s state, but as her eyes flicked over to Gibbon again, she wondered if there might be some benefit still to gain.

August gave little reprieve to the heat.

Though every spell imaginable seemed to be cast upon Number Twelve, Emmeline found herself longing for the shaded hedges of her own back garden. There was little stopping her from going over there, as it had long been declared habitable again, but she was in the throes of deciding to either sell it or try and make it feel homey again without the horrible memories that seemed to surface upon even entering the front door. Technically, it was also dangerous: it was obvious that the Death Eaters knew where it was, so if she did in fact sell it, it would cause the people living
there to be in danger. It would put her in danger to live there. Her Grandmother had offered her the
spare room, but to her mind, the Isle of Wight was a holiday place and not a place for serious
study. She had no intention of tainting it.

She ought to ask if the back of this house was also shielded to a similar degree. It might make for a
change of scenery to work out there, particularly with the sudden influx of teenagers running up
and down the house and causing portraits to have fits. She didn't mind the noise as such, but it was
getting a little difficult to look at some of the more delicate ideas regarding soul displacement
without arousing teenage curiosity.

Finally, a moment of reprieve came when Sirius corralled up the largest offenders - aside from
himself - and declared that they were Burrow bound. Something about a Quidditch match, and
usually when sports came out, she zoned out. This did give a now rather rare opportunity to set up a
pleasant study session, if Regulus were so inclined.

“Would you like to take advantage of the privacy?” asked Emmeline, when she managed to track
him down.

Regulus looked up, tipping his head in a little nod. “The quiet will be welcome.”

“I can’t promise I’ll be quiet,” Emmeline had to admit, as she was well aware of the rambling
potential lying in wait. “But I have some further soul encasement thoughts, if you’d like to talk
about it without prying ears.”

“I would. We are due to revisit the topic,” Regulus agreed firmly, marking and shutting his book.
“We never did fully consolidate.”

“This summer has been distracting,” Emmeline admitted. It had been more so than she cared to
admit. “The house has been rather active too. I'm suddenly glad I don't have teenagers, let alone
four of them. I'm not sure of your outside charm work; would it be secure to work there?”

“I’m confident in it, yes,” Regulus said, stirring from his seat to set his book aside before crossing a
few paces to reach her. “Shall we?”

“Do you want to get some stationary, or do you already have a book full of notes you can add to?”
Emmeline asked. Personally, she thought the book more of a risk, but it would be easier to contain
one book than loads of bits of parchment

“I have my notes with me already,” Regulus responded with a little tip of the head.

Of course he does.

The garden was not particularly well-cared for, as the focus had been the house. The patches of
grass were sunbleached and patchy with the heat, but folding a few cooling charms, the old seats
felt much more comfortable to sit on. She took out a small, blue book, and with a lick of her finger,
began to leaf through it for her own notations on the subject.

It was mostly a collection of Riddle related trivia that she had managed to dig up. Seemingly
having had a meritorious career as a prefect, he had been given an award for special services while
still at school. She made a note that they ought to speak to the younger lot about that; she had the
niggling feeling it had been mentioned. She had noted that the ring had the mark of Grindelwald on
it, though not surprising for the era. She had managed to track down the familial names of the
dorm mates and experienced a total lack of surprise to see Avery, Lestrange, Nott, and Rosier
listed. She passed him the book to peruse.
"It's only preliminary," she admitted. "I haven't really had the chance to sit down and talk to Harry, with all the flitting about."

Accepting the book, Regulus ran his eyes over the page with a look of pointed concentration, punctuated with another little nod.

“It is consistent with my own understanding,” he began, pulling out a neatly folded piece of parchment out and unfolding it to reveal two columns of neat - if stylistic - writing trailing down the page. “My primary focus was the nature of the objects themselves, though I found that taking to Harry admittedly did provide more insight about 'Tom Riddle’ than I had expected.”

"I'm suddenly glad I took runes," Emmeline joked. It was definitely coded, but she scanned over it to try and think of what a few of them might be before she committed to asking.

It likely needed a cypher, but she could gleam some based on context. TR → DL was obviously Tom Riddle to Dark Lord, the unknown spell used was perhaps for the horcruxes themselves, but it seemed a little scant to have further things on there, HP was rather obviously Harry, and she ventured a guess that GaR was the Gaunt ring with herself and Dumbledore as the involved parties. That likely meant the five preceding were also possible horcruxes. SL was likely Slytherin's locket, the second used in a spell (resurrection?), then TRD was obviously Tom Riddle's diary, which left her feeling somewhat unsettled by the HP. But there were other initials too - WF, what would that be? CoS, that was likely the chamber of secrets, was this the Harry connection? K was rather obviously Kreacher. SS was likely Salazar Slytherin, given the note of sentiment.

One did not imagine that such a creature could be sentimental, she thought sourly. "I can hazard a guess at some," she admitted. "Though WF has me rather stumped."

“That is referencing Arthur - specifically the snake attack," Regulus explained. “WF for ‘Weasley father’ because I did not actually recall his name. I was really only speaking to Sirius, Lupin, and the children at the time.”

A little rude, but not wholly unexpected. "You have a lot of ticks," she said. "I assume those are confirmations. What haven't you confirmed yet?"

“This column is more dedicated to the ongoing concerns,” he began, gesturing to it. “Initially, I was speculating what the remaining objects might be, starting with the other founders’ relics, as well as how many he might have made, though there is little in the way of confirmation on the latter. Clearly not all of the objects are related to the founders, but it is still worth the consideration until investigation suggests otherwise. Hermione had mentioned Albania, but I did not see much of consequence in my initial glance... Speculations about the legilimency link, the resurrection ritual, curiosity about the basilisk, Harry’s scar, and whether our point of concern can in fact be placed within living beings... I also left a decoy of the locket in the original’s place, but I can’t say for certain if he’s realised it yet, so I suppose that remains unconfirmed, beyond the fact that it has not come up yet... Things of that nature.”

"The founders are still a solid lead," Emmeline admitted. Without the knowledge of whether or not two souls could exist in the same vessel, it was one of the better ones. She didn't want to jump onto that one while there may be another explanation. "Albania is a little random for a thing to bring up, unless the reference is to Helena - the Grey Lady. I believe she was killed there, and I suppose by extension, so was the Baron. He does like his Slytherin links, why not one to its resident ghost? Could he have something of his, like the weapon used, for example?"

“That's certainly possible,” Regulus admitted, “and worth some investigation. Perhaps one of them might provide some insight. I mean to ask Harry for a proper look at the chamber before school
starts, so opportunity may present itself then; or if not, Harry may well be able to ask during the school year, though I don't know how obliging the Baron would be for him."

"He does seem rather sullen," Emmeline agreed. "But Helena isn't much better. She's not a big talker at the best of times, but especially outside of her own house students. She tends to only speak to those who, by preference or circumstance, remain isolated from their peers. I'd recommend asking Harry if he has a Ravenclaw in his little army."

"I’ll make a point to ask.” Regulus folded the parchment again, slipping it back in his pocket again. “But this does remind me... on the day I was in the time-loop, I discovered something strange at the Lestrange Manor. An interruption prevented the degree of thoroughness I would have preferred in my investigation, but there was a box with Slytherin’s crest on it - the same iteration on the locket, specifically. Nothing inside seemed to be of any consequence, nor did it give off the same strange feeling as the other two items of concern: A plastic toy, a thimble, things of that nature. Perhaps it was Bella’s, but it was not the typical crest, and I can think of as many reasons for it to be the Dark Lord’s as I can think of it to be Bella’s - trophies, perhaps... I saw no immediate identification, so it was not as helpful as I’d hoped, but…” He shook his head. “I haven’t completely discounted the possibility.”

“A toy.” Emmeline thought back to her own list of locations. “Perhaps it’s linked to the orphanage. I’m afraid it was torn down some years back, but we could likely find a staff listing from the financial records.”

“That’s quite possible. You know the location, then?” Regulus asked, lifting his eyebrows. “And I suppose another question is how long he was there - whether he ever went back for holidays or if he always lived at Hogwarts, from them on. They could be from young childhood, certainly, though they did not appear to serve much practical purpose.”

"Oh!" Emmeline exclaimed excitedly. One of her uncoverings had been a birth record, which was rather like a Hogwarts ledger but used by muggles for what she imagined were census records. She made the copy with some help from a bored, if generally bearable person at the office. "I can help with that! The birth record was where I found it. Not too many Marvolos around, not even in the twenties, so it wasn't difficult to find him. Thirty-first of December, 1926, born at Wool's Orphanage. It's signed M. Cole, so I imagine that was the registrar at the time. I can also say with some certainty that no one is allowed to remain at the school during the summer - believe me, I saw it tried, so then, certainly he went somewhere."

“I see,” Regulus said, nodding. “I wasn't certain if that applied to orphans as well, and I never particularly wanted to stay, myself.”

"Harry," Emmeline said. "I believe he wanted to stay." Of course, she believed Sirius had once or twice as well, but it seemed as if it would rather sour the mood to point that out. They were none of them teenagers anymore.

“I see.” Regulus nodded with a pensive expression. “All the same, I suppose the site might be worth investigating, even if it's torn down, in case he's hidden something there. I don't know that it is worth retrieving the box itself, yet, but I did make note of the contents in case they turn out to be important. I know where to get it, should it be necessary.”

"Good, if it turns out we have a Lord Hoarder on our hands, it'll be more difficult to identify the correct objects. The ring was hidden. Oh, that reminds me, did you happen to note what the symbol on the ring was? I was wondering if there might be a connection."

“Not at the time, but it was Grindelwald’s symbol, wasn’t it?” Regulus said with a thoughtful tone.
"If the ring belonged to the Gaunts', perhaps they were supporters. The ideology is similar enough. Researching objects associated with Grindelwald may not be a bad idea either, if that is where you were going with that train of thought."

"I haven't seen much of the paraphernalia from that war," Emmeline admitted. It may have been locked away, out of vogue, but she was quite sure she ought to have seen something. "It struck me as odd. I may ask Nana Henley; she's been quite insistent about me staying with her, so visitation should at least suffice. I'd ask if you'd like to tag along, but she's rather intense and doesn't mince her words. I'm afraid I'm her last surviving grandchild, and no one had any children. I'm doomed for a 'I raised four children by myself during a war when I was younger than you, it's not an excuse' lecture. It would be worth it if she knows if the symbol was in common enough usage, or if the ring was perhaps something of personal significance beyond the family connection."

The corner of his mouth flickered, and he shook his head. "I have no shortage of intense family members, but the point is well made, all the same. I agree that speaking to her about it could be beneficial."

"Exactly," Emmeline said solemnly. "You don't need to add my own on top of yours. I really don't want to address the whole 'living with a bunch of boys' either. If she finds out I've been seen without my makeup, that's it, you can forget horcruxes, it's all you'll hear."

With something caught between a fluster and a smirk, Regulus shook his head. "There is nothing wrong with your face, but it sounds as though there is no need to feed that particular monster. Horcruxes are a much safer subject, as ironic as that statement might be."

Feeling the tingle that usually meant her ears were going a charming shade of pink, Emmeline adjusted her hair to hide them. "Yes, well," she said, more as filler. "When it comes to grandparents or a Dark Lord, the latter is at least defeatable. You've settled upon seven as the number of choice?"

"I don't know that 'settled' is the right word for it until more have been found, but from a theoretical perspective, seven is the strongest contender," Regulus began thoughtfully. "More, perhaps, if living hosts are possible. The ring, the diary, and the locket are confirmed. Three is a significant number in itself, and significance seems to be a priority in this process, but I'm unclear if one was used for his resurrection or if the original soul somehow remained intact. Even barring the use of a horcrux in that situation, adding the remaining founders' objects raises the number to six. The snake makes seven, and if Harry was an accident, then eight. If living hosts are not possible, or if he could not acquire or did not desire the other other founders' objects, then it could well be something related to the orphanage, another object within the current categories, or perhaps even something thematically different from any of them, such as an item associated with his adult life."

"It does feel as if there's no way to know for sure. I do wonder though," Emmeline started, as she attempted to piece together these fragments. "Was he aware of Harry, if this proves correct? He does seem to try to kill him, and wouldn't this in turn, destroy part of himself in the process?"

"My assumption is that the Dark Lord does not realise it - if the theory is correct - but it remains little more than speculation. Although I don't put much stock in prophecy, I remain curious if there might be anything that would tip those assumptions in any particular direction." Regulus shook his head then, crinkling his nose slightly. "And of course, there very well might be a completely different reason for what happened with the snake, but I've yet to find anything deeply convincing. I was curious about the dream manipulation in your department, but it was hard to say with such limited exposure."
There was a fleeting thought of deja vu, before Emmeline sat back in her chair with arms crossed. "Since I don't think you had time to see it before, I'm taking a wild guess at how you spent your consequence free couple days." Fighting the bristle that she would have liked to have done it herself, she tried to resettled into the debate. "Nevertheless, there's been more than one prophecy involving him, but I don't know the wording in either. Perhaps Harry, and Dumbledore I expect, alone know them in full."

"Yes, that does seem to be the case," Regulus remarked thoughtfully. "And I take from your response that our tour of your workplace is restricted to some alternate timeline now. You had speculated the possibility of remembering when closing the loop off, so I was curious."

"Time is a bit..." Emmeline put her hand out and shook it from side to side. "Wibbly-wobbly. Even to those of us with experience in such matters."

"So it seems," Regulus said wryly. "Well, you did not miss anything of great consequence, considering it is your workplace, but I rather enjoyed the look around."

Thinking back to one of their earliest conversations, Emmeline smirked. "See any assassins?" she asked, as innocent as you like.

"Not a single one," Regulus responded with a tone like regret. "I had my recruitment spiel prepared, all for naught. However, between the brain room and the potentially murderous alchemy plants, I suppose there is room for some creative interpretation."

"Just don't write any books about it," Emmeline laughed. "You'll lose your academic credit, which is much worse than your life."

A smile quirked on his lips. "I cannot argue with that."

For the third time that afternoon, Sirius's wand flew from his hands and clattered ten paces from him.

"Harry," Sirius said, with a mixture of pleading and exasperation. "You can't duel by disarming alone."

"It's working," Harry replied, gesturing with his own wand to Sirius's lying on the grass. Then for good measure, summoned it and held it out for Sirius to retrieve it.

Cheeky bugger. Sirius felt a rise of affection for it, but he squashed it down. They'd been trying to better equip Harry to deal with dueling, but he couldn't seem to get it into his head that finishing the duel as quickly as possible wasn't always a possibility. Not to mention that there were those who didn't require a wand to to defend themselves. It wasn't his specialty, but Sirius had learned a few tricks here and there.

With a finger flick, the beaker full of pumpkin juice on the table launched its contents over Harry. After the initial shock, he gave Sirius a look of such betrayal that he couldn't help laughing to himself.

"A lack of a wand doesn't make a Death Eater defenseless," Sirius told him, conjuring a towel for him. "There's those who know how to do wandless magic, even bits and pieces like me, or there's someone who'll just thump you."

"No Death Eater has tried to thump me yet," Harry groused.
“Let's not give them the chance to start,” Sirius said, before tapping the wand against his palm. “You have to get better at your offense.”

Harry mumbled something unintelligible into the towel. Sirius waited him out. They had a little time. Headquarters was quiet this afternoon, with Vance off doing her job and Regulus off trying to become one with the library. It was a good time to practice.

“I don't want to hurt anyone,” Harry said, though from the tone, the word hurt was being substituted for something a lot more final.

“It's not about hurting them,” Sirius said, as gently as he could. “It's about disabling them from hurting you. Let's try again, alright?”

When darkness suddenly became a very fuzzy light again, Sirius began laughing. Whether it was the mix of uncertainty, confusion, and touch of pride in Harry's looming face, or the fact Harry had definitely hit him with a nasty stunner, Sirius didn't know, but it was the most offensive spell he'd been hit with all day. No matter what, Harry seemed to show far too much trepidation with what he was using, and he really needed to get him more comfortable.

When Sirius himself had been young, he had taken to dueling like a duck to water. Aside from being scolded for lack of proper etiquette (not for the first time), he had loved it. He was winning early; he did dueling club at school, and it was the one of the only times he had time with his father by himself. Regulus had never been much one for dueling either, now he thought of it. Sirius could twist his arm, but part of his confusion as to the reveal that he'd been fighting his brother in the snow all those years ago had been that he'd improved considerably.

Sirius assured him he was completely fine, then left Harry eating in the kitchen. He'd gotten walloped harder by Bellatrix a couple of months before, so it was hardly more than a quick tap. As far as defensive spells went, stunning wasn't bad, but it wasn't good either. He needed a better way to get through to Harry that there was a way to be offensive in a defensive way. If it worked with his brother, then maybe they could get it working with Harry without trying to get him to change his entire dueling style.

So, Sirius went in search of said brother. He needed some better insight. If he could see him fighting from an outside perspective, he might get on a little better, and even if not, defensive as offensive might be some obscure spellwork, and Regulus loved his rare spells.

"Recreational or business?" Sirius asked, once he got to the library.


"He keeps wanting to disarm rather than disable," Sirius sighed. He didn't really want to complain about him; it was a shitty thing to do, but it would be a lot easier if he had some instinct to fight on demand. "We can't get three moves in before he shuts it down. He's worse than you. At least you're competitive."

“Yes...I did not have much opportunity to observe his dueling at the Ministry, but I can imagine it's more of a problem when everyone is trying to kill you,” Regulus agreed with a crinkled expression. “I prefer defense, myself, but if disarming is the primary trick, all they have to do is practice their wandless magic. Is he varying the spells, or does he always end it by disarming?”

"He varies a little," Sirius admitted, trying to resist the urge to come to defense. This was supposed
to be helpful. "But he's jinxing more often than not, throwing water, impediments, something like
due to what we'd have done play dueling. Death Eater or not, he doesn't want to blast people, but it's not going
to withstand up against an Unforgivable throwing fight."

"Throwing water won't do him much good, no, but there are ways to disable and deflect without
blasting people," Regulus said with a thoughtful tip of his head. "But I would not call myself a
master duelist, so I don't know how much help I am on this subject."

"You're a defensive duelist," Sirius corrected him. "Apparently, so is he. I'm sure as hell not."

"No, you certainly are not a defensive duelist," Regulus said wryly. "As for Harry...from a
defensive perspective, I would not say that shutting the duel down quickly is a problem to be fixed,
but it sounds as though his spell repertoire could use some work. Is that the case?"

Sirius nodded. "The problem is if he gets entrenched in using only those moves; if he needs to vary,
his won't be able to. I can't practice with him if he won't prolong."

"Very true," Regulus agreed with a slow nod. "That is a situation in which one would benefit from
variety, as well as fluency in reading the appropriate moment to implement a particular spell. It's
not quite the same as relentlessly hurling curses until one of you collapses, which may be where
the breakdown is."

"Any chance of a hand?" Sirius asked.

Regulus lifted his brow, paused a beat, then nodded. "I've never approached it from a teaching
perspective, but if you think it would help, I don't mind trying to assist."

"I just want someone who has his perspective and is actually capable," Sirius replied. He wasn't
expecting bloody miracles. "So far, we've established that he can hex his way out of a Slytherin
attack, but seems to do the exact same move for Death Eaters. Bella in particular is not going to
play nicely; she didn't even go easy as a kid. I don't want him to be in a fight, but I think he'll end
up in them regardless of what I want, so he has to get better at more advanced spellwork."

"That's very likely," Regulus agreed, slanting his mouth down. "I will make an effort to
communicate that distinction. He will be staying here until school starts, correct?"

"Should be," Sirius confirmed. He had an inkling Molly thought otherwise, but unless Harry asked,
he was inclined to have as much time with him as possible before school started. The niggling
feeling he was going to have to justify it next summer laid heavily on him. "Till Diagon, at least."

Regulus lowered his chin in a slight nod. "Then it should not be difficult to find time. Is he aware
that you asked?"

"No, he's downstairs eating his weight so he can be taller than you by seventeen," Sirius replied (to
which Regulus rolled his eyes). If Harry wasn't taller already. He really was growing like crazy; it
was hard to remember the toddler when he looked at him. "But he was clearly getting frustrated
with me doing it, so I'm calling in reinforcements. I'll ask Remus when he's back too, assuming he's
not moping in a pool of his own delayed teenage angst."

"Noted," Regulus said. "I'll see if we can make progress with a different method, then."

When Regulus found Harry later that day, the boy was practicing magic in the garden, flicking
various colours and swooping spells, though the concentration in his expression seemed to cast
more focus than playfulness on the scene. The sun had lowered in the sky, peeking over the top of
the surrounding buildings with a lining glow, though the heat of the afternoon had not fully lifted enough to forego any cooling charms.

“What are you working on?” Regulus asked, shutting the door behind him and walking out into the middle of the garden.

"Non-verbals," Harry replied. At first, he didn't turn around, but when only a single light spark appeared, swirled, and disappeared, he slumped. "I've never done them before. Hermione said they were NEWT level."

“They are. Non-verbal spells can be challenging, so it is good to get the headstart,” Regulus said, tipping his head in confirmation. “You’ve been quite busy, it seems. Sirius mentioned you were training earlier, too.”

"If only one of us is going to survive," Harry began bluntly, "call me selfish, but I'd like it to be me."

“I’d like for it to be you, too,” Regulus said with a strained smile. To bring up that Sirius had been detailing Harry’s aversion to variation in his strategy felt like a betrayal of sorts: neither Sirius nor Harry were likely to benefit from sharing the finer details of that exchange, however gentle his brother might be when it came to Harry. Instead, Regulus finished his approach and continued, “You were thrown into all of this far sooner than any child should have even been thinking about the realities of war, but if that must be the way of it, far better that you can protect yourself.”

"I'm six for six, so I'm not doing that badly," Harry replied. He let his wand drop. "Besides, I don't want to kill anyone. That's what he'd do."

The tone in Harry’s voice resonated with a feeling Regulus had experienced at that same age, different though the allegiances might be. As it was, Regulus felt more vehement about the Dark Lord’s death now than he had felt about anyone’s death as a teenager, but it was not quite the point he felt the boy was making. Undoubtedly, Harry wanted the Dark Lord gone as much as anyone, if not far more, but that feeling was very different from setting a death in motion.

“The Dark Lord needs to be permanently stopped, but killing is not the solution to most fights, as far as I am concerned. Truthfully, I’ve never had much of a stomach for it, myself,” Regulus admitted, pressing his lips to a line.

"Him, I'm alright with," Harry said, with a harder tone. "But I'm not going to sling out torture curses either."

“I can agree with that wholeheartedly.” Regulus shook his head with a sour expression. “Fortunately, there are other options.”

"Like petrification," Harry said. "Or elements. I'm trying fire, but I thought I probably shouldn't do that in the house."

“I appreciate you not setting the house on fire,” Regulus commented quite sincerely. “As for petrification, it is certainly more effective than it is often given credit for.”

“I know,” Harry said. “It's how we stopped Neville following us after Voldemort when we were first years.”

Though Regulus doubted the petrification of Neville Longbottom was much of a dueling situation, the point still stood that the spell did its part. Somehow Harry and his friends had survived face-offs of that nature each year since then, but first years going against the Dark Lord nonetheless
made his stomach turn. "For the best, I imagine. I've heard you disarm your opponents rather a lot, as well."

"Isn't the point to finish it quickly?" Harry grumbled.

"As far as I am concerned, yes it is," Regulus agreed, loosely crossing his arms across his chest, "and I think your ongoing success speaks for the fact that - stylistically - it clearly suits you. I, too, prefer to cut to the end of a duel as quickly and cleanly as possible, but I would posit that variation strengthens a defensive approach. There are a great many options to consider from this perspective, even beyond the standard shield charms. For example, one could cast a temporary blindness spell; perhaps a spell that creates double-vision; a simple incarcerous spell; removing bones so your opponent can neither hold the wand nor properly wave their hand for wandless magic. There is a spell that causes a horrible, obnoxious blare in your opponents’ ears, but only they can hear it, so it lessens their concentration, in theory, which can give a small edge in the chaos of a fight... Truthfully, I’m rather fond of environmental manipulation, as well. Using the trees, the pillars, the furniture. It’s striking, the benefit you can gain with an effective survey of the setting around you."

With a soft and thoughtful huff, Regulus added, “The point is...many of these spells are annoying at worst, far more tame than any Death Eater is going to hurl at you, but tame does not mean that they cannot be strategic. Sometimes petrifying a Death Eater and dropping a bookcase on him is sufficient, but if that is always your strategy, then they can - and most likely will - adjust for that. Variety, fluency, and creativity can make a big difference in the long-run, and unfortunately, we don’t know how long the run is.”

“I did get someone through their eye hole in the mask at the Department of Mysteries with a conjunctivitis,” Harry admitted, almost as if he wasn’t sure that was quite what he meant. “But we used a lot of prophecies as bowling balls.” Then Harry stopped, realising what he said. “Do wizards have bowling?”

Regulus lifted his eyebrows and shook his head. “No, I don’t believe so. However, it does sound like it is along the right track.”

"You throw heavy balls to knock over pins, or in this case, Death Eaters," Harry said, by way of explanation. "I just don't want to use something that might hurt other people around."

“A valid concern,” Regulus granted. “Much of that will come down to precision of spellcasting and maintaining awareness. For example, there is a spell that will momentarily petrify a small crowd of people, rather than only one. That might be appropriate if the entire crowd is an enemy, or if you can encompass everyone - friend or foe - in the vicinity, but you may find yourself in a difficult situation if a friend is included in the group while a foe in the area was not, because that friend would then be defenseless until the spell wore off. Sometimes you can use a lack of precision as an advantage, but I feel it is a matter of reading the situation.” Tipping his head to the side, Regulus drummed a thoughtful finger on his arm. “Are there particular spells you are worried about?"

"Anything that can bring someone down enough that it stops them, but not that it has a chance of killing them," Harry replied. "Or me, or anyone else if it backfires."

“Those can be largely avoided, I think,” Regulus said, though he could feel an echo of Bellatrix rolling her eyes aggressively at the back of his mind. “Causing harm is one way to disable, but it's not the only one.”

"That's why I disarm people!" Harry said. "I knocked Snape out disarming once."

“That is one way, certainly, but what if they are adept at wandless magic?” Regulus asked, lifting
his brow. “I don’t know much myself, but summoning is one of them.”

“So I should summon the wand that way?” Harry asked.

“Summon it however you like, as long as you have a plan for when they summon it back again,” Regulus said wryly.

Harry paused for a moment, then shrugged. “Snap it.”

A little smile flicked on Regulus’s lips, and he shook his head. “You are quite committed to this strategy. Excellent next step. Now let’s take it a step further. You’ve snapped the wand, limiting the spells accessible to your opponent, but not all. They instead summon your wand to them because we have established this is in the Death Eater’s repertoire. What do you do?”

"Probably thump them," Harry admitted. "Which would be a lot easier if I could apparate on my own."

“I suppose that is one solution.” Regulus shook his head again, though the dry, slanted smile had not yet dropped. He had half a mind to think the boy was just being stubbornly contrary now. "Another option might be to cast a different spell as a follow up to the disarming, considering how difficult a thumping is to achieve from a distance when apparition is not an option. It is a frustrating disadvantage."

"Disarm and stun," Harry said, in response. "Which is what I’ve been doing."

“Perhaps, but it isn't what you said.” Regulus lifted his eyebrows. “Is there a particular reason you aren't interested in learning additional strategies?”

"I don't always do it," Harry replied. "I do want to know other ideas, but I don't want to get into a habit of it. I don't want to go around hexing people for no good reason."

“Having a varied repertoire can only help. I don't make a point to excessively hex anyone either, nor would I suggest as much for you, but I simply want to emphasise that relying heavily on a few spells is inviting them to notice and start planning for it.” Not every Death Eater was sharp enough to catch on nor talented enough to account for it - Regulus knew that well - but some were. “Your style is your own, but it's about more than a signature spell. Just something to keep in mind.”

Harry dithered for a moment. "I'm giving it a go, but until someone tries to kill me, I won't know. I shouldn't have to wait too long, someone usually puts my life in danger around October."

A depressing thought, and Regulus granted a flat smile - or perhaps more of a grimace - as he nodded. “That seems to be the way of it.” Shifting his weight, Regulus paused for an awkward beat before adding, “Should you wish for any recommendations, let me know, but otherwise I will leave you to it.”

"Are you coming to Diagon, when we go?" Harry asked, seemingly out of nowhere.

Regulus lifted his brow again. Prior to the Order meeting, it did not seem like something to impose upon when he was not a guardian of any of the children in question - normally the Weasleys rounded up the supplies, as far as he’d gathered - but Sirius was not wrong that there was safety in numbers, and safety was in short supply. “I have been considering it, yes.”

"With us or with Malfoy and his mum?" Harry asked.

A little sting pricked at the back of Regulus’s mind - part defensive, part sad to think that Cissa and
her son would not welcome him on such a trip, even if he were to ask - but he kept his face neutral, save for a little pull at his mouth. “Complicated though that situation might be, I was referring to you and your friends.”

"You should duck out before we head to Fred and George's," Harry warned him. "It sounds like your worst nightmare. Hermione's got a black eye from one of their testers."

“Fred and George’s?” Regulus lifted his brow.

"They've taken over one of the empty shop fronts to sell their creations. Jokes, creatures, potions, and a bunch of defensive objects." Harry smiled at the thought. "They're doing really well."

“Hm.” Regulus made a thoughtful sound. They had tested more than a few of those creations within this house, and though a joke shop was far from his realm of his interest, he could admit it suited the boys well. “I hadn't heard.”

"I think it helps," Harry said. "I heard Diagon's been empty, but they're always packed. After Mr. Fortescue was taken, no one feels safe going anymore."

“Understandable, all things considered,” Regulus said, pressing his lips to a line.

"I'd still prefer you lot than Ministry guards," Harry winced.

“We are much better company, it's true,” Regulus granted with a nod. How strange it still felt, sometimes, to be lumped in with ‘you lot,’ but truthfully enough - the company was not so bad at all.

To his surprise, Sirius found Harry sitting on the steps of the topmost landing the following morning. He didn't seem upset or worried, but it wasn't always easy to tell. The last couple of weeks, Harry had been running about with his mates a lot, but Sirius idly wondered if – with the looming end of the school holidays in sight – if he was going to see another upsurge in the clingy behaviour he'd seen in January.

“Alright, Harry?” Sirius asked.

To his amusement, Harry seemed to startle. “Er, yeah.”

“Bad dream?” It wasn't out of the question. He definitely wouldn't have been the first kid to seek refuge on the stairs after even a normal nightmare. Sirius had done it himself, he was sure, even if it felt so long ago that it was fuzzy.

“No,” Harry replied.

“Phineas being a prat again?” Sirius had moved the portrait into the hall, and he didn't think Regulus had kicked up a snit about it, so he figured that it was fine. No one needed a tittering Slytherin in the room when you were going through puberty.

“Not really,” Harry said, which probably meant that he was.

“Budge up,” Sirius said, before shuffling himself onto the same stair with a little effort. Morning was not exactly his best time for functional thought. “What's eating you?”

“Nothing, I-” For a moment, Harry seemed almost embarrassed.

It was only then that Sirius noticed he was twirling some parchment, hidden under his knees.
“News?” Sirius asked.

“I made Quidditch captain,” Harry all but mumbled.

Something warm and happy rose in Sirius's chest, and he felt himself beam. “That’s brilliant!” He grabbed Harry in a one-arm hug and squeezed him tight enough that he felt his glasses hit his hair. Some things never changed. “Really, really great. You deserve it; you're a hell of a seeker.”

Though a little pink, Harry seemed more pleased now than anxious. Sirius had a feeling he already knew the question that was about to come. “Was my dad—”

“Yes,” Sirius cut him off. “Beginning his sixth year.”

He'd known the smile was coming, as it still tended to whenever someone compared him with his parents in any way that wasn’t a description of a hedgehog on his head or Lily’s eyes. “Same as me,” he said.

Caught up in the thought, Sirius gave Harry a couple of pats on the shoulder. “Come on,” he said, before leaning on his knees to get up. “I bet I've got a couple of photos of it.”

Sirius pushed back into his bedroom, heading to the large cupboard where he knew there were some pictures both from Tonks and ones he’d left here by accident twenty years ago. He was sure he’d put them back in there. It took a little digging, and reaching into something alarmingly sticky, but he found one of the old boxes. He dropped it on the bed and tried to sort through them despite a total lack of order.

“Aha!” Sirius said when he found one of their old team. There was a stab of sadness that he fought, that half of them were gone now, but this was more about showing Harry—

-Harry, who was lingering near the door, for some reason. Following his eyeline, Sirius cringed internally at his teenage decorating habits and tried to joke it off. “Don't suppose you'd believe it was just the bikes I was interested in?”

Despite looking a bit pink about the ears. Harry shook his head. “I was looking at the photo,” he admitted. “I was just surprised.”

“Permanent sticking charm,” Sirius admitted. There was no way his parents were getting the picture down, which made it a little harder to look at for its traitorous inclusion of Wormtail. “Your dad tried to paint it all red and gold, but it got changed back to silver often. I usually remembered to redo it when I came back; must've forgotten the last time. “

Sirius then handed the picture over. “Here.”

Harry took the picture and looked over it for a long moment. “She looks familiar,” he said, pointing to Marlene McKinnon.

“That's Marlene. She was in the Order photo that Mad-Eye showed you,” Sirius explained. “She was in your mum's dorm. Hell of a firecracker, that one.”

“Were they friends?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, they were pretty good mates,” Sirius said. “You'd usually see her and McKinnon and Vance and Macdonald – that's Mary, swear Vance was the only one of them I could understand when I first met them.”
“Why?” Harry asked.

“Your mum, back when we were firsties, had a proper Brummie accent, and I couldn't understand a word of it,” Sirius laughed. James had been bad enough, but he at least just sounded like a less colourful Hagrid. “Then McKinnon and Macdonald, they were Scottish, so you understood them right up till the point the slang came up, and then it required a translator. They weren't so bad after a couple of years, though.”

“My aunt doesn't sound like that,” Harry replied.

“I don't sound like Regulus either,” Sirius pointed out.

After a beat, Harry seemed to gather courage. “Did you ever?”

“Nah,” Sirius said, then he relented a little. “Yes, a bit. I was never as polite as him, not a day in my life, but I probably sounded a bit pretentious. I'm only telling you 'cause Vance reckons Benjy got some of it in on video, and if he's managed to get me sounding like a twat, I best own up to it.”

“I thought muggle things didn't work at Hogwarts,” Harry asked.

“I think it's all after Hogwarts,” Sirius said. “But I've been known to bust out the voice from time to time if I'd had a couple.”

Harry handed him back the photo, but Sirius waved him off.

“You can have it if you want,” Sirius said.

“Cheers,” Harry said, looking back down to it. “I didn't know you were a beater.”

Sirius nodded. “Yeah, my sixth and seventh years. Your dad finally twisted my arm; he'd been on since second year.”

“You didn't want to?” Harry asked.

How could he explain that James had gone round the twist with it? He was an obsessive bastard, competitive, pain in the ass, and worst of all, a morning person. Harry didn't need to hear his father insulted like that.

“Seemed like a lot of work,” Sirius settled on. Then to swiftly and smoothly change the subject, he gestured to the picture. “I've got a lot more pictures and postcards, stuff from your grandparents, back at the flat. We could take a wander up there if you'd like.”

“That would be great,” Harry smiled.
"Hi, Harry!"

There was a flash of anxiety before his brain kicked in, and Harry realised that no Death Eater is going to say hello to him in such a friendly tone. Those suspicions were confirmed when he saw Neville waving enthusiastically at him from outside Obscurus Books. Harry looked back over at the motley crew that had accompanied him to Diagon Alley: Mrs. Weasley, along with Ron and Ginny; Sirius and his brother ("He gets in too much trouble left to his own devices," Sirius explained, "Almost as much as you."); and their security escort, Hagrid. They were supposed to be meeting Hermione and her parents, but Tom said they hadn't passed through yet.

"Hi, Neville," Harry said, before scanning the crowd for Neville's grandmother.

As if reading his mind (he really hoped not, he'd had enough of that for a lifetime), Neville pointed to Madame Malkin’s. "Gran's been talking everyone's ears off since the Department of Mysteries. I thought she'd be angry, but she said she finally saw some of my parents in me!"

To Harry, that sounded terrible to hear only then, but Neville sounded so pleased about it, he didn't want to say anything. "That's great," he said instead.

"I didn't think we'd see you here," Neville went on. "With the security measures. Did you hear about Ollivander?"

Harry nodded, then glanced to his side once again. He saw Sirius had pricked up in a way that so resembled his animagus form that Harry had to beat down a snort. He gestured to the group behind him. "I have my own security."

Neville seemed to register the group, before grinning back at Harry. "Cor, you do, don't you?" At that moment, Trevor, Neville's frog, made one of its usual bids for freedom. "Trevor!"

Harry was completely unsurprised by the way Sirius seemed to pop up, toad in hand, and offer him the wayward pet back. He'd been doing it a lot lately.

"Alright, Neville?"

"Er, thanks," Neville replied, taking Trevor back.

It could've just been Neville being his normal amount of awkward, but Harry had the sneaking suspicion that having his face plastered all over wizarding Britain and Ireland over the last two years hadn't done Sirius any favours. Even if he didn't look that much like the poster now since he'd cut his hair shorter and taken to wearing more muggle clothes than not, it was obvious that he'd just gotten recognised. From the brief flicker of annoyance, it was obvious to Sirius as well. He wasn't enjoying being stared at any more than Harry was.

"That's my godfather," Harry said, plainly.

"From the Department of Mysteries!" Neville exclaimed, but looked around sheepishly as some hushed staring took off around Diagon. "Sorry."
"We have met before," Sirius told him. "But it was a very long time ago."

"When?" Neville asked.

"About sixteen years ago," Sirius replied. Harry estimated it at him only being a few weeks old, then. "Your vocabulary's diversified since then. That's not Frank's mum, is it?"

"Oh, that's my Gran, yes," Neville said, as he looked back at his grandmother. She seemed to be giving someone the what for outside Madame Malkin's.

"She hasn't changed," Sirius said, but Harry wasn't sure if it was an impressed or exasperated tone. "Frank always said she was tough as dragonhide."

"You should hear her talk about Harry," Neville said, before putting on an affected voice to presumably imitate his grandmother. "He's got more spine than the whole Ministry of Magic put together."

"You were at the Department of Mysteries too," Harry said, uncomfortably.

"I didn't face him," Neville said, with that vague air of awe which continued to make Harry uncomfortable.

"No, you faced Bellatrix Lestrange," Sirius stepped in. "Considering both myself and a trained Auror got knocked on our backs from her, that's no small feat."

"It didn't work, though," Neville said, though he couldn't hide a certain spark of pride. "It was mostly just things we learned from DA. Are we still doing it?"

"No point, now Umbridge is gone," Harry said.

Neville looked crestfallen. "I learned loads with you!"

"You might not learn anything more," Sirius muttered. He gave Harry a knowing look, and Harry immediately remembered who their new Defense teacher was.

"We might do a couple," Harry replied. "Just in case."

"Try not to go chasing after Death Eaters without letting someone know," Sirius said.

"I wasn't," Harry replied. "I was looking for you."

"Don't do that either," Sirius said. "If there's trouble, I'm probably in the middle of it. Biological hazard. Reg can't pull you out of the fire everytime; he's just as bad."

"He didn't," Harry said.

"Didn't what?" Sirius looked confused.

"Pull me out of the fire," Harry said.

"At the Department of Mysteries," Sirius clarified, looking between Harry and Neville. "I thought he and Remus grabbed the two of you."

"He did," Harry said. "Lupin grabbed me, I mean."

"In the Atrium?" Neville asked.
"Yes," Sirius clarified, before reaching over the heads to find where his brother seemed to be looking surreptitiously at the books in the window displays of Flourish and Blotts. "I take it he didn't stick around and talk about it."

"Er, no." Neville said.

"My little brother. He's usually polite when not in mortal peril," Sirius said, before calling out to beckon him over.

From a few paces over, Regulus glanced towards the group, pausing just a beat before wandering over.

"Hello." Regulus glanced first at Neville with a flicker of recognition. "Neville Longbottom, isn't it?" he noted, then flicked his eyes to Harry, then Sirius. "Did you need something?"

"Did you really grab someone you didn't know and apparate without an introduction?" Sirius asked.

"You make it sound like I just abducted him off the street. An introduction was not exactly situationally appropriate at the time," Regulus responded dryly.

"It sounds very rude. You've changed," Sirius said, with an overly dramatic sigh. "You would never have been rude before."

Harry thought that actually, being a Death Eater was probably considered a little rude when they tried to kill and torture people, but it seemed like the kind of thing you shouldn't bring up in Diagon Alley when it's swarming. "There's one on the tapestry."

"One what?" Sirius asked.

"Longbottom," Harry said. He wondered if it was a distant relative of Neville's. "On your family tree."

"The house motto may as well be 'If you were pureblood, we'd be related by now.'" Sirius shrugged. "Besides, it's not my tree; I'm not even on it."

"Callidora," Regulus supplied without acknowledging Sirius’s comment, then looked to Neville. "She's your great-aunt, isn't she?"

"Wow, yes," Neville said, looking back to Harry. "She's really old, but she writes lots of advice. Do you remember the letters I kept getting when I was choosing my subjects?"

Harry nodded; he remembered that Neville's relatives all seemed to have very strong opinions about what he should do, and the dorm room was flooded with letters from them. At the time, he hadn't been able to push past the pang of jealousy, but things were different now. He knew exactly what he wanted to do. He wanted to be an Auror, and that meant he had set classes he needed to take. He had no idea what Neville wanted to do, now he thought about it.

"Does she still keep in regular contact, then?" Regulus asked, turning a look that was flecked with interest.

"She owls," Neville said. "I haven't really seen her since it turned out I was magical after all."

"Hm." Nodding thoughtfully, Regulus loosely crossed his arm. "I wonder why. We did not often see her either, though we were more distantly related compared to yourself. If anything, I would..."
expect the opposite."

“Side effect of the hiding out - you don’t let in the crazy part of the family” Sirius added, to which Regulus shot a look of mild annoyance. “Frank and Alice did too.”

“I have a lot of relatives,” said Neville, as he turned a little pink about the ears. “It's not easy for everyone to get in one place and be heard.”

“Indeed not. I suppose it all gets a bit sprawling, at some point,” Regulus said with a thoughtful knit of his brow.

"And my gran can be..." Neville trailed off, looking at Harry as if he had a clue what to say. He shrugged in response. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. They would've given anything to have someone like you, but they have me, so I don't think they really want to see me." There was an awkward beat of silence, where Sirius leaned in and said something inaudible to his brother before Neville perked up. "But it might be different now. I've even gotten a new wand! They think it was one of the last ones Ollivander sold before he was taken."

“That's certainly something,” Regulus began. “Did something happen to your first one?”

"One of the Death Eaters at the Department of Mysteries broke it," Neville said. His eyes flickered downwards. "It was my dad's. I've never had a wand of my own before. I thought they'd be angry, but they're just happy."

Harry thought back to one of the first things he'd ever heard from Neville. When they were all talking about their backgrounds, Neville had said that his family had been sure he wasn't magical and weren't even sure Hogwarts would take him, even when he was, in case he wasn't magical enough. Yet Voldemort had thought they were both threats, hadn't he?

"It was Dolohov," Harry said. "I recognised him. He was dueling Hermione."

"That explains why she was in a worse state than the rest of you," Sirius said in a hard tone, to which Regulus added a stiff nod. "Dolohov's old guard. Getting out with just a broken wand is more than most."

"And he broke my nose," Neville said.

"Episkey," Sirius said, tapping the side of his nose. "Learn it and use it. Heals minor injuries, and you won't end up going about with a crooked nose like your boggart. I've lost track of how many times I've gotten a busted nose, or leg, or finger, and I've only ended up in St. Mungo's twice and got a couple of scars. Let's get your lot doing the same, make sure you outlive your Great Aunt."

Harry tried not to snort with laughter. He suspected it had more to do with avoiding coming clean after fighting in school, but Hermione probably already had the spell memorised. She usually did.

"It is certainly safer - and less likely to draw attention - both of which are valuable in their own right," Regulus agreed wryly, shaking his head.

Harry glanced around Diagon Alley, which despite being more sparse than it usually was at this time of year, was still packed enough that he could see both people from school and people he didn't know pointing, staring, and whispering.

"I don't think not drawing attention's an option," Harry said.

“Indeed not.” Regulus followed his eye line to the little patches of people. “It seems we are a bit of
a spectacle at the moment."

“Chosen One, ex-convict, Department of Mysteries fighter, and…you walk into Diagon Alley.” Sirius made a vague gesture in his brother’s direction, which either meant Death Eater or Slytherin, depending which he thought was the worst offender this morning.

"Harry!"

Bustling towards them was Hermione, with her parents looking wary behind her. He didn't blame them; there'd been an attack on muggle parents not that long ago, let alone that they were probably worried for their daughter. Harry wondered how much Hermione had told them about what happened.

"I thought we’d missed you!" Hermione cried, as she came to stop. "We had to go to Gringotts first. Mum, Dad, you remember Harry! And that's Neville, you remember me telling you about Neville. Oh, and Sir... Sirius, you've talked over owls, when I went up to Wales."

"Harry's family, yes.” Mr. Granger looked a little unsure, but put his hand out nonetheless. “It's nice to put a name to the handwriting."

While Mr. Granger and Sirius exchanged a polite handshake, Harry struggled not to beam at the description. Of course, the Grangers had never met the Dursleys, so it was a natural thought to have given that they were all in Diagon shopping for school supplies, but it didn't make it feel any less giddy in his stomach.

Sirius introduced his brother younger brother as giving them a hand with the protection detail.

"Is it really that dangerous?” Mrs. Granger's eyes flicked to her daughter.

"It can be,” Sirius admitted. “But we’ll be alright if we’re in a group. It’s unlikely there’ll be a pre-planned attack without knowing more about the day we were coming.”

“So!” Mr Granger said, perhaps looking for some sort of common ground with the strange group of people. “Those aren’t very common names. Both constellations, aren’t they? Bit of an astronomy buff in the family?”

Regulus flicked his eyes over towards Sirius then back to Mr Granger, hesitating for a beat before responding. "One could say that. Although not everyone has particularly strong feelings about the stars, it has been an ongoing naming tradition in our family for centuries, so there are more who fit the pattern than those who do not."

"Mythology buffs are closer," Sirius explained.

"We do like mythology," Mr. Granger said. He did seem a little more comfortable. "Hermione is from the Ovid. The Greek. Which ones were you thinking of?"

"No idea," Sirius shrugged. "Probably Greek, it's Orion's dog, isn't it?"

"Ah, then Basiliscus," Mr. Granger said. "For Regulus."

This caught Harry's wandering attention, and he turned back to the group. "Like the snake?"

Regulus was eyeing Mr Granger with something that might have been curiosity when he shifted his attention to Harry with a little nod. "Same root, yes. The mythology varies, depending on the cultural source."
"Yeah, he only wishes he could petrify people by looking at them funny," Sirius provided. He put his hand on Harry's shoulder, and patted it. "Since we're all together, we should get a move on. Longer we're here, longer we have the chance of someone uninvited coming along to join the fun."

Later that morning, Regulus collapsed into one of the overstuffed chairs, settled with a book he was not yet motivated to open. Even within the safe confines of his own home, Regulus could not keep his mind from reeling through what ought to be interpreted as an altogether uneventful shopping trip in Diagon Alley. The group - bordering on an entourage, from how it must have looked - had not suffered any assaults from Death Eaters; they had not even run into Narcissa or Draco, which Regulus had been half-expecting. Considering his luck, Regulus it had seemed inevitable that the trips would collide, but the worst they had suffered were scattered stares - stares that could easily trickle back to Malfoy Manor, of course, but harmless enough in the moment.

Death Eaters were not the source of his discomfort, but rather the unexpected points of conversation that cropped up within their own huddled crowd. Neville's self-deprecation had been mildly surprising, considering Frank and Alice Longbottom had been known powerhouses within the Auror ranks, as far as Regulus was aware, but it was Hermione’s father who had been truly unsettling. Not unpleasant - it might have been more comfortable if he had been - but rather the man was well-spoken, with more intimate knowledge of mythology than Regulus would have expected of a muggle. Perhaps some expectation was warranted with a child named Hermione (and for that matter, with a child as bright as Hermione seemed to be), but he had never dedicated much more than a passing thought.

The moment had passed quickly, the conversation seeming to shuffle past like the Diagon patrons weaving through the crowds. Curiosity had buzzed at the back of Regulus’s mind, turning over what sort of circumstances led muggles to information like that, but his mouth might as well have been sewn shut for all the conversation he managed for the remainder of the trip. It was within the confines of his own mind that he entertained the questions as Harry and his friends bought their supplies in a familiar flurry, and now, in the quiet of his house, they rang even louder.

Yet it was not only the curiosities of muggle education that prickled at the back of his mind: Hermione’s father had mentioned 'Basiliscus’ - the Greek version of his name, yes, but Harry had been right to compare it to the snake, and it had brought forth their failed attempt at the chamber some months ago. Without any students (and one less Umbridge) in the castle, perhaps now was as opportune a time as any. Setting the book aside (otherwise untouched), Regulus set down the hall to where Harry had been staying.

“Harry?” His door was wide open, and Regulus glanced inside where the boy was walling in by the year’s new school supplies (and a number of other things, from the look of it). “Do you have a moment?”

"Er, yeah," Harry pushed away some of his new supplies to the end of the bed. He pulled himself on it, tucking his crossed legs under himself. "Is something wrong?"

“Not wrong, no,” Regulus responded, shaking his head. “Your mention of the basilisk merely reminded me that I intended to ask you about the Chamber of Secrets again. We were unsuccessful this past spring, but I thought perhaps the summer lull would negate most of the complications we faced last time. Would you still be willing?”

"Sure,” Harry said. "But I don't know if students are allowed there during the summer. I asked the Headmaster about when I was in first year, and he said they weren't."

“I don’t expect the Headmaster will mind too terribly if it is for the betterment of the war effort,”
Regulus said, though Dumbledore blocking him from further knowledge of the prophecy did cast some doubt on the thought, however small. “Nor should it take long.”

Harry stopped moving for a moment, but he must have decided it was a good idea anyway. "Or we could just go in through one of the tunnels."

Regulus's mouth flicked up at the corner, and though it would be simple enough to ask Dumbledore again, he felt rather disinterested in the prospect when they last time he asked permission, it resulted in a metaphorical door shut in his face. "A suitable alternative."

Beside him, Harry opened one of the drawers and pulled out the parchment. He then placed it on the bed, spread out to show the edge of the Hogwarts grounds. "There's one here," Harry said, pointing to the fourth floor. "It comes in from Hogsmeade again, but we won't need to go through Honeydukes. There's always the Shrieking Shack, but Snape knows about that one now."

Running his eyes over the map again, Regulus nodded, baffled (and mildly horrified) anew by the reminder Sirius and his friends had possessed access to such a thing for at least a portion of their Hogwarts career. Perhaps that would never stop springing to his mind when he saw the weathered old parchment, but it was at least some small comfort that he could garner plenty of benefit now, even in their absence.

“I feel we should keep a closer eye on this,” Regulus commented with a wry smile, tapping on the map, “deserted though the corridors are likely to be. With that said, I agree that it is best to take additional precautions and avoid the better known options, so if you think the fourth floor suits that, then I think that is a good starting place.”

"I just didn't want to risk losing it last time," Harry said, with a touch of defensiveness. "Normally, I just shut it down, but I've done that with Snape before, and the map’s defenses are...personalised, at least for him. I didn't fancy losing it."

“Worry not. You won’t lose it,” Regulus said in a placating tone. According to the map, Snape appeared to be holed away in his office as they spoke. Although Regulus knew he probably ought'n’t invade the professors’ privacy, his eyes darted around curiously to the other names. Slughorn was there, too, and so was a professor named Trelawney; the name was familiar enough that he wondered if she’d gone to school with rest of them, though he supposed he could be thinking of the Seer with the same surname. “Nothing additional is required to get in or out, correct? Just parseltongue to enter?”

"Not exactly," Harry admitted. "Getting in is okay. It's a tunnel, and as soon as you jump in, you just whoosh down. But getting out, there's no way to climb out. Last time, I was able to call Fawkes, but if we weren't going to do that, brooms would work. It's narrow, but if me, Ron, Ginny, and Lockhart fit through last time, I think we'd be okay. Have you thought about what to do about the venom?"

The prospect of ‘whooshing’ down anything was not particularly appealing, but as long as there was not sewage waiting for him at the bottom, Regulus supposed it was still comparably better than the Ministry’s choice in transportation methods. “I have some fortified vials and containers that are suited for transportation and storage, so that should not be an issue.”

"Then yes," Harry said. "That's all you need."

As it turned out, the Chamber of Secrets did not, in fact, have sewage at the bottom of its aggressively rapid chute, but did have an excess of slime that Regulus could have still done
without. The stone floor was damp and slick to the touch, and a lingering chill in the air pricked along Regulus’s skin - far colder than any August air had the right to be - but it was the pungent rot that he found most staggering. The unnervingly large basilisk carcass was still there, untouched, just as Harry had speculated it would be, and Regulus felt a strange lurch at the sight - and an equally prominent thrill at the prospect of obtaining his own venom, this time, for a far more reasonable price.

Personally draining a basilisk’s venom was at least comparatively less terrifying when the basilisk was already dead.

After rising to his feet, Regulus dried his robes with a casual flick of his wand and shifted his eyes around to the dim surroundings, comprising of a rather prominent serpent theme that finished on the image of Slytherin himself, cast in a green glow.

“So this is the Chamber of Secrets,” Regulus said, looking back to the basilisk and trying not to gag on the smell.

Harry had no such compunctions towards such things, bending over and putting his head between his knees to cough and heave a couple of times. "I think-" he said, trying to regain his breath- "- we're under the lake."

Crinkling his expression, Regulus tried not to breathe through his nose. “That would make sense,” Regulus said, voice sounding a little strange. With another flick of his wand, the air around them began circulating, visible only by the the subtle way it brushed at their hair. Far more noticeable was the gradual way the stench seemed to thin to something a little more breathable. With a little wave of his hand, he added, “This may not completely solve the rot problem, but hopefully it will dampen it a little. I do not wish to imagine further what it must smell like over there.”

Harry nodded. The state of the giant snake after rotting for three years down here hadn't been at the forefront of their discussions, but it really was terrible. "You're really squeamish for a former Death Eater," Harry commented, lightly.

With a tight smile, Regulus shook his head and batted off a series of rather intrusive memories starring his eldest cousin remarking on very much the same thing. Those echoes were phrased in a much crueler way, digging their curling claws into his mind, but he subtly shifted his posture to something a little straighter.

“I was ill-suited,” Regulus responded instead in a tone that was lighter than he felt about the matter. Setting off in a stride towards the basilisk, he took particular notice of its lolling head and protruding fangs and reached a hand into his bag to grapple for a container without bothering to look.

"How long did it take you to figure that out?" Harry asked, approached the basilisk carcass himself. He looked around the chamber warily.

“Too long to manage a smooth exit,” Regulus responded vaguely, supposing that Sirius must not have gone into much detail at all if Harry did not even know how long Regulus had been a Death Eater. Pausing in front of the slack, crooked jaw of the snake, he took a moment to take in the placement and structure of the teeth, a thoughtful expression loosening on his face.

"Be careful about the contact with the venom. While it didn't feel like the worst way to go at the time, I don't think it's what you're aiming for." Harry looked over the basilisk, and scrunched up his face. "It seemed bigger when I was twelve..."
“I imagine it did.” Eyeing the massive creature, Regulus thought that it still seemed rather big, even as an adult, but he brushed off the thought. “Basilisk venom is an exceptionally unpleasant substance, and indeed, I will take care with it. To die from this now would be terribly anticlimactic, in light of everything else. I’m just getting a good look before drawing it out. Suffice to say the opportunity to examine a basilisk is rare indeed.”

Harry nodded, but then gave a laugh to himself. “I’m suddenly missing the days when my biggest problem was the hat choosing Slytherin first.”

“Slytherin House is not some terrible thing,” Regulus countered lightly, glancing over at Harry then back to the fangs. “But your problems certainly did escalate rapidly.”

“You'd have thought it was a terrible thing if you'd been sorted anywhere but Slytherin when you were twelve,” Harry countered.

“It would have been. My entire family has been sorted into Slytherin for nearly a millennium, with the exception of Sirius, and our mum did not save all of her shouting for her time as a portrait,” Regulus said in what was at least intended to be a casual tone as he opened the first vial - about as tall as the length of his palm - and held the open mouth up to the basilisk’s fang. Muttering an extraction spell, Regulus watched the sticky black liquid start to seep out the bottom of the fang and stream slowly into the vial, and although it would not require much monitoring, were he to cast a levitation spell on the glass, he nonetheless held it in place with a look of concentration.

Regulus’s own remark felt uncomfortably like a betrayal, so he opened his mouth to speak again, but Harry was already responding, face contorted at the liquid coming out of the fang.

“I'd only known about magic for a month. I'd only just found out my parents had been murdered. I didn't care what house I was in - I just didn't want to be in the same one as Voldemort. Then I met Malfoy, boasting about his entire family being Slytherin, and he said if I wasn't nicer to him, I'd end up murdered too. Didn't fancy listening to that for the next seven years, so I told the Sorting Hat ‘anywhere but Slytherin.’”

With a very sudden and profound discomfort, Regulus held his attention on the fang and the venom with even more exact concentration, unsure what he ought to say to that. Avoiding the Dark Lord’s house made sense, all things considered, though it was not the house’s fault that he did what he did. And Draco… Although the interaction with his youngest cousin had not been particularly pleasant on the whole, either, it was hard to imagine an eleven-year-old child threatening another with murder, even within their family. He could neither fully agree nor could he defend against it, and he certainly did not know what to say on the subject of murdered parents, so he frowned forward at the fang.

“When I said he was going to end up like his, I didn't think he'd take me seriously and sign up,” Harry was muttering in an irritated tone. “And he's more squeamish than you. I don't think you can use a parent’s excuse note to get out of maiming someone.”

Tension stiffened the muscles in his shoulders as Regulus flicked his eyes over at Harry, brow knit to a point. All of his words felt sticky in his throat, but he forced them out, fighting to keep the uncertain dread out of his voice. “Certainly not. Has he maimed someone?”

“Not that I know of. I think he just enjoys mouthing off, but I never thought he actually had it in him to do more than hex people,” Harry replied. “Then I realised what was on his arm.”

Shoulders loosening again, Regulus pressed his lips to a line and looked back to the fang. Somehow, he doubted Harry would be open to hearing the complexities that could lead a teenager
to join a group that was far out of his depth, so he bit back a bubbling defense. “War can do strange things to a person,” he began, then immediately shifted the subject as the vial of venom his the halfway mark: “I wonder how much venom is in each fang. I have never seen a text that specifies.”

"No idea. I just stabbed it with a fang. I don't know how much it took." Harry peeked over, then reeled a little with a wince at the sight. "But it's not the war I'm worried about. I keep thinking about the Quidditch World Cup, when they put on those masks and went around killing people just for fun. Voldemort wasn't even back then, so do we even know they'll stop once he's dead?"

“We don't, no,” Regulus admitted with a fresh wave of discomfort. “We must prepare for that possibility, but defeating the Dark Lord is first priority. I'm not usually one for prophecies, but eliminating him from the equation can only help.”

"Fat chance when the person who's supposed to do it is never told anything," Harry complained. Then he stopped. "Why do you call him that?"

Regulus glanced over, then back to the vial again. “Emmeline asked the same, recently,” he said, his mouth thinning thoughtfully “Force of habit, to a degree, I suppose. Saying 'You-Know-Who' or 'He Who Must Not Be Named' sounds silly.”

"It does," Harry agreed, hunching down to check on the viscous liquid. "I kept trying to say You-Know-Who, but I felt ridiculous. Being so afraid of someone you won't even say their name gives them power over you, and after this last year, I'm done being afraid of him. He's just a man. A man using magic to stop himself from dying, but still, just human like everyone else."

Regulus nodded, his face pensive. The thought of saying the Dark Lord’s actual name still made his stomach lurch in a strange way, but he no longer felt like cringing when the others did so. He was not sure when it had ceased to be jarring. Fear...did he fear the name? He did not respect it, though Emmeline had asked about its reverence. Without fear or reverence, he did not much like what was left.

“That is an interesting perspective,” Regulus granted, though he felt a little bristle, uncomfortable with the thought that something so small could still have some measure of control when he had left the ranks so many years ago. (Yet - perhaps it was true, a little bit.) Again, a frown pulled down at his mouth.

"Anyway, almost everyone else who calls him that is a Death Eater," Harry added, almost as an afterthought. "Or Mr. Crouch, who might've been worse than one."

The mention of Barty’s father stung sharp and sudden in Regulus’s chest, but to acknowledge the senior would lead him to the junior, and around Harry, there was nothing to gain in how he felt about that.

“Well, I am not a Death Eater,” Regulus said with finality.

"No, I know that," Harry said. "But you were one, and if you hadn't been, you probably wouldn't be here."

Slowing the venom to a drip as it started to near the top, Regulus nodded.

“Probably not. Ironic, isn’t?” Regulus said, and when the drip had slowed to nothing, he pulled the vial out and sealed the top. There was already far more venom than he could possibly need, but while it was free and available, better to stock up and have excess than find themselves in short supply.
Slipping the full vial into his bag and pulling out the next, he unsealed the top and once again fit it beneath the fang to restart the process.

"My life is full of irony. At this point, I'm used to it." Harry went over to the bag, and took a look at the vial. "How many pieces do you think there are?"

“Pieces?” Regulus lifted his brow and glanced over at Harry. He had only vaguely referenced them to Harry, but he wondered now if perhaps Dumbledore had told Harry anything more while they had been in France…

"You said you thought there were other things, like the memory." Harry asked. "That's why you wanted the venom, because it destroyed the diary when Ginny hadn't been able to. Wouldn't they be tied to other things too? Unless he's been keeping diaries the whole time, and that was just the first volume."

Regulus glanced over at Harry, thinking back to a moment before - the sentiment that no one ever told him anything - and wondered just how much Harry did or did not realise. To some degree, withholding information was in the boy’s best interest to protect him, but in these matters, perhaps Harry had more right than most of the adults.

“You said that no one shares information with you… There is a place for the compartmentalisation of information, but when it directly applied to you…” Regulus shook his head. “This line of conversation requires discretion, and to communicate the gravity of it, the majority of the Order is presently unaware, to better protect from loose lips. That is not a commitment to take lightly, but because it already involves you, perhaps you ought to be better informed.” Regulus checked the vial again - slow and steady - then back to Harry. “Are you comfortable with maintaining discretion?”

For a long moment, Harry didn't say anything. Then he nodded.

Nodding back, Regulus began. “These ‘pieces’ are called horcruxes.” The bluntness of the statement seemed to punch through the air. “They are shards of-” Regulus hesitated for a breath and steeled himself- “Voldemort’s soul, split off and implanted in various objects. I took one with me when I defected, assuming it to be the only one, but when he returned last year, I knew there must have been others. To be frank, the number we are dealing with is all speculation right now. I have destroyed two so far, so there were at least three, but I suspect more.”

"So when the Killing Curse rebounded off of me,” Harry began slowly, "then that was what kept him like a kind of ghost? Like what was left of his soul was going about without a body, until Wormtail found him two years ago?"

Again, Regulus nodded. “I cannot confirm if what you observed is the resurrection ritual for horcruxes or if it was another related process, but for our purposes, I am tentatively speculating it to be the same.”

"So there could be parts of his soul all over the place," Harry said. Then he shook his head, "No, I don't think he'd do that. He'd never put it somewhere ordinary, he's too arrogant. I'm trying to think of what he said in the graveyard. He said he had gone further than anyone in his goal to conquer death, that he didn't know what he was after, only that he was alive, and he could possess people. Wait! So could the fragment in the diary! Is that what happened to Ginny? Is that what happened to me?"

“I have been entertaining speculations on that matter,” Regulus admitted, though it was precariously close to the one thing about horcruxes he did not think Harry necessarily needed to
know at the moment. The last thing they needed was him getting some sort of sacrificially Gryffindor idea that killing himself would eliminate a horcrux when they didn’t even know for certain if one was in there. “However, not all horcruxes seem to have this ability. The one I stole as a teenager was Salazar Slytherin’s locket, and it took me approximately a year to figure out a method that would actually destroy it. The split soul did get quite aggressive when it realised it was under legitimate threat, but it was not a matter of possession - nor was the ring, which was discovered and attended to earlier this year. Each one has had a different line of defense, but I think you are in a better position than most to be on the lookout for such things.” He glanced over with a wry smile. “Considering the pattern of your first five years of school.”

"Are they all connected to Slytherin?" Harry asked. "The diary was written by the self-titled Heir of Slytherin."

“To Slytherin himself? That is yet to be determined,” Regulus responded. “The ring belonged to the Gaunts, who are descendents of the line, so they have all been connected thus far… but Emmeline has been working with me recently, and we have been exploring the possibility of other founders’ objects. In light of that, I would ask that you be on the lookout for any clues about Ravenclaw’s diadem or Hufflepuff’s cup. I’ve been in proximity to the sword, and it did not fit the aura of the others, so I do not think it is affected. Either that, or it was, and when the basilisk venom infused in the blade, that destroyed the horcrux itself.” Eyeing the venom in the vial, it was nearing the top again, and he began to once again slow the extraction to properly seal it.

"I don't know what those are," Harry admitted. "I think this Chosen One thing would go a lot better if it was Hermione. I bet she'd know."

“Surviving objects that belonged to the founders of Hogwarts,” Regulus supplied. “There may not be much to glean from Hogwarts itself, but it can only help to be watching for it.” Perhaps tasking Harry with speaking to the ghosts about Albania could wait until he’d had time to process everything if he felt unsure about the objects themselves.

Yet on the subject of chosen ones- “That does, however, remind me… I have been curious to know the full extent of this ‘chosen one’ prophecy so often referenced. As I stated earlier, I am not one to put much stock in them, but I have been wondering if there may be some additional clues to be considered in the full wording. Dumbledore has kept it all rather close to the chest, but with so many threads to pull, even rubbish like divination seems worth considering.”

"I don't remember it exactly," Harry said. "But I know it was eavesdropped on, so Voldemort only knows a part of it. Lucius Malfoy knows at least part of it too, because he knew about the scar. It said that the person with the power to kill him would be born at the end of July, to parents who'd defied Voldemort three times. That was me, or Neville. Then that he would be marked, which he did, he gave me a scar. And that..." He seemed to stop, and hesitate. "And that I'd have a power he wouldn't know, but I don't know what means. I don't have any special power."

Something in Regulus’s chest seized, and he fought to keep his expression neutral. ‘A power he wouldn’t know’ - the nature of prophecy was the ability to interpret multiple possibilities from a single line, making it terribly prone to the bias of expectation, but Regulus did not like the sound of that. His eyes darted over to Harry’s scar as he sealed the top of his vial, not even bothering to look at it, though it sealed solidly, nonetheless.

“Hm.” Regulus crafted his tone into something casual as he slipped the vial into his bag again. “Prophecies are strange things. Is that all you remember?”

"Either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live if the other survives," Harry said, in a tone that made it sound like a direct quote.
The sharp dread in Regulus’s chest was only worsened by the addition, but he committed it to memory, nonetheless. “I see. We shall carry on towards his prompt destruction, then.” A thin but nonetheless sincere smile. “Thank you for the details; I don’t know what may come of them, but they are something to think about.”

“It’s why I need to be back at school,” Harry said. “I had fun this summer, it was great but...if it has to be me, the longer I spend doing that, the more people he has a chance to kill. I don't want anyone else to die because of me. I want to do something that matters.”

Regulus frowned, and though the words and circumstances were a little (or a lot) different, the sentiment resonated quite soundly. *Something that matters.* Guilt was a nasty thing, as was the imposition of responsibility, and to think of that on the scale of prophetic proportions only amplified it further.

“You are doing something that matters; a break did not change that,” Regulus said, and as he continued, his voice got a bit tighter, despite the lightness of tone: “To that point, although I do gather that your existence makes him exceptionally grumpy, he was orchestrating the deaths of many people before you were ever born - born directly and indirectly - so do not be too hard on yourself. It’s terrible, but they most likely would have done the same, regardless of whether you were at Iago, the Weasleys’, or Hogwarts.”

Harry snorted. “Exceptionally grumpy?”

Regulus meet his look with a little flicker of a smile.

Harry laughed in return. "Okay, so family ring, diary and locket down. At least two possible objects, that's five. Maybe the sword, which would be six. Did he split it all at once into tiny bits, and he's leaving them in things, or does it have to be done a bit at a time?"

“I cannot say for certain, but my suspicion is that it was done over time. Murder is the means to split the soul,” - Regulus smothered a shiver and blocked out the blaze of a fire - “but he did not even indicate that the horcruxes existed, much less did he explain his process. It has been more a matter of piecing together information over time.”

For a long moment, Harry said nothing. "But he's murdered a lot of people. If he doesn't do it every time, then why those murders?"

“Once again, it is speculation, but at least one of them, we believe, was created when he murdered his muggle father and grandparents.” Though the trip to the Gaunt shack had only been earlier that same year, it felt so long ago - so much had happened, and he could not help the fleeting thought that teaming up with Emmeline had been a choice he appreciated even more, in hindsight.

Focusing his thoughts in the present, once again, Regulus added, “With that in mind, I would guess that he used murders he considered to be particularly significant.”

"So if you figured out what murders were significant, you could figure out when each one was made,” Harry speculated.

“Which could, in turn, hint - to some degree - what significant objects he might have had access to at the time,” Regulus continued with a little nod. “It is all a work in progress, but it is coming along - and the more contained it remains, the less likely he is to realise we are aware of it. Thus far, he does not seem to have noticed.”
"So the diary was Moaning Myrtle. She was the muggleborn student the basilisk killed when he let it loose in the fifties." Harry said. "But Lucius Malfoy had the diary. Couldn't that mean that other Death Eaters have them?"

“It's possible - even likely. The ring was not in the care of a Death Eater, but the locket was entrusted to me.” Regulus paused, then amended sourly, “Well, entrusted to Kreacher. All I was told was that he required an elf.”

"Dobby might know," Harry said, suddenly. "He said he used to be around when Voldemort was there, but no one paid any attention to him. Dumbledore gave him a job here; he should be here, if it's not his day off."

“Dobby?” Regulus lifted his brow. “He was the Malfoys’ elf for some time, correct? The one you freed?”

"He's kind of a friend." Harry nodded. "He knew about the chamber, and no one ever thought to specifically tell him not to tell anyone. He didn't want Voldemort to return either; said that it was much worse for elves under him, and no matter what happened to him, he had to try. Even if he did keep almost getting me expelled in the process."

“I did not see it much at the time, but Dobby is right about there being little regard for elves. The-” Regulus caught himself and crinkled his nose. “-Voldemort left Kreacher to die without even acknowledging it, perhaps assuming I wouldn't notice… All the same, Dobby is certainly worth asking. He would have likely been around those who would have been involved, and most people truthfully don't pay elves much mind.”

“I wasn’t making a dig at you,” Harry said, quickly. “You can call him whatever you want to.”

Though anyone - not just Harry - pointing out the title always felt a little bit like a dig, Regulus nonetheless believed him; and perhaps worse, thought there was some measure of validity to it. When Emmeline and Sirius had brought it up, there had been a certain discomfort to thinking that the perception of him was somehow cast into question over something as harmless as a habitual title (that was far less ridiculous than everyone else’s), but there had been something a little more harrowing about Harry’s interpretation. *Being so afraid of someone you won't even say their name gives them power over you-*

“I had only thought of it as a matter of semantics, but you raised a valid point. I’m rather tired of being controlled, too,” Regulus said with his lips in a line as he pulled out a smaller vial - the one that had been in the little box in the cabinet - the last he’d brought.

Harry smiled at that. "He really shouldn't complain. It's not as if you're calling him Tom."

Adjusting the vial in place, Regulus’s mouth flicked up slightly at the corner. “That would be worse.”

"He doesn't have anything to lose. I already told them at the Ministry who his parents were," Harry said, evenly. "Needed a distraction, and that seemed like a good one.”

“I would say so. He doesn’t seem particularly pleased about about those parents,” Regulus commented, watching the venom drip in, though it was significantly smaller.

"You don't get to choose them." Harry shrugged, and sat down cross-legged. "I wouldn't choose the Dursleys, and I think you'd like one that doesn't scream all the time."

With a frown, Regulus let out a slow, heavy sigh and shook his head. Though Regulus himself had
brought up her tendency for screaming just a moment before, it was not as though he did not want her to be his mum…

“Family is family,” Regulus settled, though he could not say if it was an argument or an agreement.

"Unless you're Sirius," Harry laughed lightly. "But it's still better to have a complicated family than none at all, right?"

“Sirius is family too. It's not my fault he left,” Regulus said to the vial, voice even despite the little sting; it was a strange feeling, unbidden and unwelcome, and he had not meant it to come out quite so defensively. His mind had somehow started its distracting spiral, and he made an effort to shake himself off of the path. Complicated was better than nothing. With a smothering shrug, he stopped the venom and sealed the top of the vial again.

"No," Harry said, quietly. "It was just why you joined the Death Eaters."

Tucking the vial into his bag, Regulus eyed the line of fangs, more to avoid looking at Harry than for any further need to study them. Whether the boy’s words were a statement or an accusation was unclear, so without responding, he stepped back from the snake. “I am finished here. Do you need anything, before we return?"

Harry moved to get up. "Just to talk to Dobby if you still want to."

Regulus crossed his arms with a little nod, staring hard at the back of the beast’s throat. For a moment, his feet felt stuck to the ground, like it would take every straining effort to lift his shoe even one inch as the shadowed memories of the Death Eaters of his childhood weighed down, heavier on his shoulder than they had been in some time. Drumming up questions he ought to ask Dobby would be the better course of action, but Bella’s exacting stare hooked with a thousand tiny claws - and his brother standing in the door of Regulus’s room at Iago, telling him that everything was going to be okay when he must have known it wasn’t going to be okay at all. That he was going to walk out the door and leave them to figure out the mess in his wake.

Stiffly, his arms tucked a little firmer, and he turned back towards the way they had come. “I do.”

Harry seemed to sense his distraction. "We'll be quick."

Such was the life of an Unspeakable that Emmeline was frequently delayed from her appointments. However, for this particular one, she can't say that she couldn't have done with another delay. A few more days, weeks, perhaps a decade or two. However unready for it she felt, she plodded onward around the same corner she'd been taking home for over a decade. It all looked more or less the same; slip through Eccleston Square’s apparition point, go down to the white townhouses, turn the corner at the pub, and second house on the left. The first floor white, with two additional exposed brick tops that her mother had lovingly restored. Somehow, it seemed as though it all should have changed. She hadn't really been back here in a non-investigative capacity. It felt wrong to hold the wake there, and she found now that she could remember very little of it.

There was one crucial difference to the house now. Outside, there was a dark-haired woman lingering conspicuously. She could see one of their neighbours poking her head through the curtains to spy, perhaps thinking Hestia was not a friend come to help her retrieve a few things, but rather some sort of criminal. Where was that sort of vigilance when she needed it? Logically, she knew that would have only escalated the situation, as muggle law enforcement would be crawling all over it then too. Standing here, it wasn't the easiest thing to be logical.
"My apologies," Emmeline said. "My presentation ran long."

"I didn't mind the wait," Hestia replied, graciously. "If you're not ready, perhaps your grandmother could come and do this herself."

Emmeline stamped the thought out immediately. It hardly mattered that she had been stomping the thought out of her mind at any given opportunity. There had to come a time where injuries must be faced head on, and she couldn't bear to hear any recriminations of fault from Nana right now. She would only ask why she hadn't been home, and explaining such things was difficult with a shrewd lady. Besides, she had spent her life around Gryffindors. She understood the importance of finding bravery in the most difficult situations.

"I'm going in," Emmeline announced, and to her pride, she could only detect a small wobble in her tone.

Once inside the door, her heart rate kicked up to annoying levels. She could feel fresh sweat unbdden along her arms, born more out of her own upset than the August warmth, and she jolted a little as Hestia closed the door behind her. It echoed. The house didn't smell of blood, or worse, which she was grateful for, but it somehow felt worse than downstairs; it was difficult to tell they had not simply gone on holiday.

"Where would you like to start?" Hestia asked.

"The artwork," Emmeline said. There were pieces littered throughout the house, from vases to paintings. "And photographs. For me."

Between the two of them, they began to make quick work of downstairs. If she didn't think about it too much, it wasn't so bad: it was like moving house, and she had done that so many times. She'd even managed a wan smile at some of the more ridiculous pictures of her littered around the cabinets. She thought of the cabinets at Number Twelve. Object memory, the reason a house became a home.

Then when there was little else they could do downstairs, they turned their attention to the stairwell. It was harder to breathe on the landing, nose wet and hands spasming at the mere memory. It felt long ago, and yet, only yesterday. It was more obvious here, though the bookcase had been righted. The long wooden cabinet, which had held her paternal grandmother's thimble collection, was long gone as kindling to the fight. She struggled to think of anything else, beyond a feeling of cowardice, shame, guilt, and whatever else her mind wanted to throw at her the moment.

It took only a few steps before she felt something underfoot. She bent down to pick it up, finding it to be a surviving thimble. Bridget Wenlock, famous Arithmancer, discovered the magical properties of seven. Emmeline gave a startled laugh. Was that not the working theory number of horcruxes? Or whatever the plural of it was. Of all the things to survive.

"What is it?" Hestia asked.

"A thimble," Emmeline said, showing it to her. "Nana Vance collects thimbles. To be polite, Mum, she, um," she cleared her throat. "She said she liked them too, so Nana sent her a collection."

"Where are the others?" Hestia asked.

"There were smashed," Emmeline said, pointing to the sun shadow where there should have been a cabinet. "Mum has-had-had a cabinet, and I smashed it onto Mulciber. It's a good thing she's not here, she'd have killed me for that..." She tried to punctuate the statement with a laugh, but a hoarse
and snotty sob happened instead. To her complete and utter horror. “S-sorry.”

About to go digging through her robes to find her handkerchief, Emmeline found one already placed in her hand. “You don't have to apologise.”

“I do if-” Emmeline gulped hard, and blew into the handkerchief. Her face felt hot, wet, and her throat was getting tighter, not looser. She was starting to feel lightheaded, as if there was too little air and a flight response was kicking in. She wanted to get outside, where it was airy, and away from this hallway, but she was also likely to look atrocious. She forced out, “If I've gotten snot on you.”

“I'm a Healer,” Hestia said, quietly. “Do you know how much human gunk I've gotten over me over the years?”

Unable to trust herself to comment, Emmeline shook her head.

“A lot,” Hestia nodded, knowingly. “Do you want a hug?”

Normally, yes. As a rule. However, at the moment, with her own inability to control herself in the one place she had always considered to be safe and home, she felt raw inside her own skin. She couldn't be sure it wouldn't be painful to accept it, even as a comfort, even if it made no sense. Instead, she said in a soupy voice, “I don't know.”

“Perhaps we could try it,” Hestia offered. “And if you don't like it, we don't have to continue.”

Emmeline nodded, and the two friends embraced. Emmeline was a little taller than her friend, so she could see the top of her head and smell a rather perfume-heavy shampoo. Or perhaps an herb. She couldn't deny the distraction helped, if not fully. They stood there for a long time, or perhaps it wasn't long at all, but it felt like it. The murky soup of distress that felt like drowning was really ruining any hope of objectivity.

“We don't have to go on,” Hestia said, taking her hand as the two parted. “One floor is plenty for today.”

Embarrassment fled to her cheeks. She hated to be overly emotional in front of people. She found it tended to lose her some credibility, and somewhere in the recesses of her mind, it didn't seem very ladylike either. Or perhaps too ladylike. She was beginning to wish someone had written a guide to all of these feelings intermixing and flowing in her with a clear step by step explanation to how to deal with them and address them in a timely manner. She despised the uncertainty of it.

“Another day,” Emmeline forced out. She had at least half of the things, and it would have to be enough.

With a prickle of curiosity at the back of his mind, Regulus had stepped into the Hogwarts kitchens for the first time in many, many years, just ahead of Harry. A small crowd of elves had been milling about - preparing lunch for the Hogwarts staff, from the look of them, though it was strange to see such a comparatively small quantity in the absence of a castle full of children. Despite the heaviness of his mood, when they had found Dobby, Regulus had entertained a flicker of fond familiarity, though it felt a little out of place. Dobby had a miserable time as the Malfoys’ elf, and even when Dobby remembered him positively as a rare guest who did not treat him like rubbish, Regulus suffered a little prick of guilt for how dreadful his cousin’s family had been to the elf. The extent had not been apparent beyond the occasional rude comments, but it was no less disappointing to hear so directly.
Successful though they had been at locating the elf, it took no more than a few minutes to determine that Dobby had not actually garnered any clues of significant note beyond the diary entrusted to Lucius. Additional eyes and ears were always beneficial at Hogwarts, especially when people tended to speak as if house-elves were invisible nonentities, but he could not help a twinge of disappointment that Dobby had no treasure trove of eavesdropping. The Lestranges’ elf would likely be more helpful - after all, if he and Lucius had been tasked, surely Bella herself had been given one - but there had been no sign of any living creature in the manor when he had visited, and more than likely the elf had been given to someone else in the family, if it was even still alive.

He and Harry were looking at the map as they walked down the kitchen corridor towards the nearest stairway, but in the dungeon basement below, Slughorn’s all-too-familiar name again caught his eye. In some sense, Regulus still felt strange thinking of it as a homecoming for Slughorn when his own memories of school had concluded with his Head of House still solidly in place, but with a year of hearing people complain about Severus and his run as Potions professor, perhaps there was some small element of that return.

Interestingly enough, Severus was no longer anywhere to be seen on the map, but it was just as well. He had been in a rather bad mood, the last time Regulus had visited.

“Might we take a small detour before leaving?” Regulus asked, looking over to Harry. “I thought I might say a quick hello to Professor Slughorn. Perhaps we are not strictly meant to be here right now, but he is unlikely to tattle.” In truth, even if Slughorn did tattle, Dumbledore had expressed no concerns with breaching the chamber the last time, so even with their lack of express permission, he could not be too cross about it.

"He's already here?" Harry stuck his head closer to the map. "Oh, yeah. We can go if you want, I've only met him the once."

“Setting up, perhaps,” Regulus speculated as they reached the stairs, turning to go down towards the Potions classroom, rather than back up to the ground floor. “He was my Head of House, and possessing of a more amiable disposition than you are likely used to in that classroom, from the sound of it.”

"I know," Harry said, following on as well. "He mentioned you when I met him. He seems nice enough, didn't lead by calling me lazy, sloppy, or arrogant. Just a bit..." he trailed off, perhaps never finding the word to describe him.

Regulus could not help but feel a bit pleased to have been mentioned, even if there was some likelihood that it was in relation to Sirius, considering the conversation was with Harry (something that notably did not annoy him in the way it would have a year ago). “He likes to bask in the glory of those around him, avoiding the spotlight himself,” Regulus offered, shaking his head with a little smile. “I imagine he liked you rather a lot.”

"I think he knew what Dumbledore was doing asking me to go with him to ask him to come back," Harry shrugged. He didn't seem that bothered by it. "It's different with the Department of Mysteries. I don't mind people wanting to talk to me because of that because at least I did something there, and it's not because of something I didn't choose to be a part of or because my parents murdered and I wasn't.”

“That’s understandable,” Regulus inclined his head in a little nod. “If you would prefer to avoid the conversation, I will not be long.”

"I don't mind going," Harry said. "Er, that is if you want me to, I can just wait here if you don't."
“You can come along. I merely wanted to give you an escape route if you wanted one,” Regulus said with a little quirk of his mouth.

Harry laughed at that. "Any chance I can keep that offer in reserve?"

"Oho!" came a voice ahead of them. "I thought I heard people talking!"

“Good morning - though I suppose it is nearly afternoon,” Regulus greeted, though he was uncertain of whether he ought to call him ‘Professor’ when it had been over a decade and a half. “We were just coming to see you.”

"Were you really?" Slughorn's eyes flickered from Harry to Regulus, where they suddenly stretched wide. "Well, this is certainly an unexpected pleasure. Mr Black?" He added it on, as if he wasn't entirely sure.

Regulus tipped his head to a nod. “It has been quite some time. You are looking well.”

"As are you!" Slughorn held onto his chest, and gave a wheeze of uncertain laughter. "Much more so than I expected. I'm sorry, my boy, but it's rare to attend a pupils funeral and have the chance to catch up with him twenty years later! I trust you're keeping well?"

“The re-acclimation process has been going rather well, yes. The world is a very different place in many ways, and in others, very much the same.” (The success of his re-acclimation was perhaps open to interpretation, but Regulus kept the thought private.) Lightly, he added, “I did not see you in Iago, this summer, so I was wondering if you had heard yet. Do pardon the suddenness.”

"No, no, I'm afraid I've been out of the loop for a while," Slughorn replied, though his tone was one of discomfort. He clapped his hands together, and then smiled. "No matter! A pleasant surprise is very welcome indeed, especially in such times. And of course, it's not much of a surprise to see you with Harry!" He turned his attention to the boy. "I did mention he was part of my house, didn't I?"

"You did," Harry said. "And that Sirius wasn't."

"No," Slughorn sighed. "I've always been a little put out about that, I had everyone else. Being gifted often runs in families, too. I went to school with Arcturus, exceptional alchemist, and with your grandfather as well, though he was a few years my senior. I never forget a good potioneer. Are you taking it?"

Harry nodded.

"Excellent!" Slughorn said. "You're in excellent company, six O's at NEWT, along with a captaincy, wasn't it?"

Regulus nodded, clipping a reaction to the mention of his NEWTs. All those years ago, he had left home before the results arrived, and though exams had been rapidly knocked down from their short-lived position as Most Stressful and Important Task, he had been unbearably curious in the end. Far too many nights had been spent with a situationally inappropriate sense of disappointment that he was stuck in France and did not even know what his scores had been. For some time, he had forgotten how badly he wanted to know.

“Yes,” Regulus said instead. Privately, he felt that being a Death Eater had taken more emotional energy than NEWTs, quidditch, and the responsibilities of a prefect combined, but he had never made that particular extracurricular known to his old professor and did not think it wise to emphasise now. “That final year was very busy, as they so often are. I expect Harry will experience much the same.”
"Yes, a very stressful time," Slughorn agreed, before glancing back down the corridor. "I'd invite you in, but everything is everywhere. Trying to get everything ready has never been my favourite part of coming back. But I imagine we'll have a chance to catch up properly soon, won't we?"

“I expect so,” Regulus said, inclining his head. “Hogwarts will certainly benefit from your return. Take care in settling back in.”

Slughorn preened, and smiled. "Of course! And Harry, I shall undoubtedly see you on the train."

As they parted ways, Regulus found that his mood had lightened significantly, once again, brushing away the stress of the chamber and the disappointment of the kitchens. To be accepted so naturally by a prominent figure from his youth, without much in the way of doubt and nothing in the way of disdain, was surprisingly refreshing. Slughorn had been isolated from the collective ire of Society, untouched and untested by popular opinion, but he had always been a little more flexible in favour of those he favoured. Perhaps it was a bit inconsequential in the grand scheme of things, but Regulus could admit, at least to himself, that it cheered him.

Laden with a bag of basilisk venom an a morning of conversation to sift through, Regulus deemed the day very successful, indeed.

Arriving back at Number Twelve, Emmeline stood for a moment or two to fortify herself. She felt drained, her eyes still burned, and her throat was beginning to hurt. Both she and Hestia had sorted out a storage section for things until she could take them to her grandmother's, or until she found another place to stay, but she had made at least some decision towards the house. She couldn't go back and live in it. She felt a cold fury at Mulciber for robbing her of that feeling of home, but at least now she knew she couldn't go back there and try to ignore it. She could just about manage walking around, but her heart split open the moment she'd ascended the stairs. It would need to be sold, and for the fourth time, she would need to move. She couldn't stay at HQ forever. She very badly wanted a home to feel safe in, and it hadn't felt quite so raw or real until now that it was gone.

She slipped into the hallway and removed her shoes with a sigh of relief. There didn't appear to be anyone about.

“Alright, Vance?”

Emmeline started, loudly. She hadn't realised Sirius was on the floor on the upstairs landing; why he was on the floor on the upstairs landing was likely a better question, but one she wasn't equipped to deal with today.

Unfortunately for her budding headache, this was the absolute worst hallway in the world to squeak in. Behind her, the rage of Walburga Black filled the air.

"FREAKS! HALF-BREEDS! DISHONOURED STAINS, TAINTING THE HOUSE OF MY FATHERS!"

"Oh, do cease the histrionics!" Something in Emmeline had broken, and she felt too raw in her skin to be yelled at today. "The only person bringing dishonour to the magical world is people like you! What is the point of tradition and houses if they are only used to toss away the very family they are supposed to protect? If good people lose their lives for it and horrid old women can use it to justify sending one child for the slaughter and throwing away another? How is that protecting anyone?"

Realising that she had raised her already hoarse voice to screaming levels, Emmeline clamped her hand across her mouth in a mixture of embarrassment, shame, and being far too uncomfortable for
words to cope with any of this.

With a flash of colour, she realised the sudden and deafening silence was because Sirius had pulled the curtains across. The two stared at each other for a moment, before he gave her the most irritating smile.

"If I didn't know it'd set the old bat off," Sirius whispered, pointing to the portrait. "I'd give you a round of applause."

"It's not funny," Emmeline said, unable to keep the anger out of her tone.

"No, it's not," Sirius said. "But I was getting sick to death of you acting like her calling you all the names of the day wasn't pissing you off. She wouldn't have deserved that kind of politeness when she was still knocking around; she doesn't deserve it now she's dead."

Emmeline ran her hand over her face. "It's been an exceptionally trying day."

"You want to talk about it?" Sirius asked, before hushing his voice.

"You have no idea how much I very badly do not want to talk about it," Emmeline said. At that moment, the only real idea she had was to sit in a very long bath and climb into bed.

“I can bust out the drink if you need one,” Sirius offered. That was, generally speaking, his usual response to this sort of thing.

Emmeline shook her head. “I think drinking will only make me do something exceptionally stupid.”

“ Sometimes, doing something exceptionally stupid helps too,” Sirius said.

“ That only works for Gryffindors,” Emmeline gave him what she hoped was a better smile than it felt like.

“ You're an honourary,” Sirius said. “Marlene always said so."

It seemed as if today was a day for hitting upon sore subjects. At moments like this, she wanted very badly to see her best friend. Sometimes, she could go days without thinking of it, and she would think that something she saw or did would be something Marlene would like, and she'd remember it all over again. Today, it felt as if she was being winded.

It must've shown on her face, because Sirius almost immediately winced. “I didn't mean to upset you."

“ It's not you,” Emmeline forced out. She bit back a truly terrible comment about his tendency to forget that he was not the only person to lose his best friend in the war. If she didn't want to lash out at a portrait, she truly didn't want to lash out at a good friend. “I need to deal with this by myself."

For a moment, he looked fit to argue. He must have decided otherwise, because he merely nodded. “Goodnight, then."

Emmeline nodded in return, “Goodnight.”
This note is not related to this particular chapter, but because we are coming up on the Marius subplot within the next few chapters (exact placement will depend on how the scenes pace out), we wanted to give a warning that there are some potentially upsetting themes in respect to Bad Things Happening to Small Children. We'll put another warning on the chapter itself, but wanted to make sure to warn ahead of time, too.

For those who are interested, we will also be putting out some backstory exploring Marius and the rest of the family during that time period (Sirius and Reg’s grandparents and their contemporaries). Recently, one was put out that starts hinting at it - "feel no more (feel no less)" - but we're planning to work on some others that tell the story more directly.
Chapter 12

Find the prophecy and bring it to me.

Draco had rolled the command over and over in his mind. There could be no other word for it. Being in the presence of the Dark Lord only a handful of times in the last year, it was unclear if anything he commanded was simply a request, but he doubted it. He more than doubted this. As his aunt had reminded him upon her return from the Ministry, his father had failed in retrieving the prophecy from the Department of Mysteries and would now have a respite in Azkaban for his failure. Not that it was a true stay in Azkaban, his aunt had remarked, as the dementors had fled it.

However, faced with the stench of failure and the horrors of disgrace, Draco had jumped at the opportunity to prove that it was nothing more than a fluke. His father was a talented man; even if the Ever Perfect Potter was at the Ministry, the idea that Lucius Malfoy had been hoodwinked and overtaken by Longbottom and a flurry of idiotic traitors was almost too much to bear. Failure was not an option.

The so-called Chosen One prophecy was no longer in the Ministry; of this, he was now sure. It could only be touched by those involved in it, which naturally meant Potter would have it. If he'd given it to Dumbledore, the likelihood was that it was currently in the school. There was no guarantee that he had done that. It was the smart thing to do, even if he was an old dodder on his last legs. So where would he stash it? He dismissed the idea that it'd be put somewhere muggles could get to it. It'd scramble their brains, and he'd never do anything like that. It could be with the Weasleys. It's not as if anyone would notice if it scrambled their brains. They might even get some better class scores if it did. There was always Longbottom, but he'd probably touch it and drop dead because he forgot he wasn't supposed to.

Where did that leave it? There was the dog, an embarrassment to his mother’s noble blood, but he hadn't the vaguest idea where to look for that. Another idea walked into his head unbidden. There was another person he'd seen stalking about Potter. This wasn't the same cousin, he was quite sure, but it was possible the emergence of another traitor was not coincidental. He could ask his mother about it, but he had to be careful not to confirm or deny anything. She could not get into trouble on his account.

Given the breeze that had finally descended and cut through the sweltering heat, it was not such a surprise to find her in the garden. “Mother,” he started, as he tried to think how best to approach a delicate subject. “Do you have a moment?”

Looking over, she met his eyes with an obliging expression and shifted to face him. “Of course. Is something troubling you?”

Draco glanced around, to assure himself of the privacy. "Just the continued appearance of someone claiming to be related to you."

A sort of keen interest flickered in her expression as she folded her hands neatly in her lap. “Oh? Who is it?”

"I didn't catch a name," Draco replied. It was unlikely mentioning running into him coming out of the girls bathroom with Potter would shed any light on it, but it was still his most automatic thought. "In the book shop, and at Hogwarts. Do you have a cousin?"

Expression softening, his mother's mouth pursed to a gentle line. “Yes - Regulus. He was the
youngest and a frequent patron of any bookshop he could find,” she offered with a strangeness to her tone.

Draco curled his lips. "There's three of them?"

Her nose crinkled. “I have only one living cousin. I meant youngest in the family.”

Draco fought against the urge to roll his eyes. "Why is your only living cousin having holidays with Potter?"

She sniffed with distaste. “Something clearly has him confused. He is not acting like himself at all, as of late.”

A thought occurred to him rather suddenly. "Didn't your youngest cousin die?"

At that, she frowned a little deeper. “He and Evan both, yes, I had thought so; but in the case of Regulus, it turns out I was mistaken.”

"He did sound a bit..." Draco searched for a word that meant totally crazy, but wasn't that. It seemed like it might insult his mother's family if he did that, even if it was true. Even so, crazy was better than traitor, so it was still a step up. "Out of sorts. Did you talk to him?"

Again, she nodded. “I have spoken to him, yes. It is a complicated situation, but I will see it through, whatever the result may be. Regulus was not a traitor.”

With an uptick of nervousness, Draco continued. "Then I would prefer to meet him officially, not skulking around. Perhaps we could go to him."

His mother's expression shifted then, lifting up around the eyes. After only a fleeting second's pause, she nodded, thumbing the back of her hand despite her board-straight posture. “I'm certain something could be arranged. I don't understand why he is lowering himself, but questionable commentary aside, I do believe he means well. Regulus always puts family first, in the end. He will come to his senses.” With an asserting nod, she added, “I will inform him of our intention to visit.”

Privately, Draco thought he would reserve judgement on that. Time would tell if it was some Potter-induced temporary insanity. Potter often went into histrionics, maybe being nuts was getting contagious. But none of that mattered if Draco got to have a snoop around.

"Thank you," he said. He just about managed not to add on they couldn't suffer any more embarrassments.

Regulus was huddled in the drawing room when the tip-tapping of an owl drew his attention to the window behind him. A letter from Narcissa, he immediately realised, identifying the neat swoop of her handwriting; there was no true need for the confirming signature at the bottom, though he was delighted to see it, all the same. At once, his eyes swept through the letter - a request to come visit, he noted as relief began to swell in his chest - and he had nearly reached the end when his brother yanked at his attention from across the room.

"Why do you look as if someone just used the sacred words 'first edition'?"

Trying to smother the pleased expression, Regulus folded his letter and glanced up. “It's Cissa - asking to visit with Draco.”
"You're getting excited over a tea party," Sirius said, in a bemused tone. "You better do it in public. I don't want to have to deal with a kidnapping."

“It’s not a tea party,” Regulus responded, a little bit crossly, and stuck the folded letter in his pocket. “Draco is specifically interested in seeing the house - and before you say anything, I do recall that he is a Death Eater, do realise the potential for a trap, but am not terribly concerned about it. As long as our sweep of the house is thorough, it presents as nothing more than a residence, just as it always has.”

"Of course he is," Sirius said. He ran his hands over his face, making a noise of annoyance. "You might not be terribly concerned, but it still functions as a safe house. You have to tell people, Vance and Harry, at least."

“I will,” Regulus responded, making an effort to filter defensiveness out of his tone. “The charm would mask those protected by it - with the exception of us, presumably - but I would not be so impolite as to spring that on them without warning.”

"Be prepared for the fallout." Sirius said, with a visibly forced shrug. "That's all I'm saying."

“What do you think they are going to see that would be so concerning?” Regulus asked, raising his eyebrows.

“I think that as long as they don't know about the Fidelius, it's safe,” Sirius replied. “But the point of a safe house is that it's safe to come running into day or night, and if either of them clock the ward, they might have the unfortunate sense to look out the bloody window.”

At that, Regulus frowned. Even after a year, it was still difficult to think of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place as a ‘safe house’ or as ‘headquarters’ when it remained - as always - his home. Allowing the Order to meet there and seek refuge had not felt like a problem, even before he had joined their official ranks, but that did not make it any less his personal living space or ancestral home.

“Then we can warn the others too. It is not as though Cissa and Draco are likely to stay terribly long,” Regulus said, though at least part of him wished they would - or at least wished that they felt amiable enough that their presence needn’t be a dance of perceptions.

"And me?" Sirius asked.

“What about you?” Again, Regulus lifted his brow.

"I hope you've packed your bags for the incredibly long guilt trip I'm about to inspire," Sirius said, plainly. "Because she's going to snoop upstairs, or her kid will. Phineas will need to be shut up. Truthfully, if it's about to start being used as a real home again, we need to start looking for somewhere else, and not just because she'll wonder what our dearest mother is screaming half-breed or traitor at."

Propping an elbow on the arm of his chair, Regulus fit his chin into the palm with a more pronounced frown. Without half-breeds or traitors around, Regulus thought privately that their mother might not actually scream as much at guests, but he suspected that pointing it out with that particular phrasing would not actually help.

“You are right about laying the guilt on thick,” Regulus said dryly, a touch of uncomfortable annoyance in his tone. “They won’t be wandering around without me, and Phineas has been moved before, we can move him again. I don’t mind sharing the space, but I didn’t ask for my ancestral
home to be given to the Order.” Even as he said the words, they felt a little childish and combative, but his brother’s intended guilt shot had landed a little too squarely, and the defensive bristle lingered.

"It wasn't someone's home when I told Dumbledore he could use it," Sirius replied with a barely contained eyeroll. "It was just an old building, well-warded and filled with things no one had come to see in a decade, or for me, almost two."

For a moment, Regulus leveled a frown, a little more stung than he liked to admit that Sirius still thought of it as nothing more than an ‘old building’ when it came to the question of who was allowed to use it, even now. He wanted the Order to feel safe there and recognised the trouble that would be pulled to the surface, but he had not invited any of them into his home - except for Emmeline, whose comfort was admittedly of greatest concern.

Picking up the book he had set aside, Regulus opened it up again with a flattened expression. “It is now. You have communicated loud and clear that you don’t care about it, but I do.”

"It's almost like I have a lot of lousy experiences tied up with the place and really don't enjoy being bombarded with them day in day out," Sirius said, in a grumpy tone. "But regardless of either of those feelings, meeting needs calling so people don't drop in unannounced at the wrong moment, and to try and find a secondary location, just in case Bellatrix decides to drop in now she knows where you are. Or even if Narcissa does without warning."

“A secondary location would be a safe option, as things are, but I would like to point out that I did not specify my residence,” Regulus said, the defensiveness still sticking to his throat a little more than he liked. “Me being alive at all is reason enough to make an educated guess, but it’s not as if I sent an announcement. Being evasive with them would only make it worse, suggesting there is something to hide here.”

"There is something to hide here! If there were nothing to hide, Narcissa could show up on the doorstep at any time. Or worse, use the floo." Sirius said, with a throaty noise of frustration. "I'm thinking about the long term. I don't fancy being ambushed, and while you might have a modicum of protection from Narcissa at the minute, I don't, and I have no guarantee the charm will apply to me. In fact, it probably won't."

“I am aware that there is something to hide, which is actually my point. Do you really think that they would be less likely to show up unannounced if I was suspicious about it? Saying ‘you can’t come to the ancestral home’ will only draw more attention to it,” Regulus said, though he was speaking tightly to the page of his book now. “We can set up precautions to lock out visitors who don’t have permission, but sating their curiosity is better than heightening it even more by trying to shroud it with restrictions.”

There was a beat of silence. "I don't trust her."

Regulus flicked his eyes up from the page, and though his mouth was still pinched, some of the tightness had loosened in his tone when he spoke again. “I don’t entirely trust the situation either, but I don’t think she is trying to schedule my murder, and as long as we are thorough, there is nothing that ought to indicate any whiff of the Order. If she asks about your living arrangements, I can always lie and say you avoid the house like one would avoid kappa-infested waters because most people have the sense to assume you would do just that.” His eyes flicked down again.

"Murder plans or not," Sirius sighed, "it's not just the Order I'm worried about."

“Emmeline will probably be at work, if the timing in the letter is maintained, and you and Harry
can take a break from the house, if you are worried about potential issues or tip offs on that front,” Regulus said with a subtle lift of his shoulder. “I will start looking into further protective measures for the house going forward, too, if that makes you feel any better. I was planning to do so anyway, with the assumption that Bella’s grace period won’t last forever.”

After another beat of silence, Sirius reached for one of the ornate cushions on the soda and tossed it at his brother’s torso. "You cannot be that dense."

Catching the small, hurtling cushion with one hand, Regulus settled it neatly in his lap, resting the book atop it. He knew his brother wasn’t concerned about Kreacher, so that was thoroughly out of the question, and though it was an almost comical sort of thought, he was not in the mood to hear Sirius complain about Kreacher. “If you are referring to me... No one is likely to attack me with Narcissa standing right there, and I will be in no more danger after the visit than I already am now.”

"Narcissa can cause more suffering for you with a few sentences than Bellatrix can with her wand," Sirius replied.

The sting was unexpected - not because Regulus thought it an unfair statement, but rather because he knew it was true. As illogical as the feeling was, he dreaded Narcissa’s rejection significantly more than he dreaded a surprise ambush from Bellatrix, but it was not an emotion that he knew what to do with, so he pursed his lips to a line for an uncomfortable beat.

“There is still a chance she could come around,” Regulus said, though he was looking down again, not reading the words on the page at all.

"I know that. I might not like her, but she's no Bellatrix." Sirius put his hands on his knees, and sat down slowly. "But if you're protecting her and her kid, you need a little protecting because you'll be too distracted to see the hit coming. This is a prime location to give you a nasty shove into a corner, in an environment where you can't just pick up a book and ignore her until she goes away because you don't want to argue with her. Protecting yourself is important. She's got claws on her when she wants them."

Regulus nodded, though his mouth was turned downwards. Narcissa was not one who typically used those claws on him, but she had landed a sting or two already, and he knew the ground was at risk of dropping out from under him with a badly met argument. That she and Draco wanted to come visit was perhaps promising - and deep in his chest, he wanted to believe that it was - but the more his mind reeled, it troubled him that he could not pinpoint what the change of heart might have been. He badly wanted a chance to show them that they could make it all work - but if they didn’t want to…

“Protecting myself how?” Regulus asked. “The closest thing to a shield charm from unpleasant conversation is to plug my ears, but I expect I am a bit too old for that now. Or perhaps a silencing charm, but I don’t think that would do much to de-escalate the situation.”

"It's not the conversation; it's how you feel. You can't do what I do; no one would believe you don't care, but there's nothing wrong with looking at what she can use - the blood, the name, the Death Eaters, disappearing and letting her think you were dead, or hexing her sister - and making sure you have an answer you won't choke on." Sirius then shrugged. "Or a wild idea, just tell her she's being upsetting and ruining an otherwise pleasant visit. Manners might overtake her, or she might care enough to stop if she knows it's painful for you. I emphasize: might."

Words clustered at the back of Regulus’s throat, but for a moment, they would not come out, so he simply nodded his head. Having an answer to all of her questions was not, in itself, the most
difficult part, but rather trying to find answers that were both true to what he felt and not wildly
offensive to her sensibilities. Those answers were essential if he wished to maintain any hope of
reconciliation and to convince her and her son that defection was not only the right answer, but also
the best option. The attempt with Draco had been even more abysmal than the limited success of
his conversations with Narcissa, and this would be a matter of accounting for both.

“Perhaps so,” Regulus said after an uncomfortable beat. “I can do that.”

"Tell me if you can't, and fuck it, I'll hang about just in case." Sirius nodded. "There's nothing
wrong with it if you can't. I'm not going to have a go at you, but I do need you to speak up."

“I have thought about the answers to those questions extensively,” Regulus began, shaking his
head. “I just need to figure out how to phrase them more effectively, I suppose.”

"You do that,” Sirius said. "I'm going to go see if Harry wants to go see his friends for a day or two
in case they decide to pop in unannounced."

Regulus nodded. “I will tell Emmeline,” he confirmed, though even after Sirius had left the room,
he lingered in the chair with thoughts spinning in his mind.

This place was a safe house to her, too, as much as he had grown accustomed to her presence.
Though it was, in reality, no less safe now than it had been all this time, he wanted her to be able to
feel safe, too. Undoubtedly, this was not the first time Number Twelve Grimmauld Place had
occurred to a Death Eater, but it was nonetheless a sign that the Death Eaters were potentially
turning their eyes to it. Her living spaces had been invaded far more often than any person’s ought
to be, and though she had known that risk going in, he felt far more guilty about her than he did
about the Order’s headquarters.

He found her in the library - as he expected he would - absorbed in a book he couldn't quite
identify from the door.

“Might I interrupt for a moment?” he asked, though he had already taken a few steps into the room.

"You're not interrupting," Emmeline said. She placed the book down on the table and pushed her
book away. "What do you need?"

“I received a letter from Narcissa just a moment ago,” he began as he approached the table,
supposing there was not much else to do than dive into the point. “It seems they have made the
rather easy deduction that I returned to this location. Draco is asking to see the house, and quite
frankly, I think it appears more suspicious to deny him entrance than to oblige.” (Furthermore, he
could not completely shake the surge of hope he'd initially felt, however depressing a turn the
conversation with Sirius had taken. A less important point to emphasise, most likely...) “It does,
however, affect you, as a current resident of the house… The timing should align with your work
hours, but it seemed prudent to warn you, nonetheless, considering the potential ramifications.”

Emmeline blinked once or twice in quick succession, then nodded. "I shall consider myself
notified, thank you."

His mouth pursed to a line as he watched her face, and his hands found the back of the nearest
chair, drumming an absent beat. Perhaps that was all that needed to be said - the information had
been relayed - but his mind was still grasping at a way to stay a moment longer and resolve the
strange air. He recalled she had gone with Hestia to clean out her house while he'd been at
Hogwarts with Harry - something that had seemed to linger behind her eyes, but he did not know
how to bring it up when it was his schoolmate who had done it.
“Should you find yourself in need of a new project outside of work, I will be researching new wards and contemplating potential modifications for the Order’s safe houses and residences alike. You needn’t feel obligated, but you are welcome to join me, if you’d like,” he offered, resisting the urge to shift on his feet.

Emmeline seemed to consider it for a moment. "My concentration is a little reluctant to engage at the moment. Is it dangerous?"

“No more than usual,” Regulus admitted, “but I’ve been meaning to for some time, and it seemed as good a reason as any.” A breath of a pause, and then he added a little vaguely, “How are you holding up?”

“In need of more engaging distractions,” Emmeline replied, dryly. “I can't promise good company, at least for the moment. But perhaps neural company.”

“Neural company suits me just as well,” he said, expression lightening a little. “I did not want to burden you right away, but there has been some minor development with our ongoing research, should you feel it is a proper distraction; but if you would rather avoid the war, I’m sure we could come up with something else.”

Emmeline smiled at him. "You're saying that knowing full well no matter what, I must know what this development is, aren't you?"

There was the hook. A little smile tugged at his lips as the nervous energy peeled away. “I am.”

"Using my inquisitive nature against me is a bit fiendish," Emmeline replied. "Especially saying it's only a minor development, which in translation means it's not minor at all."

“I prefer ‘strategic,’” he responded lightly, mouth still quirked up at the corner.

"Don't make me upgrade to manipulative," Emmeline said, in a warning tone.

For a moment, he considered asking if ‘manipulative’ was worse than 'fiendish,’ but he could not say for certain if she was in the mood, so instead he folded his arms on the back of the chair. “All jesting aside, I intended to provide an update, regardless; it is merely a matter of timing.”

"I meant what I said. You're not interrupting." Emmeline said, with an eyeroll. "You can come and talk at any time."

“You said you weren't up for discussing protective spells, a moment ago,” he pointed out, lifting his brow, “so I was trying not to make assumptions.”

"Assume that if there is a stimulating mystery to be solved and I'm wallowing, telling me about new details about it is an excellent way of getting me to move," Emmeline replied, with a huff. "I'm sorry to tell you that protective spellwork does not hold the same stimulation."

“I think both subjects are fascinating,” Regulus responded firmly, “but no matter.” After shutting the door with a wandless flick, he continued, “I retrieved a rather significant quantity of basilisk venom with Harry's assistance, and considering his tendency to stumble upon these horcruxes without even trying, I told him what it is we are dealing with. I did not detail the theories on living hosts, for obvious reasons, but he will be able to watch for any clues related to the Founders, should any exist at Hogwarts.”

"Breaking into Hogwarts, having Death Eaters to HQ, and spilling your guts to Harry," Emmeline noted with a flicker of amusement. "You are feeling rebellious lately, aren't you?"
“I suppose I am, a bit,” Regulus admitted, shifting to pull out the chair he had been propped on and settled in it across from her. “Sometimes one must creatively reinterpret certain restrictions in order to accomplish a goal.”

"The only rules which apply are the ones I was intending to follow anyway?” Emmeline translated.

As a young child, Regulus had shied away from rule-breaking of any sort, but he had to admit it was much easier to accomplish tasks of a forbidden nature when rules were loosened. His mouth quirked. “Essentially.”

Emmeline glanced over him, then snorted wryly. "I think being around notoriously impulsive and reckless people has had a bad influence on you."

“That must be it.” More than likely, that shift could not be blamed entirely on the mass of Gryffindors surrounding him - truthfully, Regulus would have never discovered the horcruxes or left at all, had he followed the rules within the structure of his life - but the house did have a very different energy about it with such a consistent Gryffindor presence. A stark contrast with what it once had been - one that he suspected his parents had feared, to some degree, and he felt a fresh sting of guilt.

"Or perhaps Sirius isn't as unusual as he likes to pretend," Emmeline theorised.

“I don’t think anyone wants to take that title away from him, though perhaps for a variety of reasons,” Regulus said wryly.

"I seem to recall you once telling me you could be considered very rebellious,” Emmeline commented. "But perhaps leave the lack of impulse control to the lions. Particularly around horcruxes. You did say they fight back."

“They do,” Regulus responded with a nod, and with a little quirk, he added, “On the subject of rebelliousness, there is a place for it, but I wouldn’t say that I make quite the lifestyle of it that Sirius does.”

"No, of course not.” Emmeline nodded sagely. "It’s not as if you did something deemed impossible in a break for freedom, or joined a vigilante organisation, or have stolen anything, broken and entered, or been rather mouthy with people."

“That would be complete madness,” Regulus quipped back. “Doesn’t sound like me at all.”

"Or attending muggle places of business or reading their books or art," Emmeline added, though she was clearly trying not to smile. "That's not you at all, no."

“Scandalous. It was probably a dream,” he suggested lightly.

"Presumptuous of you to think I dream about you," Emmeline said.

Regulus fought the embarrassed flush with what he hoped was valiant success. “Figuratively speaking, of course.” Shifting slightly, his tone became matter-of-fact again as he shifted the subject: “Back to the point of Harry - Although there was not much in the way of revelations, he did also share a portion of the prophecy that supports the theory that Harry is a host, however much I would like for it to be untrue. I am not one for prophecy, as a typical rule, but it claims Harry will have a power unknown - perhaps to both of them, ambiguous as it is - which could mean anything, but sounds rather like the abilities Harry shares with him. Harry also mentioned that the prophecy specifies that they must die at the other’s hand, which is not particularly reassuring, either.”
"It does make the most sense. If he was going about killing people and stuffing parts of himself in there, he had just murdered at least two people," Emmeline pondered, tapping the book in front of her. "Though I'm sorry to partially disprove your theory, it's a power unknown to Voldemort, but something that Harry has. Something that you also have, as I rather hope do I, and the Weasleys, and many others. I expect the only difference is that they don't have a part of soul that isn't theirs inside them, so it doesn't disprove it entirely."

“If it’s something everyone has, why would a prophecy go to the trouble of specifying it for Harry?” Regulus asked, lifting his brow, though curiously had crept into his tone. “And what is it, for that matter? Has it been confirmed?”

"We know he has some ability to control people, whatever is left of his collective soul, undoubtedly. He kept trying with Harry, culminating at the Ministry, but we've already seen to some degree what happens to the victims of such a thing in Quirrell and the others. Their mind, body, it gets burnt out and destroyed." Emmeline actually smiled, a little bitterly. "But young Harry was able to do what they could not - he drove him out of his mind, not with the misdirection of occlumency, but by using the same weapon Lily gave him when she sacrificed herself. Arguably, the most powerful magical force there is. Love, of course. The emotion appears to be toxic to him, and in his somewhat unique situation, Harry is capable of weaponising it against him."

Regulus thought that defeat by the power of love sounded a little bit ridiculous, old magic or not, but he recognised that it was rude to say as much. Although he still suspected the horcruxes were relevant to the prophecy if it was legitimate at all, he instead simply tipped his head. “I don’t imagine he has much of that, no. Any other prophecy-related theories?”

"Oh, I can feel that cynicism from here,” Emmeline waved her book at him. "Even if you want to set aside divination and prophecies, love is an intense emotion, and intense emotions bring about very powerful magic. It's how it manifests in children, more often than not. If you want to consider it from an outside perspective, if Harry had no particular reason to want him dead, then he may not have gotten involved at all with any of this. However, Vol-" she coughed, and pressed on. "Voldemort murdered two people he loved. From experience, this does instigate a desire to kill the person responsible in violent and painful ways. In targeting Harry, he has instigated his own demise. That's usually how it goes with prophecies. They only mean something when people act upon them, and change their behaviour accordingly."

Regulus quirked his mouth a little. “All of that, I can agree with.”

"There is the possibility it's talking about the soul fragments," Emmeline mused. "It's really only supposed to be one soul per body."

“I would not be surprised if it had a two-pronged reading. Divination and prophecies strike me as prone to multiple interpretations,” Regulus remarked lightly. “With how many of these fragments there are, the prophecy should probably have its Sight checked if it managed to miss them.”

"Trelawney," Emmeline said. "Let's not blame magic for poor interpretation of it."

He granted a little smile. “I suppose I will give you that one.”

"How gracious of you," Emmeline said, dryly. "You know that Harry has been infected with basilisk venom before, and if your theory holds, it didn't destroy it?"

Lifting his brow, Regulus shook his head. “I had not heard. Presuming the theory is sound, I wonder if the presence of the host’s soul means that the fragment is pocketed somewhere specific -
or the fact that he is still alive, perhaps the venom did not have time to take effect. That is for the best, of course, because it’s better that he’s alive, but it’s curious.” Regulus did not want to think that Harry himself would have to be destroyed for any assault on the horcrux to work, but the point made his stomach twist in a sick lurch. “I don’t intend to jab him with more basilisk venom to test it, of course, but it is important to consider in respect to our options. Perhaps it is worth initiating the search into whether it’s possible to localise any attempts to destroy the horcrux, or to remove it in a safe way,” he added with a thoughtful frown.

“I don’t have the details, unfortunately,” Emmeline admitted. “Though thank you for the image of you sneaking around with a dipped cotton swab, trying to surreptitiously poke Harry around the house in various places to see what may happen.”

With a muffled snigger, Regulus shook his head. “I can imagine how well that would be received. ‘Yes, Sirius, I’m systematically poisoning Harry, but only a little bit, and it’s nothing he hasn’t survived before.’”

Emmeline snorted. “It would require telling him about the soul splitting, which you seem reticent to do.”

“I would not say telling him would be required, per se, but it would be terribly difficult to explain in the absence of such context,” Regulus said wryly. “However, in fairness to my brother, I am reticent to tell the vast majority of people. Thus far, the list includes you, Dumbledore, and Harry - I suspected that Dumbledore already knew, and Harry likely has one in his head. It’s a short and highly specific list.”

“I’m honoured,” Emmeline replied. “It does save me the trouble of stalking and theorising on the wrong subjects. I’m not sure whether to hope Harry finds something or not. It would be nice to know what else was chosen to establish pattern, but there being that much of him shoved in the school around small children is chilling.”

“That is the trouble,” Regulus agreed. “One has to know the target to fight it, but sometimes it would be more preferable to be wrong, given the circumstances. Those children have been through enough, as it is. All of them.”

“We didn't exactly have an easy time of it either,” Emmeline reminded him.

Regulus shoved down his own unwelcome memories of adolescent war involvement. They had been through enough, too, in hindsight, but it could not be changed now. “No, certainly not,” he agreed.

“But if there is something - if they've been there since he was at school,” Emmeline said, suddenly sitting forward. “Does that not mean they were there then too?”

“They may well have been. If he was creating horcruxes at the time, he may have done so several times before moving on. I don’t know that I would have hidden them in the same building as Professor Dumbledore, but it’s not impossible,” Regulus said with a little tip of the head.

“Though an extremely accomplished man, Dumbledore is not infallible. He didn't notice three animagi running about for several years.” Emmeline added, with a shrug. “Or perhaps, a giant snake?”

“I was specifically thinking of the basilisk when granting that possibility,” Regulus said wryly, “as useful as its venom will be. But a small herd of unregistered animagi applies, as well.” As did a small herd of student Death Eaters, perhaps - or maybe Dumbledore had known, just as he
suggested knowing about Draco, and simply had not seen fit to intervene. It was hard to say, but not a welcome question to pose, if he were to guess.

"The man is ineffable," Emmeline said. "How did you know what the ring was?"

"I wouldn’t say that I ‘knew,’” Regulus admitted pensively, shaking his head. “Being in close proximity to them feels a bit awful - though when I first had the locket, I already felt awful, so it wasn’t as noticeable, I suppose. Truthfully, I was mostly just hoping the Gaunts did not hide family rings in boxes under the floor for no other discernible reason.”

Emmeline stared at him, then rolled her eyes. "So more or less a guess, then. For someone so careful, you're impressively reckless at times. How will Harry know? He's at least as reckless."

“They seem to be finding him, rather than the other way around, so at least he will know what to stab them with, should it happen again,” Regulus responded, which perhaps was not helpful from a proactive sense, but he did not expect Harry would find very much in the school, anyway.

"Did you leave him with venom?" Emmeline asked.

“It didn’t seem prudent to give him basilisk venom to keep on his person - or even to leave in the dormitories with so many other students around - but he is both the only one with access to the chamber, now, and has the means to sneak about undetected, so he could probably manage it, should the need arise,” Regulus said.

"No, perhaps not if he's getting Slughorn," Emmeline huffed a laugh. "He might tackle him for it."

“Indeed. It’s probably best not to mention the venom stash, right under Slughorn’s nose,” Regulus said with a quirked smile. “Basilisk venom is normally rather expensive.”

"I'm relieved the old man's not dead." Emmeline said, returning the smile. "I heard his house got raided. Did you hear about those last time? The uh, showing up at your door with ‘join or die’ propositions? I think Remus had one."

“Now that you mention it, Sirius said something of the sort a while back, but I was not aware of them happening at the time,” Regulus responded with a wrinkled nose. “Either they weren’t doing them yet, or perhaps it was the result of the rather limited pool of people I interacted with. I’m glad to hear he successfully avoided it.”

"Me too," Emmeline said. "People who know his real name tend to disappear, from what I could find."

“Which is not very surprising, all things considered,” Regulus noted with a nod.

"No, but it does make things awkward." Emmeline sighed, then leaned back against the chair. "We have a means of destruction but nothing to destroy. It's very frustrating."

“I initially had the opposite problem,” Regulus added, “which was also very frustrating. I do not like relying on luck, but at least we have several leads to follow. Harry and I spoke to Dobby, too, and although it does not seem that anyone was as loose-lipped around him as I had hoped, it did remind me to specifically consider which Death Eaters may have been entrusted, rather than focusing solely on the objects themselves. Bellatrix, for example - both Lucius and I were connected to them, so I would be surprised if she was not.” Crinkling his nose, he suddenly wished he had spent his time in the Lestrange Manor more efficiently, but there was nothing to be done about it now. At least he knew about the Auror trigger, now. "In the time-loop, I did a quick sweep of the manor, but there are plenty of rocks left unturned. They have a Gringotts vault, too, of
"The Ministry shouldn't be too difficult. There's usually an inventory list that Kingsley can get a
hold of. Gringotts is harder, but evidently, no longer impossible to breach." Emmeline nodded. "I'd
say they were the older lot, but your involvement does contradict that. As far as I know, none of
your family from the previous generations had any involvement with him?"

Regulus shook his head. "Just Bella and myself, as far as blood relatives go." Those numbers
changed if one went into cousins within other family branches, such as the Rosiers spanning off
from his Aunt Druella, but he suspected that was not what Emmeline meant.

"There doesn't seem to be rhyme nor reason to who he picks, then. That doesn't seem right. He
goes to a lot of trouble to procure objects, so it can't be random." Emmeline flinched suddenly.
"Oh, no. What are the odds of the Greyback lot having hidden one?"

Slanting his mouth down in thought, Regulus paused a moment, then shook his head. "It's certainly
possible - and worth consideration, given the lack of consistency - but I don't know that he would
trust it to the feral pack. As far as I know, their function is more for chaos than marked service."
Tapping a finger lightly on the table top, he added, "But in truth, I cannot actually speak for the
selection process itself, beyond my own experience. I offered Kreacher because I did not realise
what I was volunteering him for, so in that respect, my involvement was more coincidental than
intentional… yet Bellatrix was the one who told me personally that he required the assistance of an
elf, so a connection is nonetheless still possible."

"We really need to get a better look into his history," Emmeline said, decisively. "If we're to have
any hope of finding a pattern at all. I think it's time to start tracking people down, even the muggles
may know something and not realise the importance of it. I'll look into a possible excursion."

Regulus nodded. "I think that is a good idea Any threads that could shed some light are worth
pursuing. Returning to the Lestrange Manor is not terribly high priority because I have had at least
a brief look, but I intend to get another, if I can. Because Kingsley checking inventory is already a
consideration, it may even be prudent to bring him along in case the Aurors have any alarms or
traps set." Regulus paused only briefly before adding, "However, on the subject of timing,
probably best left until after my situation is settled with Dumbledore and the Ministry, to avoid
worsening any perceptions. Hopefully it will be resolved soon."

"I can give Dedalus a little push my if you'd like." Emmeline offered. "He can get a little
scatterbrained with his appointment times, but he's good at what he does."

"That may be helpful," Regulus said with a nod, though the actual appointment itself was unlikely
to be pleasant. Somehow he doubted they would simply take his word for it and pardon it all
without question when their previous pardons had all slapped then in the face with recent arrests…
but if Emmeline thought Dedalus was capable, he would at least trust that.

"The quicker you start, the quicker it's done with," Emmeline said, reaching over to give his arm a
quick squeeze. "I can guarantee, no matter what you say, they've heard worse. Some of the pardon
deals last time bordered on ridiculous."

Meeting her eyes with a small, pressed smile, he nodded again. "So I've heard. It seems as though
Imperius was a popular one."

"Ah, yes," Emmeline nodded. "There is that, but I was thinking more the people who did admit to
doing it of their own volition but named enough other people that it didn't matter."
Regulus lifted his brow. “That was a legitimate option?”

Emmeline huffed, but she looked almost amused. "I keep forgetting you were out so early. Yes, it was something of a scramble to figure out who was actually involved. Thus the more names that came up, the better, at least as far as Crouch was concerned. Karkaroff outed quite a few, including my old boss, which at least I can count as legitimate. I'm quite sure some weren't, especially now."

“Lucky I was already dead, then,” Regulus said wryly. “Who all did Karkaroff name?”

"Now you're asking,” Emmeline commented. She shut her eyes, then opened them again after a moment. "Three people who enjoy competing for my most loathed person, in Dolohov, Travers, and of course, Mulciber. Rosier too, though he'd been dead for quite some time by then. That's where Mad-Eye lost that chunk out of nose."

Regulus tried to smother a frown at the mention of Evan - and he knew it was Evan, rather than his father. Sirius had said early on that Mad-Eye Moody had been the one to kill him, along with Wilkes, and Regulus was a little surprised that a year later, it still stung. He could not muster any regret on behalf of Mulciber, and he felt worse for Travers’s sister than he did for Travers himself, but she had not been particularly friendly at Iago, either. Shaking his head, he huffed, instead. “I'm now imagining this revolving door of Death Eaters, scrambling to name each other. That must have been uncomfortable, following the break out earlier this year. Any others of note?”

"Honestly, I would need to look it up. It was an extremely charged time, not too long after they found Frank and Alice and what happened with Lily and James, of course. It's difficult to remain objective," Emmeline had to admit. "It must've been December of '81, so there probably are more. I know someone tried to out Snape, but Dumbledore wrote it off, and it got dismissed. They took it all quite seriously; a person's word could be seen as enough."

“Hopefully Dumbledore’s word is still enough now,” Regulus remarked with a crinkled nose. “Suffice to say the Death Eaters are rather cross with me, and I would prefer the Ministry didn’t hear my name from a Death Eater, first.”

"Heading it off before they do is your best option,” Emmeline replied. "As it stands, I think Karkaroff made the appeal from Azkaban, and then it had to filter through, so it took a little time. The Ministry is grappling for legitimacy, so while I'm not generally a fan of the practice of it being who you're related to, it doesn't hurt to have the Ministry already admit they've made a mistake with Sirius. They'll cover their bases."

Privately, Regulus thought it was probably best if they did not investigate too thoroughly, but instead, he nodded. “If it helps, I don't mind it.”

"Are you worried about it?” Emmeline asked.

“As long as the Ministry does not choose to ignore Dumbledore and make a statement, Dumbledore’s record of past success is promising. I just don’t much like the alternative,” Regulus said with flattened mouth. “But we don’t have to dwell on that.”

"Given how they've treated him, undoubtedly they would also like to get into his good books too,” Emmeline said wryly. "You would also make a terrible statement. You were underage at the time, left long before the fall, have a moderate disposition - or should I say, appear to. You have also participated in the first acknowledged battle of this war, and were seen doing so."

After some of the things he had done, some part of Regulus lurched with the knowledge that he did deserve Azkaban - but to hear Emmeline’s dismissal was a bright spot in the sour thoughts, and
Regulus granted a little smile to communicate as much. “I suppose those are fair points.”

"Have you ever known me to waste your time with a point that wasn't?" Emmeline asked. "You're just not a good choice anymore. The family name no longer has the same connotations, and if Severus Snape can manage, you'll be fine. Even if you have to take up teaching."

“Teaching might not be my first impulse, but it is several steps above Azkaban,” he said as his smile quirked up a little bit more at the corner.

" Depending on the students," Emmeline grinned. "Perhaps only one or two steps."

With amusement flickering in his eyes, he tipped his head. “A compromise, nonetheless.”

"That would depend on what your impulse would be," Emmeline said. "If you could be doing anything, what would you choose?"

“It is difficult to say,” Regulus admitted, though he took on a thoughtful tone. “Research, experimentation, and spell development are all intriguing, as are runes and artifacts. I suppose I focus on particular interests based on motivation in the moment, but in the sense of a dedicated effort, I don’t know what I would most like.”

“How very scattered of you.” Emmeline considered him for a moment. “No singular cause or action is attractive to you by itself.”

“At the moment, my singular cause is destroying the horcruxes,” Regulus responded easily, “as it has been since I was seventeen, but it is my hope that there will be no more need for horcrux-hunting when the war concludes. In the meantime, entertaining a variety of productive hobbies suits just as well. To that point, I have rather enjoyed our astronomy-themed diversions, too, though they are not strictly productive in the traditional sense.”

“Still feel like attempting camping?” Emmeline asked.

“I do,” Regulus answered without hesitation, despite this way his mind reeled. Camping was still questionable; camping alone with an unmarried woman was bordering on scandalous (and would certainly qualify as a full-blown scandal in the eyes of Society, though he had no intention of directly telling them); but the thought of seeing the Northern Lights with Emmeline triggered a pleasant leap in his chest that brought a smile to his face. “The aurora will be stunning, no doubt.”

“It’s actually, um,” Emmeline started, before stuttering to a stop. “I have a birthday coming up, if you’d like to go soon.”

“Of course,” Regulus responded, though when he thought about it, he was not actually certain when her birthday was. He had only seen her in passing, in the autumn of last year - a strange thought, with how differently it all felt now. (Perhaps more importantly, how differently he felt now.) “When would that be?”

"Let me check the star charts and see when it's going to be the best visibility." Emmeline made a face of distaste. "I hope they've sorted out the gravity in Space again. I don't mind floating, but with prior notice."

“It was an interesting room, to say the least,” Regulus remarked with a quirk of the mouth. “Let me know what time is ideal, and I will accommodate.”

"Time, very funny," Emmeline nodded. "I'll let you know."
Regulus could feel his mood brightening, and a smile lingered light on his face. Although he was not looking forward to defending either cousin’s presence before the Order, sitting with Emmeline in the library was a balm in itself. Tensions had yet to fade, but if everything blew up in his face - if the Order griped or his visitors somehow betrayed his hospitality - at least there was something to look forward to that the war wouldn’t touch.

The silence of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place in the early hours of the morning could easily have been described by others as unnerving. Even portraits aside, the house seemed to be in a near constant state of bustle at any given moment, but not now. Emmeline had never been the sort to mind a little quiet, but somehow, the lack of something else to focus on was making her ability to focus on the words enough to take them in. It was a frustrating state of affairs. Being awake at all was a frustrating state of affairs, if truth be told. As a rule, she was not prone to insomnia, and only when things gathered on her mind did she find difficulty falling asleep. Still, she kept to her rule of only laying for half an hour, and if no closer to a restful sleep, get up and do something.

The drawing room was comfortable. It was easy to imagine larger, familial gatherings in rooms like this. The piano, the fireplace, the overly cushioned seats, the large windows which were currently draped by huge, thick curtains. She had lit the gas lamps, but kept them low; she didn't want to find herself feeling more awake as she wound down.

“Book that boring?”

Emmeline had drawn her wand from her housecoat before she could process who it was, but Sirius did not seem wholly bothered. She'd assumed he was asleep. Folly, perhaps, given that he was prone to bouts of insomnia and had been as long as they'd known each other. She was pretty sure she had a picture somewhere in those boxes that now sat piled up in her room of him having fallen asleep on an exasperated Lily during their seventh year at some gathering or other, and suddenly the drooling dog jokes that James seemed to find so hysterical made sense in retrospect.

“There's no need to hex me for insulting the books,” Sirius said. He was still dressed, so perhaps he just hadn't gone to bed yet. This would account for his inability to function in early mornings without adrenalin.

“You startled me,” Emmeline said, unnecessarily. She put her wand back down beside her on the chair.

“You looked a bit out of it,” Sirius said, before he gestured to the book. “I must've been standing there ten minutes, and I didn't see you turn a single page. I've grown up around enough swots to know that's a sign something's up.”

“It's just a little trouble sleeping,” Emmeline said, before looking him over. “I'd prefer you didn't stare at me for ten minutes when it's obvious I'm not paying attention. It's creepy.”

“Sure, that's what's creepy around here,” Sirius said, before flopping with his usual lack of decorum onto the chair opposite. “Me.”

“You have your moments,” Emmeline said. She placed both her palms on the book in her lap. “Besides, as I recall, you don't enjoy people lurking about and staring at you either.”

“Never stops them,” Sirius replied, eyes flicking over her. “What's eating you, the prospect of having a baby Death Eater in the house again?”

“A little,” Emmeline admitted. She had no doubt the charm would hold, but nothing was infallible,
and it seemed risky. However, it was also unfair to ask someone to treat their home as anything other than their home, let alone someone like Regulus who viewed the place with an exceptional reverence. “It's a reminder I need to find my own place.”

“I don’t mind having you here,” Sirius objected.

“I know you don’t,” Emmeline nodded with a smile.

“Regulus sure as hell doesn't either,” Sirius insisted.

“I know that too,” Emmeline replied. “But it is still staying in someone else’s home. I don't want things to become difficult.”

“Why would they become difficult?” Sirius asked. “Because you lost your rag with a couple of paintings? I do it ten times a day. Not to mention it's par for the course around here. People screamed and argued and barbed their way through this house for as long as I can remember.”

“But they are your relatives,” Emmeline said. “It's different.”

“Not by much,” Sirius insisted. He then lowered his voice further. “This isn't about the two of you, is it? ‘Cause he hasn't said anything?”

Oh, for Merlin’s sake. “No.”

“It just takes him longer to figure things out, it doesn't mean he's not-” Sirius began, but Emmeline interrupted him.

“Sirius-”

“I just don't want you to feel like-”

“Sirius!”

“It's not that he's-”

“Do I look like a rehabilitation centre for purist boys to you?” Emmeline snapped. She winced in regret almost instantly, both from the words, the implication of them, and the fact that for a brief moment, Sirius looked put out.

“No,” he mumbled. “That's not-”

“I know,” Emmeline said, before sitting forward to put her face in her hands and take one deep breath, then another. “I realise, in the grand tradition of older siblings, you are prone to infantilising your brother. But since when have you ever known me to shy away from something I truly wanted over anything as idiotically backward as pureblood elitism?”

For a moment, Sirius said nothing. Then, as she looked up, he shook his head. “I haven't.”

“Then has it not occurred to you that I have my own reasons for not speaking up?” Emmeline sighed. She supposed it was her own fault for not raising the issue between them when he had begun winding her up about it, but she hadn't anticipated it would become such a thing.

“I thought you might just be waiting for him to get over himself,” Sirius admitted. “You do like him, like him, don't you?”
In that moment, Emmeline had to refrain from pointing out how juvenile that sounded. She reminded herself that they had a gap between their relationship, from the ages of twenty-one and thirty-four. At twenty-one, she would likely have phrased a crush in such a way too. She tried to remind herself to be patient.

“I do,” Emmeline said. “But I'm not the sort of person who waits around without good reason.”

“If his notorious past and occasionally ill-spoken present aren't the problem,” Sirius asked, “what is?”

A difficult question, not because she didn't know the answer, but because Sirius was not known for taking a suggestion of loss well. Neither was she, but she was somewhat more internal about her feelings, and often, it took her much longer to think things through. She considered that Regulus likely did the same, considering his note-taking, so she hadn’t thought it would become such a stupid issue.

“Opening up requires a certain courage, one I'm not sure I have the fortitude for at the moment,” Emmeline said. “I have a rather large tendency to lose the people I love to this stupid war, and it breaks my heart every time. Almost all of my closest friends were murdered, my parents now too, and I don't know if I can take going through that again. I'm still trying to work through them. Somewhat unsuccessfully, if my nerves are anything to go by.”

Sirius looked at her, and she thought perhaps he would say something, but he didn't. He just glanced downwards, stood up and left the room.

She wondered if perhaps it just dredged it all up again for him; perhaps for Harry's sake, he'd been trying to put it out of his mind. She reached again for the book, wondering if perhaps she should try something more stimulating, when Sirius returned and slid a glass of something that looked and smelled alcoholic.

“I'm not sure drinking at two in the morning is a good life choice,” Emmeline said.

“It's a shitty life choice, but so is vigilantism, and like you said, almost everyone is dead,” Sirius said, sitting down and taking a swig, not from a glass, but from the bottle. “If you're going to make a bad life choice, I'm your best company. I have the most experience.”

She could go back up to bed, or simply decline, of course, but they didn't do this much. He was one of her oldest friends who was still here. She saw Mary occasionally, here and there, and Remus had withdrawn so heavily after James and Lily and what she had thought was Peter and the arrest fiasco that they hadn't kept so strongly in touch that she felt on solid ground with him. Her friendship with the remaining member of the Ravenclaw group in Sturgis had continued onwards, but Remus and Sirius, she'd known those two when they were still in school. They had a shared experience, and talking about it with someone who might have an inkling of what she was talking about held a strange appeal.

She took a drink from the glass, and promptly coughed. “Oh, that is awful!”

Sirius laughed at her, low but genuine.

“This is the kind of swill we drank as teenagers,” Emmeline said, before just tossing it back and feeling an uncomfortable burn in her stomach. “That'll rot your stomach.”

“Where's your sense of adventure?” Sirius asked, with a gleam.

“I don't find the idea of heaving up in the morning for an uncomfortably long time particularly
adventurous,” Emmeline protested, though she did let him pour another one in. She did give it a glare for good measure. It was always a good idea to establish dominance with malevolent things you were about to consume.

“Yet you're the one who lived in Knockturn, not me,” Sirius said.

“That was Marlene for you,” Emmeline smiled, though she could feel the grief of that rising. It was never all that far away lately. In the space of four and a bit months, they had lost Benjy, Gideon, Fabian, Marlene, Caradoc, and Dorcas from their little group, and then the mess at Hallowe’en had been the final nail in the coffin, seemingly losing James, Lily, Peter and for all intents and purposes, Sirius in one fell swoop. Then barely time to breathe before the news of Frank and Alice's capture, and then the realisation of what had been done to them. It made her heart hurt just to think of it, and she could feel her eyes becoming a little blurry. “It's easier to be brave when you have someone to help you.”

“You're telling me,” Sirius smiled back, wide and genuine.

“I had to try and explain that Regulus was not the one I ended up getting arrested with when they met,” Emmeline said, looking down at the glass. “Well, cautioned, but we'd never have been at that sit in if not for Lily and Marlene.”

Sirius shook his head, “You couldn't argue with them. Stubborn.”

“Because you're terribly easy going,” Emmeline said. Sirius tossed one of the throw pillows at her, but she caught it. She had done so almost instinctively, having seen him do it fairly frequently over the years. “Honestly, that is part of the problem.”

“How does my stubbornness have anything to do with you getting your leg over?” Sirius scoffed.

“Not yours but it is something you share,” she took another drink and made a face at the swill. “Stubbornness. Running into things without thinking. The martyr complex. If you add these things to someone who is already a target, he is in exceptional danger.”

“He overthinks,” Sirius argued. “He doesn't just do things.”

“Oh, yes, he does,” Emmeline said, thinking of him and that bloody ring in Little Hangleton. “It in no way cancels out his intelligence, diligence, or conscientiousness, but I do think it runs interference with it if he is the only one who would get hurt if something were to go wrong. Self-sacrifice is noble, yes, but I don't want to set myself up to get hurt again because he can't think through his consequences when it is himself on the line.”

Sirius made a face, but then nodded. “Yes, alright. He does do that.”

“Is that not part of the reason you're still here?” Emmeline demanded. “You despise this place. I can see you liking the safety of it, but as a place to be as often as you are – are you truly telling me it isn't some self-sacrificial nonsense about making sure he doesn't wallow through this place alone?”

Sirius looked at her with surprise written all over his face. “It's...not an easy place to be.”

“No,” Emmeline admitted. “I enjoy it as it is interesting, and curious, and it has a lot of history. But that is not my mother, and I don't have the same history, and still, in my current, rather frayed mental state, it's grating on even me. I need some space to figure out my own mind, and this is a reminder of that.”
Sirius nodded. “I can understand that.”

“Good,” Emmeline said, with a nod. “If something happens, it does, and that would be lovely. If it doesn't, I still have a wonderful new friendship. But either way, I need my own home.”

“Then I think you've already made up your mind,” Sirius said. “You're already close enough to get your heart broken is something happens to him. But it's not going to, because it will be over my dead body that something does, and I'm a cockroach. I don't die.”

“You have had several spectacular near misses,” Emmeline agreed, lightly. She supposed he had a point. Would it feel no worse if something happened now? Was she already invested entirely too deeply? “One thing is for certain, it is neither the time nor the sobriety to be having serious considerations of anything.” Sirius huffed a laugh, and she realised what she said. “Oh, shut up, you're completely ridiculous.”

Sirius beamed in response. “Thank you for noticing.”
When faced with the Black ancestral home, Draco found himself a little speechless. Unfortunately, not in a good way. Not that there often was a good time for speechlessness; he was an intelligent and naturally loquacious person, so it was often more beneficial for him to be talking and other people to be listening. But this, this was something of a shock.

In all truth, he hadn't been expecting it to be literally Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. He imagined it was just the name, the way some of the most exclusive restaurants were simply known as No. 8 despite being quite apart from any other sort of building. But no, it was quite literally the twelfth house along a row - no, the sixth house along the row, did no one know how to count? A glance at the houses on either side seemed to confirm it, with numbers eleven and thirteen omitted. It must be some highly superstitious building. Someone had clearly taken arithmancy entirely too seriously.

It just looked so unassuming for an ancestral home. It had little of the grandeur of the manor, and his mother may have had a more humble origin of the multistory townhouse in Kensington, but that was just a house she'd been raised in. Ancestral holdings were different. Coming face to face with the one from his maternal heritage, he was thoroughly underwhelmed. There was no greenery, the walls looked bordering on dingy of all things, and there were obviously muggles around the neighbourhood, as their transportation seemed to be littering the place.

One of the oldest magical lineages in Britain, and its ancestral home was a row townhouse (not even having the decency to be an end house), stuck in a muggle infested area, run down, and looking quite abandoned.

"It's seen better days." Draco said, preferring in situations that could be delicate to his mother to be the master of the understatement. Besides, what if it hadn't seen better days? What if this was literally it? If that were true, perhaps her cousin had taken his death to to save himself the embarrassment.

His mother granted a thin smile. "It has," she agreed. For a moment, it looked as though she was preparing to say something else, but instead she strode forward, grasped the ornate snake knocker on the front door, and gave it three solid raps.

Almost immediately, the door creaked open to reveal - nothing, at first glance, but an incredibly old house-elf, upon looking down at the floor.

“A warm welcome to Miss Cissy and Young Master Draco,” the elf said in a scratchy but altogether approving tone, yet he barely had the chance to get the words out before Draco saw his mother's cousin step out of the nearest room.

“Thank you, Kreacher,” the man said as he approached, then looked up to them with a gesture to step inside. “Come in.”

Inside the front door was a long hallway, with a few doors down the side. There must have been a hundred portraits adorning the walls, a couple he could recognise from the manor, as well as his grandfather, who he could still remember, even if it was a little difficult to think in specifics. He wondered what each of them had done to deserve a portrait in such place of pride, and why some
were bigger than others. The dim gaslights led to a cramped and stifled feeling, but the grand staircase was familiar.

Also familiar was his mother’s somewhat barmy younger cousin. However, he was not nearly as interesting as the things littering the tables. Was that a renaissance athame? It looked like the right handle. And a giomantic charmstone? He couldn't read the sigil, but it looked too big for scrying work. Admittedly more interested in taking a look at the items littered about as if they were nothing more than worthless ornaments than making niceties with someone who had obviously taken leave of all senses, Draco pulled himself out of his distraction. He had to be cordial. This was supposedly his idea.

He ducked his head in greeting, in lieu of the knowledge of how one greets a seemingly resurrected, somewhat mental relative.

“You look well, Regulus,” his mother said politely, to which the man tipped his head.

“As do you,” he responded, maybe more stiff than well, but neither seemed intent on admitting how terribly uncomfortable it was. “Before we start looking around, is there anything Kreacher can get for you? Tea, perhaps?”

“Not right now, thank you,” she answered.

After turning a little nod of dismissal to the elf, his mother’s cousin - Regulus, it was - clasped his hands neatly. “In that case, it is worth establishing your points of interest.” His eyes flicked to the table that Draco was trying not to stare at again; when he looked back to Draco, he continued, “Is there anything in particular you would like to see?”

Since 'anything that will help me find an errant prophecy' was probably not the sort of answer he should give, Draco shrugged. "Whatever is most interesting."

“Most likely, that would be the drawing room - upstairs,” Regulus responded with a gesture towards the staircase as he started making a step in that direction. “Cabinets of artifacts, shelves of books, and a tapestry detailing the family tree, going back for nearly a millennium, now.”

What sort of maniac was asked about something interesting, and spouted off that they should go somewhere they'd find books? This just added to the theory he wasn't at all in his right mind. However, artifacts could potentially be interesting, especially if they were just strewn around and forgotten about, as if they weren't precious at all. The tapestry was also a point of interest, if only because he might be on it.

The staircase was only a little winding, not even comparable to Hogwarts, but he liked to believe he held his disappointment in check. He was rewarded with the drawing room, which looked much more like his typical experience. Ornate glass-fronted cabinets, lit chandeliers, desks, chaise lounges, and a grand piano. Light streamed in from two large windows, giving a stately appearance rather than the sort of place you'd find tucked away in Knockturn Alley. In the corner, a large tapestry graced the wall that, like most things, seemed like it needed a good touch up. Mother knew a person; perhaps they could recommend. He wondered how to communicate the idea, but as adept as they were with having conversations via eyebrows alone, that was likely a little too complex.

"What's in the cabinets?" he asked.

“An accumulation of artifacts, cursed objects, and various treasured items collected across generations prior - the safety of which is very situationally dependent.” Tipping his head, Regulus
added, “I would not recommend touching anything without asking first, but if there is anything you
would like a closer look at, do not hesitate to let me know.”

“What sort of reckless half-wit goes around touching clearly guarded objects?” Draco scoffed.
“They’re likely locked away for a reason.”

The corner of Regulus's mouth lifted wryly. “Too right.”

Draco walked over to get a better look at what was covering the wall. The tapestry was a mess of
little black holes in random places, likely due to people being cast out for betrayals or having lost
their minds completely. It was a little shocking to see so many in one place, a lot more in the recent
ones. It really did show the wizarding world was going to the dogs. However, with some
satisfaction, he did note that he was the most recent addition to it. He flickered his eyes away from
his father's name and focused on that instead.

He also ignored the fact that there was a Potter on it. Why couldn't he leave well enough alone?
Even Draco’s own family tree wasn't sacrosanct enough to be untouched by the ever perfect Potter
clan.

Fighting the incoming eye roll, he looked instead up towards the faded ones at the top. They were
more difficult to read, and even contained the occasional name he wasn't familiar with.

"It's not signed," he commented.

“Not every tapestry is, depending on the commissioner. I would say that detailing every traceable
name for a thousand years is more important than knowing the person within those first group of
names was the one to start it,” Regulus responded, his own attention turned to vast spread of
names.

If it were him deciding to chronicle an entire tree, Draco would want his name on it. How else
would they know who'd done all of that work? "You're not dead on it," he said, suddenly
remembering he and his mother’s conversation.

“I was, previously, but I have since adjusted it for accuracy,” Regulus responded, looking down at
the section in question. Draco could see that his mother had turned towards them and was now
eyeing the tapestry too. For a glance, she had taken a double-take glance at one of the chairs near
the door, too, but there didn’t seem to be anything particularly special about it. She must have
realised the same because her eyes roaming the most recent generations, though it was hard to say
what she was looking for.

If the man was going to edit it, surely he should figure out a way to fold in the wayward branches
so there weren't unsightly marks all over it? There ought to be professionals to do it if he was
incapable. He took a glance over at the cabinets, taking care not to touch anything, but they weren't
as cluttered as downstairs. There were a few curios, jewelry, vials of what appeared to be blood,
and what looked like some kind of paw.

"Is that a griffin claw?" Perhaps the blood was salamander; both were potions ingredients when
powdered or otherwise reduced, though one was much rarer than the other.

“It is,” Regulus confirmed, shifting his attention back to the cabinets.

"Pansy's father just acquired one," Draco said. "In Cairo." And she hadn't shut up about it for a
week, either. He was having to duck owls.

“Pansy…?” Regulus began in a leading tone.
“Parkinson,” his mother supplied from where she now stood by a group of hanging photographs, several of which appeared to have her in them.

A look of immediate recognition flashed in his expression. “Sage or Aster?”

“Aster,” she responded again without missing a beat. “Sage has a boy in his third year and a girl in her first. Pansy is in Draco’s year.”

At that, Regulus nodded thoughtfully. “To the original point of the claw, I imagine her father is rather proud of that.”

“It’s been in every letter for a week,” Draco grumbled.

Regulus did not mask the dryly amused flicker at the corner of his mouth. ”That does not surprise me. I cannot speak for your classmate, but her father was rather vocal about such things.”

Every spare space on the wall that wasn't covered in ornate mirrors seemed to be covered in portraits. It wasn't unlike Hogwarts, though most were small enough that they squeaked more than talked. A few seemed to be grumbling for no apparent reason. Draco had no idea he was related to such moody people - his aunt aside. "I wonder if idiot is also genetic then," he mused, thinking of some of the other students. It would explain Longbottom. The Longbottoms got themselves on the wrong side of his aunt and uncle, so clearly, they were a few nuts short of a fruitcake.

“There are some individuals who would make a strong case for that argument,” Regulus remarked wryly. “At the same time, children can overcome terrible parents, too. I've known individuals with at least one abysmal parent who turned out alright.”

"If alright is up to your standards," Draco commented.

“I am understating for the purpose of mild conversation,” Regulus clipped, though his tone remained even. “The person in question was my best friend when we were in school, and he was quite remarkable, despite the unfortunate circumstances.”

"I have no idea if our standards align at all," Draco said, and this time, he was unable to keep the loftiness out of his tone. The man’s expression went a little stony, but he made no move to speak as Draco continued, "You do have some peculiar ideas, though I do like the athames. I haven't seen ceirean bone outside of a museum.” Even if it really did need a thorough polishing, those were definitely gaelic markings and the most likely source of the handle.

“In respect to our standards, you will have an easier time understanding such things when you inquire after context rather than assume,” came the firmly measured tone - to which Draco could see his mother spare a tense look - but Regulus's tone loosened to something more obliging when he added, “But as for the bone, it is certainly a rarity. You are welcome to a closer look, should you wish for one.”

The struggle not to roll his eyes caused Draco's face to twitch in an unpleasant manner. Of course he wanted to look at it, that was why he'd singled it out. "I would," he said, trying to sound more measured than irate. "If it's welcome."

Regulus eyed him for a moment, then dipped his head in a little nod without another word. When he opened the case, he took out his wand and gave it a little wave and flick over the blade. After a beat, he picked it up, thumbed the handle, then handed it over with the blade pointed out to the side.

It wasn't as polished smooth as Draco imagined it would be, but he also didn't have quite the
obsession with knives that his aunt seemed to. They seemed a little too messy for his tastes.
Anyone could wield a knife, although a magical one like this did make it a more appealing idea, particularly if it was cursed or poisoned; but it still required getting up close to stab someone and, mostly likely, ruining some perfectly good shoes in the process.

Of course, he said none of this. "Not that heavy," he said, instead.

"The materials are lightweight but very strong," Regulus commented, watching him turn the knife over. "This particular blade was my great-grandfather’s - your great great uncle’s - and speaks of his appreciation for ornamental bonework. He had it forged, personally, as I recall, having… come upon a small set of the bones in his adulthood. From that particular set, he also gifted objects to his children, so there is an alchemy bowl made for my grandfather, Arcturus, as well as a flute for Great Aunt Lycoris, and a serpent sculpture for their youngest, Regulus, who I was named for."

"It all ends up here?" Draco asked.

A broom would likely have been better, unless they were all old enough to appreciate rarity of them. Even then, they could just acquire it as they saw fit. Draco glanced to his mother, then back again to Regulus. And the names - people had the cheek to laugh about his name. Idiotic traitors, but he supposed they were still a person, even if they were sorry excuse for one.

"Many of our prized possessions, yes, but by no means all of them," Regulus responded simply. "We have accumulated a number of properties, so I believe my grandfather and his siblings brought their most favoured objects with them when they moved out as adults. This house actually went to our shared grandfather, Pollux, because my grandfather Arcturus preferred the manor in Guernsey, so that is most likely where the bowl is, for example."

So there was actually a more size appropriate place. Draco practically heaved with relief at the realisation. He may have been to it, after all, but if he did, he didn't remember which. He only knew he'd never come to a particularly shadowy townhouse in a muggle area. "And now it's yours?"

"All of the properties and holdings have passed to me, yes," Regulus confirmed with a nod.

That meant that if he truly was involved in this, there could be any number of hidey-holes anywhere. Draco’s face darkened for a moment, but he fought to maintain some kind of composure in front of his mother, who seemed to be watching them carefully. "Even though you were dead?"

Regulus lifted his brow, just slightly, as he took on a more guarded tone: "Misunderstandings like that happen in war, so it was not difficult to sort out."

"Evidently," Draco said, though even as he said it, he decided he’d been spending entirely too much time with his head of house. Draco wasn't good at restraining his mouth, or being particularly careful with it, but something didn't feel right. "Why was there a misunderstanding?"

At that, Regulus lifted his eyebrows a little more noticeably. "Because being presumed dead is more simple to remedy than being actually dead."

"Evidently." Draco said, though even as he said it, he decided he’d been spending entirely too much time with his head of house. Draco wasn't good at restraining his mouth, or being particularly careful with it, but something didn't feel right. "Why was there a misunderstanding?"

At that, Regulus lifted his eyebrows a little more noticeably. "Because being presumed dead is more simple to remedy than being actually dead."

Out of the corner of his eye, Draco could see his mother shifting with a deepening frown as she spoke up. "Presumed or real, the grief is no different." That was clear from the way she put up with this nonsense.

The man had the decency to look guilty for a moment, then shook his head. "Given the situation, the chances were incredibly slim that further grief could be avoided in its entirety." His eyes
flicked to meet hers, and for a split second, her expression seemed to crack before she smoothed it over again. “Difficult situations lead to difficult decisions, and not every rippling effect is what a person might have wanted.” Shifting on his feet, Regulus turned his attention back to the cabinet, eyes raking over the shelves of objects.

"It was a very long misunderstanding," Draco commented. This had to be relatively new, as he had never encountered this person before.

“It was,” Regulus agreed without looking away from the shelf. “One that I persisted through long enough to label a misunderstanding, so in that respect, I prefer the misunderstanding. However - to our previous point of conversation, you were asking about the accumulation of objects. It is true that, even spread across multiple homes, the majority always land here. Stylistically and functionally, the properties vary, but a great many people have passed through this particular house, and it has a way of gathering up those people in a way the other residences don’t. These runic stones, for example, were created by my father.” With his wand, he prodded at a small, intricately carved bowl of different coloured stones. “Touching them temporarily neutralises a particular sense - each stone, a different sense. It takes a while to wear off, but it oughtn’t be permanent.”

That sounded exceptionally useful, aside from the part where it does it to the person touching it. It would be harder to manufacture that. As fascinating as it was to poke about in the cabinets, there was still a whole house and possibly an outside space. “You said you liked Quidditch before. Is it possible to play here? There doesn’t seem to be much room.”

“There is room to fly in the garden, but not enough space for a full pitch,” Regulus answered, glancing over. “One person per position would be manageable, but I always played at school and spent most of the summer at Iago where Quidditch was played freely, so it did not really matter much if there was space here.”

If you couldn't just walk outside and play, what was the point? No wonder it felt completely cramped. "It'd be too close to the houses anyway," Draco replied.

“There's a disillusionment charm, so onlookers are not so much of a problem,” Regulus said with a shrug. “I would say that the limiting factor was more accurately a lack of desire to invite that many people over at one time. School and Iago were sufficient.”

“What’s wrong with having people over?” Draco asked, puzzled. “We have people over all the time.”

“There isn't anything wrong with it, per se, and we entertained plenty of visitors, but I prefer to have time to myself, too,” Regulus clarified.

“Right,” Never mind dead, try dead and musty. Or dead boring. This was shaping up to be a colossal waste of time.

Regulus flattened his expression. His lips parted slightly, as if he was preparing to say something in response, but instead pressed his mouth to a line, leveled a look over to Draco’s mother, then returned his attention to the cabinet. A stretching beat passed before he spoke, his tone distanced but polite: “Is there anything else you wish to see?”

“Aren’t you related to a headmaster?” Not that Draco got called to the offices all that often, but he had vague recollections of an empty portrait with the name. Not the usual sort of name either.

“Phineas Nigellus Black, yes,” Regulus responded. “My great-great-grandfather - and your
mother's, as well.”

“He has a portrait in the Headmaster’s office,” Draco noted idly.

“And one here, as I recall,” Draco heard his mother chime in.

Regulus looked between them and nodded. “There is. It is not so different from the one in the Headmaster’s office, but if you wish to see it, I will take you up.”

"Yes, I would," Draco said, decisively. He couldn't think of another way of escaping the clearly unhelpful drawing room.

“In that case - this way.” Regulus gestured toward the door but had already started leaving the room, glancing back once he reached the threshold - maybe to check if they were following. “Of course, I cannot guarantee that he will be there, but it is presently up in the upstairs nursery.”

That made him perk up with interest. "Why in the nursery?"

Lifting a shoulder, Regulus responded, “No reason in particular. He used to be in a different room, then a hallway. A change in scenery can be beneficial.”

Draco saw his mother shoot a wary glance. “It’s not being used, is it?” she asked.

With a soft, dismissing sound, Regulus shook his head. “No. If anything, it’s a place he can go where no one will bother him because there have not been any babies in this house for a very long time.”

"I thought it would be because he was being childish," Draco commented. He thought back to the last time, and he could have sworn that as he'd left, he'd heard the telltale sound of a raspberry being blown. That could have been Dumbledore, though. It sounded a lot like him.

“I believe he prefers ‘clever’ to ‘childish,’ but perspective comes into play, as with so many things. Arguably, he has been rather well-behaved lately.”

"Riveting," Draco said, flatly, to which the man leveled a brief, narrowed glance out the corner of his eye before stepping up onto the top landing.

There was nothing of particular interest; for all of the objects and all of the potential for something notable to be going on, it mostly seemed like a man out to save his own skin rather than show the proper loyalties and respect, shut up in a townhouse with some impressive magical objects. If the high point of the tour was going to be an old picture in a nursery, he was going to draw a line through his involvement and figure out a better way to get to Potter when they got to school.

When the door to the nursery swung open, Draco could see something soften in his mother’s expression, her eyes flicking around - seemingly to every object except for the conspicuous portrait, which was empty, anyway. The distance in her demeanor seemed to falter, for a moment.

“Is information of the greatest import,” Regulus responded, looking back at her with a little smile.
With a flicker at the corner of her mouth, she shook her head. “Like the ten names you had been recently assigned to memorise on the tapestry.”

“As I said: Greatest import.”

“I don’t know where you put it all. I had started Hogwarts that year, and I couldn’t remember half of them. At least not their given names.” She folded her arms neatly below her elbows, eyes sweeping the room again before finally landing on the portrait of the former Headmaster Black. The glance was short-lived when she realised there was no one in it.

“How much younger are you?” Draco asked. The whole exchange sounded like he was much younger at the time, perhaps four or five.

“Six years,” Regulus answered, glancing over.

It was more than Draco had expected. A horrible thought suddenly slammed into his mind when he thought of the school years. Given all of the times Draco had seen him around idiot Gryffindors, it was skin-crawlingly possible. "You were in the right house, weren't you?" He didn't know if he could take it if he was so closely related to someone out of Slytherin.

“Of course I was,” Regulus responded firmly, crinkling his nose a little.

There was no need to get on like that. It was a perfectly legitimate question. Traitor seemed to be a catching epidemic within this particular branch, and more than once, Aunt Bella had been talking about hacking it to pieces to save them all the embarrassment.

"As you're rather fond of loitering about them," Draco drawled. "I assume there is a bathroom nearby?"

Regulus leveled an even expression. “There is one on this floor, just across the hall. You are welcome to use it.”

Draco excused himself, and walked out onto the landing. There were two other rooms on the landing, one belonging to the traitor, and the other to the man himself. There was a ridiculous warning about not entering the room, which made it promising. If there was anywhere he'd find a clue - if one actually was to be found here - it was likely in there. He looked around, but no one had followed him.

However, as soon as he touched the handle, there was a sharp zap that jolted through his body. He strangled a yelp, but it was still noisy enough that he worried he'd been heard. Quickly, he walked to the bathroom at the end of the hallway. The last thing he wanted to do was explain any of this to his mother. He'd already be letting one family member down by wasting his time here; he didn't want to make it another.

Regulus could not fully smother the wry flicker on his lips when he heard Draco’s telltale yelp from across the hallway, and the resulting burst of laughter from Tonks, who was still standing watch just outside. She had been the settled compromise - hidden by the charm, competent if the Death Eaters showed up, and more comfortable than the other Aurors in question - but Regulus had been nearly as anxious about her knocking over a table as he had been about the Malfoys’ presence alone. Impressively enough, she had only bumped into one of the drawing room chairs, and neither Narcissa nor her son had seemed to take much notice. With the Fidelius in place, Tonks’s laugh was for his ears only, but it was just as well, considering Narcissa's expression was already sour with the zap-and-yelp alone.
“What was that?” Narcissa asked, starting to shift a glance out the door, but he did not miss a beat in responding.

“It seems Draco did not heed the sign on my bedroom door and attempted to open it without permission.”

“He’s naturally inquisitive,” she said a little defensively.

“Then all he has to do is ask,” Regulus counterered, trying to keep the annoyance at bay, telling himself it was not entirely her fault that her child was exceptionally impolite. More than likely, it had been Lucius insisting that the Malfoys were the superior name between the two family backgrounds, because on that matter, Draco appeared to be surprisingly confused. Regulus could not remember the last time he had been forced to work this hard at keeping a mild and polite attitude. His first Order meeting might have actually been a simpler task, compared with a teenager who absolutely insisted on insulting and belittling every attempt at civil conversation - even the things they had in common. But Narcissa was important, and he knew he could not get away with very much on that front when she was present. He only wished that the same applied in the other direction. Draco did not seem concerned about his rude tone at all.

“Would you have said yes?” she asked, arching an eyebrow.

“I have nothing to hide in there. He can see it if he cares to ask,” Regulus responded, a little tightly, despite his intention to remain mild. “What matters is the permission, and the obvious intention to skulk about my home. If his only concern was the bathroom, then he would not be trying to open doors that are marked otherwise. This is just a house, Cissa, as it always was. He won't find anything because there is nothing to find.”

For a moment, it looked like her cheeks might have pinkened, but she steeled her composure again in a flash. “He wanted to explore our family’s ancestral home.”

“You cannot honestly expect me to believe he wasn’t implying insult with nearly every word that passed his lips, Cissa,” Regulus said, though he softened his tone. “Whatever he has been led to believe, I am not actually a complete fool. I just have a better grasp on my manners.”

(“Ouch,” he heard Tonks comment from the other side of the door, but he once again pretended as though he did not hear her.)

“I would prefer you didn’t insult my son, Regulus,” Narcissa said, her frown deepening.

“I would prefer he didn’t insult me,” Regulus said, his tone more earnest than sharp, as he mirrored her frown. “I’m honestly trying, but I’m not so lacking in dignity.”

“What are you expecting?” she asked, discomfort and defensiveness creeping in. “Honestly, he was being rather civil.”

“I’m expecting to be treated like a person instead of a bug beneath a hovering shoe,” Regulus said, twisting the ring on his finger. He could feel that Draco was still on the top landing, but he seemed further down the hall. Perhaps he was rifling through Sirius’s room instead. That would be a nasty surprise. Or perhaps he was trying to peek in the attic or down the stairs.

“Then come home,” she said, her words an echo that repeated often in his mind, but he shook his head with a sigh.

“I am home.”
“You know what I mean,” Narcissa said, wrinkling her nose a little and flicking her eyes toward the closed nursery door, though he suspected she was looking past it rather than at it. “Does that wretched stain live here too?”

“Do you honestly think Sirius would be caught dead in this house again? He loathes the place.”

“I was looking at the photographs in the drawing room and noticed a distinct lack of representation for Bella, so I was wondering,” she said, though Regulus suspected she had been wondering about it even before seeing the pictures. Sirius had been at the house in Iago, but by comparison, the argument could be made that the summer home was still a step up from this one, from his brother’s perspective.

A beat of silence passed as Regulus acknowledged to himself that his cousin legitimately was right about Sirius cleaning out the photos of Bella, but he could not very well admit as much, therefore:

“She did threaten to murder me.”

“After you attacked her, Regulus.”

“That is rather dramatic. I have already explained that I didn’t ‘attack’ her. I stunned her to defend my brother, who she was trying to kill,” he said, a little defensively.

“To defend a traitor,” she corrected.

“I’m feeling a little betrayed at the moment, but not by him.”

Her tone sharpened a little “What exactly is that supposed to mean?”

Immediately, Regulus reeled back the snap in his tone, letting out a slow huff as he shook his head. “And not by you, either… But I gave everything to this family - my entire childhood, my adolescence, my firmest devotion - and I don’t understand what it is I’m supposed to do to get some acknowledgement of that.”

“I know you did,” she said, expression pinching gently, “but you left.”

“I lived.” (I tried to make a difference.) “I care about you, Cissa, and however he might be acting right now, I care about Draco, too.” Firmly, he met her eyes, a clash of grey to grey. “If it would save your family - save your son - would you not consider it, even for a moment?”

Narcissa’s expression was starting to crack slightly when Regulus heard Tonks calling from the other side of the door: “He’s coming back this way!”

Within a few seconds, the door opened again. Regulus turned to acknowledge the entrance, grateful to avoid the subtle startle Narcissa experienced, though he felt a little bit guilty that she had not been given the same warning.

Draco looked between the two, perhaps caught between saying something of the mood in the room or making some excuse for going to the wrong door. Instead, he merely said to his mother, "We ought to take our leave, if you're ready."

Regulus caught his cousin's eye, trying to read her expression, and at once, he was overcome with the urge to say more to soften the jab of his words. All of the mounting tension of the visit had started to crumble, but where he had felt the stab of irritation just a moment before, he now felt the harrowing fear that she wouldn't come back.

Indeed, what Regulus wanted to do was to ask Draco to step outside of the room again so he and
Narcissa could finish talking, but instead, he held Narcissa’s gaze, and they both seemed to settle on a nod at the same time. It was Narcissa who then turned a bracing expression to her son, having regained her composure quite admirably, considering the reeling flips her mind had undoubtedly been doing within the safety of her head. He knew that reminding her about Draco’s danger was a cheap shot, but if nothing else could stir a reaction...

"I am ready," Narcissa said crisply, and to her credit, gave Regulus an acknowledging glance.

With a thin expression of his own, Regulus gestured toward the door to start their walk to the bottom. "I will see you out."

Draco nodded, then added, "Thank you for the tour. It was enlightening."

Regulus thought privately that it might be the closest thing to a polite comment Draco had made the whole time, but somehow, it still felt backhanded.

"The pleasure is all mine," Regulus said instead as they reached the stairs, descending flight after flight in a silence that only seemed to thicken with each landing they passed. He thanked them for coming when at last they reached the ground floor, but it was not until the door was securely shut behind them that he allowed the stiffness in his shoulders to fall, staring squarely at the carved slab of wood.

"Yikes," Tonks said from behind him. "Is this the part where I pretend like I wasn't here for that really uncomfortable experience?"

Sighing heavily, Regulus turned away from the front door and started for the staircase leading back up. "Thank you for not knocking over anything of noticeable consequence."

"You're welcome?" she said, a touch of hesitance in her voice as he swept up towards the next landing. "Hey, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Regulus responded, not feeling fine at all, but nothing sounded better than closing himself in the study, and Tonks seemed to catch the hint because she didn't follow up him right away.

With a door shut securely behind him just moments later, Regulus released a slower, more measured breath, then made his way to the bookshelves to pluck off the first thing that caught his eye. Interactions with Narcissa and Draco were a delicate, complicated dance, and he knew that he'd tripped; it was a waiting game to see if the step could be salvaged.

“I didn't expect to find you here.”

Spinning on his heel, Sirius was confronted with Tonks rather than some considerably less welcome intruder.

Truthfully, he'd been caught between not expecting company and expecting some very unwelcome and potentially furry company. After leaving Harry at the Burrow, much to Molly's delight, he'd gone over to Remus's. He was gone on another wild wolves mission, which worried Sirius more than he'd like, given the way some of the ferals behaved and the fact he couldn't just talk to him; but being here did alleviate some of the acidic feeling that had been sitting at the bottom of his stomach. It was a hodge-podge sort of place, and Sirius was half tempted to at least work on some of the woods before he caught himself. He and Remus no longer technically lived together; he probably would find it invasive.
Still, he had said it was alright to come back here when he'd mentioned half the things that had been left here. Sirius had managed to locate Harry's letters to him (he had not written to Remus, something he'd have to ask Harry about at some point and was undoubtedly a sore spot for Remus as well), along with the other object he had needed to pick up. While he had his own keys to their mutual flat from before everything, Remus had warned him that he'd warded those keys out. It had been admitted to in shame, but Sirius had brushed it off. If Remus could forgive him, then he surely owed him the same in return.

The appearance of Tonks was a bit of a surprise. Could it be he'd finally gotten over himself and actually talked to her? More to the point, wasn't Tonks meant to be at Grimmauld Place?

That was what he'd begrudgingly agreed to when the point had been raised two days ago at a quick meeting. The response had been an almost unanimous 'when hell froze over should Narcissa come here,' but even Sirius had to admit, refusing her would make it seem as if there was something to hide, and he had no guarantees he'd be hidden there for her or her batty sister. It had been Kingsley, ever the calm voice in these situations, who'd said they ought to let her see there was nothing to hide, but also look for alternative safe houses. It was meant to be an empty residence, and it was empty no longer. It was being treated as a home. It had been McGonagall - in place of Dumbledore who had flitted off who knows where - who said Sirius couldn't remain in the house to watch. Blowing his living space was bad enough, but it would also possibly clue them into Harry being there, and that was an unacceptable risk. Tonks, though potentially familiar, had no ties, even if she was seen. She also wasn't in the habit of looking the same, so it mitigated some of the risks.

(If she had managed to get through it without knocking something over, it'd be a minor miracle.)

“I thought you were at the house,” Sirius replied, levelly.

“Yeah, I was, but they've scarpered for now,” Tonks replied.

Sirius had been trying unsuccessfully to put that thought out of his mind too. “How'd it go?”

“Dead awkward,” Tonks said, with a shudder. “The miniature Malfoy was sour and judgemental, Regulus got into a blame game argument with Madame Malfoy, and her kid tried to open a door on the top landing that he shouldn't have.”

“He get shocked?” Sirius asked.

“Yeeeeeep.”

Sirius gave a bark of laughter. “You can't knock on a door marked do not enter if you're not willing to get your hands dirty.” Malfoys, as a rule, liked to behave as they were clean as a whistle and twice as smarmy.

Still, he didn't know if it made him feel better or worse that it'd gone badly. He'd suspected it would; if Narcissa was not willing to make concessions for her own sister, why did Regulus truly believe he would be different? Oh, he knew the answer, he still clung onto the deluded idea that they'd put him first even if he knew deep down they wouldn't. But it was painful. He didn't wish pain on him. Sirius would well remember the difficulties he’d had, and he couldn't stand most of them. Not for lack of something akin to love, if he was truly honest with himself, because it had still hurt. Regulus had hurt much more deeply than the rest, because Sirius had thought he'd known him better. Maybe neither of them had. Maybe they were just two stupid kids wrapped up in a lot of shit they didn't ask to be a part of, too close to really get a handle on it, let alone what the other person thought. Regulus had outright admitted to parts of it being a facade, and Sirius had no idea at the time. But if Regulus was going through that now, if he was only now understanding the cost,
Sirius didn't envy him it.

“She noticed about the photographs,” Tonks said. “But she thinks he removed them.”

“What photo-” Sirius stopped himself, remembering that he had indeed cleared a load of photographs last year. “Nah, he was pissed I removed them; they're in some bag in the attic. The fit he was having, you'd think I set them on fire and danced around them.”

“Cheers for that mental image,” Tonks gave a light chuckle.

“He did well, then?” Sirius knew this was a test as much as it was anything.

“He was fine, managed to dodge most of the more telling questions,” Tonks commented. “She got well emotional, though, when he started talking about how he'd had to die to keep living.”

_Understandable_, Sirius thought privately, but in no world would he ever admit to agreeing to anything Narcissa Malfoy had to say.

“It's cool you've worked things out that much,” Tonks said. “I can remember when you weren’t even talking.”

That threw Sirius for a loop. “What?”

“When they were talking about the Department of Mysteries,” (who wasn't, these days?) “he just said he had to defend his brother, and that it wasn't you that was acting like traitor.”

Sirius stilled at that. “He implied Narcissa was traitorous?” It was an idea Sirius had put forth a little, that considering Regulus had the tree and the only access to edit it, technically Narcissa and her barmy sister were the ones on the outs. He just didn't think he'd taken the comment to heart. He really had to be more careful around his brother. Regulus always listens and takes things in. He had to remember that.

“Not exactly,” Tonks said. “More like that he'd given his whole life to what she and people like her had wanted, and would have died if he'd stayed, yet they're still treating him like shit.”

It was true, but Sirius had definitely not expected him to say it aloud. Let alone to Narcissa. That backbone was getting out of control. Perhaps he was more hurt than Tonks had realised, and letting his emotions get the better of him. Not exactly unusual, in terms of blood family, but not something that happened to Regulus particularly often.

But Sirius had pushed him to Iago for almost exactly this reaction, hadn't he? Sure, he had considered that Narcissa would put on her big girl bloomers and put her own blood above societal expectation, given how close they had been, but he reminded himself that she had lost – no, let go of – a sibling before. There was a precedent. It was important to get the lay of the land, but it was maybe important that Regulus get a little hurt in return. It was awful, of course, and there was something in the back of his mind that sounded a lot like payback for doing it to him, but it wasn't the reason why it had to happen. Regulus had been maintaining he was still part of that society, and he wasn't. More and more, Sirius had become sure of this. He no longer gave the supposed virtues of it that he did as a child, nor did he particularly shut down if it was mentioned, as he would have a year ago; but something had shifted. He didn't know how aware of that Regulus was, but it was clear he would never again fit in with that society. Once you could see its cracks, you couldn't go back: Something Sirius himself knew intimately.

Harry himself was a crack, and Merlin save him, _they got on_. He may have created a monster, but the awkwardness of a year ago had faded, and now and then, something the other had said would
get quoted back through the other person, and he'd be caught between feeling glad and - if he was honest - surprised. He couldn't grasp what was so different about Harry - who, while a different person, was very much like his father - that made his brother not react with an instant scowl, like the mere mention of James did. This transgression alone would do enough to add to the cracks, because Society (big S) would treat him differently for it. The same things applied to other people too. Regulus had been swapping books with Remus (werewolf), he got into crazy house-elf discussions with Hermione (muggleborn), he'd been flirting with Emmeline along with the books (half-blood, also the weirdest polygamous relationship ever), he'd joined the Order (vigilantes), and he had, as he had said, defended his brother (traitor) and wasn't backtracking on it. If anything, he seemed to be gaining steam on the idea if he felt solid enough on it to defend that in front of Narcissa.

Tonks coughed, bringing him out of his mind, which had been going a thousand miles an hour.

“Sorry,” Sirius said, easily. “I'm just surprised.”

“How come?” Tonks asked.

*He's never defended me before.*

He didn't say that, but the thought hit him with an emotional wallop. He'd made excuses for him before, but defended? No. He thought of their interactions with the friends they had once shared (most of them dead, or monsters, or worse, cowards now), their family, their parents, and he remembered something clear as crystal about the night he left. It was a hard memory to re-live, so of course, he'd spent years going over it. *You're their child first, and my brother second.* Their parents were long gone, but their influence lived on in how Regulus controlled himself. At least, it usually did. It might have felt like a hollow victory to a better man, but Sirius didn't claim to be one of those, so it felt pretty damn great, thanks.

Was it simple age that had changed things? Because at the time, Regulus had thrown back the accusation that he put him second too, and now, this was true. Sirius had been open and honest about that. Harry would have to come first. Or was the difference that he liked Harry? Was it really that simple? Could he have dragged him into the carriage his first year, put down some ridiculously swotty things in front of he and Remus, and avoided a lot of the shit they went through?

“I don't know,” Sirius shrugged, which had some truth to it. He didn't know why it felt important. Just that it did. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“Watering Remus's plants,” Tonks replied, as if that was totally normal.

Maybe it was normal for them. Sirius had only had his freedom for less than two months, and of course, they had all interacted outside of Grimmauld Place. He still had to figure out his place in the Order again, in a more active way. Not just in the fight, but socially. It'd never been much of an issue before, but again, he felt the disconnect between the lost years - even with Remus there. Although it was better since Remus knew him well enough to look past it, he was painfully aware that people he had called his closest friends had spent twelve to fourteen years living their lives when he'd been stagnating or running. He had to get into better fighting shape, but while the novelty was still fresh, he also had to figure out what the hell he was going to do for the rest of his life. Even if it wasn't a long one.

“Any word from Remus?” Sirius said, trying to change his subject internally.

Tonks looked drawn. “Not yet. Soon though, yeah?”
“Hopefully,” Sirius nodded. Speaking of having no one to watch his back, Remus should be finding a way to check in and show he wasn't in danger, or a lack of wolfiness wouldn't prevent Sirius from going up there to get him back. Sirius had faced enough dramatics without Remus adding to them.

Naturally, when he returned to the house, Regulus was nowhere to be found. Sirius tried not to take that as a bad sign, even if the nerves kicked up and made him jumpy. No study, no library, and finally, when he was about to check his room, he saw the attic hatch was open. It took him a minute to climb up and poke his head through, but it seemed he had found his wayward younger brother.

"What are you doing up here?” Sirius said, by way of greeting.

Regulus looked up from where he sat cross-legged on the floor (which looked to be Scourgified around him, of course), and a ball of light was hanging above him and several open boxes, lighting up the dark and dusty space.

“Looking at photographs,” Regulus responded simply. A book was open on his lap - or maybe an album, if it was photographs. “What are you doing up here?”

"I was on the top floor and pulled myself in an upwardly direction. This is where I ended up.” Sirius was unsure if it was a good sign or not. If they happened to be the Bellatrix pictures- but no, those were framed. This was obviously an album. What the hell was in an album up here that would be sentimental enough to be kept, but not enough to be displayed in the rest of the museum? "Trying to find and destroy embarrassing ones to thwart the Vance quest?"

Regulus rolled his eyes. “No. You know as well as I do that the photographs she seeks legitimately do not exist… It has just been a very long time since I looked around up here. This one-” He tapped on the album in his lap- “-has pictures of our parents when they were little, which is, I suppose, something they did not want on the shelves. The bag with photos of you is up here too, though they are a little scattered. It might have been thrown.”

"I'm legitimately shocked they weren't just destroyed. They're terrible pictures.” It was true, he scowled in most of them. “I've got the only half decent one."

Regulus crinkled his nose but did not take further pause before tugging at the lip of a nearby box and adding, “But perhaps most surprisingly, I found this box, which seems to have photos and trinkets from when Phineas lived in this house. Not strange in itself, but there were a few people I didn't recognise.”

Sirius had to admit a small - miniscule in fact - measure of curiosity. The idea of Regulus not knowing the entire lineage by heart was a completely foreign concept, but some may be people who died when he was too young to remember. Sirius took a couple of crouched steps towards him, before kneeling down. "Let me have a look, then."

After setting aside the album in his lap, Regulus picked up a handful of small portraits from inside the box, though the frames appeared to have been removed at some point.

“She’s one of them.” He pointed to a young woman, maybe still a teenager, with her dark hair pulled up into neat plaits. There were two others in the portrait, around her age, looking severe. “The other two are Phineas and Elladora. They’re younger than most of the portraits around the house, but I’m confident that it’s them. As for him-” Regulus shifted to show one of a young man with a very affable expression. “-He is in several, too.” Uncomfortably, he added, “I was
wondering if they might be the two burn marks - there were two from around that time. A sister and a son, I suppose it would be...”

Sirius glanced over the two pictures. He didn't particularly recognise either, so it was very possible. The attic was a common banishment spot, then. He felt a bit funny about his own being shoved up here, but he supposed for posterity, they had to keep something. "It's possible. I know one of them pulled an Andromeda; got it out when I kept badgering everyone that Christmas before Mum lost her shit. It can't be Cedrella, 'cause say what you want about their allegiances, the Weasleys still have a pureblood lineage. If it's him, there might be some lucky kid out there with the name and none of the baggage."

Regulus nodded slowly, staring hard at the faces, as if further details might surface from sheer willpower. “Perhaps.”

Sirius had to wonder that, even in his panic, family was still the coping mechanism. "I'm sorry it didn't go well today,” he said. Then he added the more truthful, "Mostly sorry."

Regulus glanced over, then down again with a heavy sigh. “I believe Order-related suspicions were successfully avoided.”

"You know that's not what I meant," Sirius replied, flatly. As much as it could be fun to live in the land of denial, this was not the place for it. "While the continued safety of everyone is vital, hiding up here with a bunch of dead family photos for company doesn't scream 'we bonded and things are brilliant'."

Slanting his mouth downward, Regulus offered a small half-shrug without looking back up. An uncomfortable silenced stretch between them for a moment, and Regulus opened and closed his mouth twice before he at last spoke aloud:

“It is just...frustrating?” he said, though his tone could not seem to decide whether it was a statement or a question. “I’m trying to be civil.”

"Why?” Sirius scoffed, before leaning over to whisper. "There's no one else here but me. My opinion on Narcissa hasn't changed in thirty years, and I've seen that kid in action. Be as uncivil as you like, it's not going to be worse than what I think."

“I know,” Regulus admitted with a frown. "But just because I can doesn’t mean that I should, and complaining about them won’t make the situation any better - whether it’s said to them, or to anyone else.”

“That's stupid," Sirius said, shaking his head a little. "You're trying to break them out of doing what they should do, but imposing the same rules on yourself?" Didn't he remember what happened the last time they left things like that untalked of? It became a festering resentment based upon a total misunderstanding. "Besides, it might help. Going over it in your head is just going to lead you to the conclusion it was your fault it went badly."

Regulus did not look entirely convinced, but his sigh was more of a huff this time. “Narcissa’s son is just....exceptionally disrespectful, and it it’s exceptionally disappointing.”

"You get your hopes up when it was him wanting to go family history digging?" Sirius pressed. He was sure he knew the answer already, but it was a sad thought.

His brother’s face tightened a little. “The thought crossed my mind.”

This was going to be incredibly painful if he kept his heart on his sleeve like that. Where was that
stony ability to block people out now? But no, the more he considered that, the more it was just
him trying to seem exactly what he was supposed to seem rather than what he actually thought. No
need to backslide into that. On the bright side. Narcissa’s kid was a disrespectful brat, yes, but
there's been no sign he's sadistic. You can grow out of disrespectful brat. But would pointing that
out just give a false sense of hope?

"He's more of a Malfoy," Sirius settled on. "He's his father’s son, as you are yours."

Regulus’s frown deepened. “It was a little bit shocking, truthfully. He was rather condescending,
not only to me - which was irritating, but not altogether surprising - but towards the whole family. I
know he’s a Malfoy, but he’s on the tree, too.”

"To his mother?" Sirius asked.

“No.” Regulus shook his head. “The insults were just implication, but not well-hidden
implication.”

"It's not his house," Sirius said, not for an excuse but perhaps some explanation. "It's different for
you because it's your house on both sides, but did you ever hear any reverence for the Crabbe name
from Mum, or any of her siblings? It doesn't mean he's not rude. There was no need to be a prick
about it after specifically asking to come here, I grant you. Those of us who are pricks about it
have earned the right, and it gives us a bad name. It just means he was checking up on you, likely
not because of his mother, but her sister."

At that, Regulus’s face went a little stonier, but he fell silent for a moment.

"She probably thinks you're being difficult," Sirius said, switching back to Narcissa. "You've never
been so before, so it's an adjustment. You're not getting the traitor treatment from her, even if you
are from almost everyone else who judges people by that. She can acknowledge you, because you
don't want to be a Death Eater, but the mark of blood treachery hasn't really come up...aside from
my involvement in this, which you could have backed down about but haven't. By her measure,
you're making this harder for yourself. She can't see how much things have changed, even in the
last year. I can, and you still surprise me sometimes."

“I know,” Regulus said with a frown, though some of the sharpness had loosened in his face. “She
is aware of where I stand on you and the Death Eaters - has been for some time now - and the fact
that she is still hesitating seems like it ought to be a good sign… but I recognise the likelihood that
she is simply hoping I will snap out of it.” He shook his head. “I just don’t know if that makes it
more or less frustrating, in the end.”


“But without it, am I not left with no chance at all?” Regulus responded in equally quiet tones.

“Not a good chance, no.” Hoping Narcissa would come to her senses would be fruitless if she
couldn't see a real way out. “Things will change. We held the last major victory; they lost half of
their breakouts to Azkaban, and they’ve done nothing but throw murderous tantrums ever since.
We're on a more even keel. When a body count begins to rack up on that side - and it will,
especially with Moody coming out of retirement, the man does not piss about - it'll be easier to see
the consequences of either choice. Bellatrix's path may be that of murder and mayhem compared to
your port in the storm, but she is her sister. Letting go in that situation is never easy, until a line is
crossed that cannot be forgiven. Knowing Bella? She won't just cross it, but bloody dance across it
and expect praise for it.” He glanced back at him. “I'm grateful you've never put me in that
situation.”
Meeting his eyes for a flick, Regulus nodded. “I’m not interested in murder dances.”

“You haven't used the Crucius or Killing Curse on a person, you haven't targeted anyone I care about. The worst thing you've done is kill someone, and I'm not happy about it, but I know how easily it can happen, and you literally tried to give your life as penance. True remorse is...I can deal with it. We could have so easily killed someone running about with an uncontrolled werewolf. Someone innocent, not bloody Snape. I have no idea if any of my own hits in the war were lethal. " With a chill more from memory than reality, Sirius shuddered. "I could have killed you that night. If you want to talk truly unforgivable, it's trying to murder a sibling."

“You didn't know it was me,” Regulus said quietly, though his expression had pinched again.

"I meant Bellatrix, but thank you. Would blowing some other kid’s head off been better?" Actually, a little, but it seemed like that was probably not the right answer in this situation. "Perhaps not as unforgivable, but still a shitty thing to do. The whole hood and mask thing is idiotic, regardless. You're blocking your peripheral vision. There are better ways to disguise an identity, but does it get used? No, it's all this ceremonial bullshit, because Society loves ceremonial bullshit. I swear, if someone sat down and really thought about it, they'd realise they were being made fun of."

Regulus crinkled his nose but tipped his head in a little nod.

"I don't think I said thank you,” Sirius continued, after a quiet beat. "I know my manners are atrocious; they are a work of art to be as terrible as I've gotten them, but I usually remember to say thank you when my life gets saved.”

Glancing over, Regulus held his look for a moment before speaking. “The aftermath was very hectic.” A pause, and then: “You're my brother, and I have no tolerance for the prospect of your death, Bella or not. But I appreciate you saying it, all the same.”

"I know that,” Sirius said, and he did. It was just different to know Regulus was willing to actually say that in front of other people, especially people who disagree with his assessment. There was something important about it, even if he struggled to pinpoint what, and he wanted to acknowledge it, but since a punch to the arm would lead to an accusation of hurting him for no reason and a hug would do what Voldemort couldn't and kill him, he found himself struggling to relay gratitude when he couldn't fully explain why it felt important. "But you shut down when you don't want to talk about something, and you could do that about me, or you make excuses. But you did neither, even though it would have made things easier for you. I didn't expect that. I think you like throwing me for a loop.”

“Perhaps a little bit,” Regulus said with a little quirk of the mouth, but his expression remained sobered. “Yet for all the unpleasantness that comes from pressing such a point, it is a point that will benefit more from consistency, if ever it can be taken seriously. Withholding comment might make it easier to go back to an approximation of what it was, but I don’t want to go back to an approximation that dictates who am or am not allowed to speak to.”

"I'm the last person to ever tell you to give up power over your own life,” Sirius replied, with a small grin. "I don't think you could hack it anymore. It would drive you crazy to know a whole bunch of people are wrong about something that you're right about but not be able to tell them, or convince them otherwise. Even without the Death Eater part, you've gone too far from convention to ever be comfortable in it again. Isn't that why you're suddenly getting curious about the marks? You want to know if you think they actually deserved to be removed.”

Slowly, Regulus nodded, looking again at the box of old portraits and what must have been
belongings that never made it back to the disowned Blacks in question. "I always took it as fact that they must have; suffice to say I am a little less confident in that, at this point."

"It's always been at the discretion of whoever had it at the time." Sirius reached over to take out a couple of the old pictures; the people in them looking a little irate about being shoved about roughly, so they were definitely related to him. "Dorea married a Potter when they were getting loud about blood politics. Cedrella married a Weasley, and was removed. I think taking Uncle Alphard posthumously off was just petty. Even for Mum."

“It was a very tense subject. Or perhaps more accurately, a very tense non-subject,” Regulus said with a sigh, shaking his head.

"It was petty. He was only trying to help." Sirius insisted. "So there probably are several petty removals, but the further back you go, the harder it'd be to find the reasons. Oldest now would be, what, Callidora Longbottom?"

Regulus nodded. “Since speaking with Arthur and Neville, I have been trying to determine the least awkward way to initiate such a conversation with her. Thus far, I have exactly zero ideas that are free of awkwardness and discomfort, but it is a work in progress. Technically, I suppose I could also ask Phineas,” Regulus said, glancing down, as if to look at the landing below them.

"Voluntarily interact with Phineas." Sirius couldn't contain his shudder of distaste. "'Hey, what did your sister and kid get blasted off for?'"

“I don’t think he’s so bad,” Regulus commented. “It’s still less stressful than asking Great Aunt Callidora. He may be a portrait, but at least Phineas has been in this house my whole life.”

"Phineas has been in this house since for over a century." That was probably it, wasn't it? "You and your bloody antiques."

“Nonetheless, one cannot deny that he has more perspective that most on anything that has happened since the 1800s. Now that I think of it, he had an aunt or uncle who was disowned, too.” Regulus over a little to peer in the box again.

"It's an epidemic," Sirius huffed. "Is it any wonder the whole line shrunk and withered?"

To that, Regulus merely pressed his lips together

Sirius pressed on. "If you start tossing people aside over love or money, you're going to start running out of people. Or more pointedly, you're going to run out recorded people. Says a lot you get on better with Andromeda's kid than Narcissa's, though."

“The irony has not escaped me,” Regulus said with a sigh, shaking his head. “I have been trying.”

"Some kids are just pricks, no matter what." Sirius shrugged, adding, "Sometimes, they grow out of it. Sometimes, they become Potions Masters. But try just taking ownership of your own mistakes, rather than everyone’s? You left the door open; whatever happens now is not on you. It has to be his choice."

Regulus frowned a little as he looked over at his brother, then tipped his head in a little nod. “I know.

"Alright, I'm going down. I'm too damned old to sit in a cramped, dirty loft being morose about this family's stubborn, moody, and petty ideas. There's more fun ways to give myself a dead leg." Sirius reached over and patted his shoulder twice. "Don't stay up here too long. I know you like the relics,
but you’re not one. That reminds me, do you want to put the stuff Uncle Alphard gave me back where it’s meant to be? It’s in the basement at my flat."

Regulus looked over, then nodded. “If you don’t mind it.”

"I don't think he planned on losing it, just underestimated the level of snit." Sirius huffed. "So if you're okay with it, it's better off with you."

“I am.” Regulus had made a little face at the word 'snit,’ but his mouth was starting to quirk wryly as he shook his head. “It would take hypocrisy to an entirely new level if I were to be grumpy about him leaving you money, now - all things considered.”

"Hypocrisy isn't a big leap to jump to. I think all And's got is a painting, but you can rifle through and see what you want to keep. I think there's some pictures there, but probably some old stuff he got from people as well. I didn't really go through it at the time. There was a lot going on." Sirius pulled himself up and attempted to glare the roof into submission so he didn't wind up cracking his head on it. "Makes you wonder how much junk is stuck in storage rooms and attics all over the place."

“I must admit I have been wondering that very thing. I was thinking to check the other properties to see if there is anything else to be gleaned,” Regulus said, neatly returning a few of the paintings and photographs back to their respective boxes. “I suppose we shall see.”

"You might find something that belonged to Callidora or her sisters, and if so, you can have an excuse to go talk to her," Sirius commented.

Thoughtfully, Regulus nodded. “I’ll check Great Aunt Cass’s house first. They were similarly aged, I believe.”

“I think she would have told you age was merely an illusion,” Sirius wiggled his fingers theatrically at the words. “But you are right.”

As his mouth flicked up at the corner, Regulus nodded. “Too true.”

As if Regulus would ever argue being right about something. "Remember what I said about staying up here too long," Sirius said, instead of addressing it. His brother could hang out with the dead if he wanted to, though why he did want to was a mystery, given he didn't have a good history of the dead playing nice.

“I will.” Regulus reassured before turning his body a little to place a few more of the scattered belongings back in their appropriate boxes.

Everything back in its place, as always.

“Phineas?”

When Regulus poked his head into the nursery with two small paintings in hand, he saw that his great-great-grandfather had returned to the frame again, slumped with the appearance of sleep. The room was dim now, casting thick shadows as the sun sunk below the buildings outside the window, and Regulus had started to back into the hallway again when he heard a familiar drawl.

“How was your visit?” Phineas Nigellus said, straightening with ease, so Regulus supposed he had not been sleeping at all. “As nostalgic as you’d hoped?”
“Not exactly,” Regulus admitted with a frown. “Narcissa’s son didn’t have quite the appreciation for our family that I had hoped. He sneered at the lack of a signature on the tapestry, despite it going back twice as far as his own. He liked the artifacts, but not much else, I don’t think.”

“Blessed with his father’s peacock sense, then,” Phineas quipped. “How disappointing.”

“It is,” Regulus agreed, and it felt a little bit less like a betrayal when his great-great-grandfather had said it first. “Not that—”

“You don’t have to justify it,” Phineas cut him off in what would have sounded like a bored tone if not for the fact that Phineas’s manner was always like that. Gesturing at Regulus, he added, “What do you have over there?”

“I found these up in the attic,” Regulus answered, moving closer and holding up the small painting of what Regulus assumed to be Phineas Nigellus and his siblings. “I recognised you and Great Aunt Elladora, but not the third.”

“Ah.” The recognition was immediate and apparent as Phineas looked at the smaller painting, which Regulus had noticed was charged with movement but no sound - or rather, maybe they had all been silenced to keep the attic quiet. None of them had chattered at all. “That is my youngest sister, Iola. She married a muggle.”

Regulus nodded slightly. She was the one Sirius had been talking about, then. “Like Andromeda?”

“No, not a muggleborn,” Phineas groused with an emphatic sigh. “An actual muggle.”

“Oh,” Regulus said, unable to find any other words to put forth, but Phineas didn’t seem to notice.

“A boy from one of the houses on the row, as she told it. She was supposed to marry Corvus Lestrange, and if our parents could have locked her in her room until she had done so, they would have in an instant.” Phineas shook his head, wearing his typical expression of mild annoyance. “I should have done the same with my own.”

“Speaking of,” Regulus began, setting aside the first portrait to hold up the other.

“How many of these did you find?” Phineas huffed but answered anyway. “That one is my second-born. Phineas. Got the notion that muggles ought to have rights. I half expect he met Iola somehow, but she was gone before he was born, and he never would say. Foolish, the both of them, and so convinced they had the right of it. Wouldn't listen to a moment of reason.” Phineas eyed him shrewdly. “Why is your mouth open like that? You look like a guppy.”

Immediately pressing his lips to a line, Regulus shook his head, but he could not help the slightly mystified feeling. “I’m just surprised you are speaking of them so freely. The subject always makes everyone so tense.”

Phineas Nigellus, to the contrary, looked exceptionally unconcerned “It happened over a century ago, and we are down to you and your brother, now. No point in stewing.”

“But didn’t you burn your son off, too?” Regulus asked, though it sounded a little petulant when said aloud.

Phineas must have felt the same way, based on how he snorted. “I suppose everything we did a century ago is consistent with our current view?”

“Touche,” Regulus said uncomfortably.
“I still think they were both utterly foolish to throw away their lives the way they did, but they were not the first, nor the last.” Keenly, he eyed Regulus in a way that felt far too pointed. “A Black is a Black, when you get down to the end. Are there any more up your sleeve? My uncle, perhaps?”

Regulus’s expression lifted immediately with curiosity. “No, but would you tell me about him, too?”

“Maybe another day. I’m far too tired,” Phineas Nigellus drawled with a yawn that seemed too exaggerated to be real.

“Then why did you-” Regulus began, but his great-great-grandfather had already walked out of the frame, maybe to the portrait at Hogwarts.

With a heavy sigh, Regulus picked up the first painting again, situating then in his arms and wondering if he ought to put them up again. Phineas Nigellus would never ask, but he couldn’t help but wonder if it was due to a lingering disappointment or due to the plaguing feeling that you could never really ask again for what you had once rejected. Even in the past few minutes, the room had darkened a little more, but even without the sun, Regulus had already burned their faces into his mind. Iola and Phineas - the latter, named for a father who has cast him out. Or perhaps the younger Phineas had cast himself out.

He thought of Narcissa’s reticence then, and of Sirius, supposing that the distinction was not always different.

Chapter End Notes

Wrote a little one-shot - history is carved in the grains of this wood - about the little mention of tiny desks. Not of strict plot importance, but has some Black family character/dynamic development, for those interested in the generations before!
It was a little after eight in the morning when there was a sudden, unwarranted flash of light from
the top landing. Sirius startled awake, on his feet before he could register what spell it was and
scrambling to get his wand off the cluttered bedside table. Who had come into the house casting?
Was it Narcissa's kid, or the woman herself? Did she tell someone? He doubted Bellatrix; the spell
seemed to do nothing at all.

Sirius then registered the laughter - no, giggles. That wasn't anyone he was related to at all, and
squinting through sleepy eyes, Sirius realised it was instead Emmeline with what he was pretty
sure was one of Sturgis's contraptions. No, it was a camera.

That was a camera flash.

"What the hell, Vance?" Sirius said, before lunging himself towards her.

Vance took off at a speed that was extremely improbable in her heels, taking two steps at a time as
she bolted down the stairs. Sirius had been running up and down these stairs a lot longer than she
had, so she was doomed regardless, but he was still annoyed she managed to keep a lead. On the
second floor landing, he didn't register Harry down on the landing below until Emmeline called
"Good morning, Harry!" as she sped past him. Sirius merely tipped a salute at his godson, who
looked on flummoxed. Naturally, their stomping about had awoken his mother, but in the time it
took Emmeline to run down the full length of the ground floor staircase, Sirius managed to climb
over the bannisters and drop down.

Emmeline came to stop but mimed an inability to listen due to his dearest mother’s screeching. He
took her by the shoulder, giving her a shove towards the dining room and following her in.
However, for the second time this morning, he was forced to double-take. There was a large, blue
structure that had taken over the dining room. Was this some sort of Harry-shaped joke that he
didn't get?

"What is that?" Sirius asked.

"A tent," Emmeline said, as it was perfectly normal to have a tent overtaking the grand dining
room.

Sirius tapped the side of the camera, which hung limply in her hands. "Have you taken leave of
your mind this morning?"

"My mind doesn't allow leave," Emmeline replied. "It's an every day of the week vocation, being
me."

Sirius gave up on trying to argue semantics. "How does that translate to a tent in the dining room?"

"It was the least used room," Emmeline replied. "I wanted to make sure I could get it up."

Which didn't particularly shed light on it either. "Why?"

"I'm going camping," Emmeline shrugged.

"Is that a good idea?" Weren't there still a whole bunch of people attempting to murder her? It
wouldn't be the most safe way of going around.
"We'll be fine," Emmeline waved him off.

"We?"

"Regulus and I are going camping," Emmeline said, in a tone that you would explain something obvious to a young child. "You knew that."

"I know you joked about it!" Sirius said. "He's not an outdoors boy, Emmeline. He's very much an indoors boy. Ironically, the only way to get the stick out of his arse about the messiness of the great outdoors is to shove him on a broom."

"We'll be fine, thank you," Emmeline replied, nonchalant.

"None of this explains why you're taking pictures of me in my sleep," Sirius groused. "That's creepy."

Emmeline shot him a look. "Like being able to watch what everyone is doing every minute on a map?"

"We didn’t go about looking in people’s bedrooms,” Sirius muttered.

"The door was open," Emmeline protested. "I needed to test the camera."

"Which brings us to why you have what looks like a Podmore-special." Sirius waved his hand in front of the camera.

"I asked Sturgis for his Vishis player for the trip, but it's broken," Emmeline finally explained. "He lent me his extended length camera until he could get it fixed."

Sirius shook his head. "A what player?"

"Vishis," Emmeline replied. "Or is it Vishus? It really needs a vowel, the inventor must have been Welsh. It's the muggle pensieve thing."

Finally, something clicked in Sirius's brain. "The video camera? Benjy's old one?"

"Yes, that!" Emmeline declared. "He was quite sure it was working last week, but it's Sturgis; last week could be 1980."

Sirius ran his hand over his face, all thoughts of going back to sleep banished by the adrenaline. "Don’t you have work?"

“It’s barely eight,” Emmeline replied, evenly. “I don’t need to leave yet.”

Sirius swore; he’d been expecting to sleep until at least after ten. His headache from the night before was bound to come back. Still, he supposed if he must be awake at such a terrible time, and Harry was obviously up as well, then he should take the time to go to the flat today. He had been putting it off for a while, but Harry would be back at school soon, and he had some random things from James and Lily - notes, postcards, even a jumper - that may mean something more to Harry than to him.

They meant a lot to him too, but he had some of his memories. More so than he had a year ago. Harry barely had that.

He had also told Regulus he could root about in Alphard’s stuff in the basement too, so he could probably kill two things with one stone. He doubted he’d ever live there again; it wasn’t suitable
for Harry, though now he thought about it, probably still had some of his toddler things in it. He tried to ignore the pang in his chest for that toddler. He liked the teenager; he was bright, good-hearted, and loyal. Pretty funny, when he was in his right mind for it. It was just harder sometimes to equate the toddler to the teenager, especially as the teenager got closer to an adult.

Sirius shook the thought way. He had to appreciate what he had, not what had ripped from him due to his own stupidity, the Ministry, and traitors he won’t dignify with attention in this moment. He now had Remus’s keys; it was early enough they could get a look around, and the two of them had bugged off a few times by themselves before. At least he’d be around this time.

Number Twenty-One B Delancey Street was just off the high street in Camden. It was a square, faded red building with two steps in front of it. Sirius had loved it the moment he’d seen it; he’d bought it within the week of viewing it in April and moved in with Remus at the end of the school year. They had all done a little decorating, which meant it had always been half-done because they’d always ended up mucking about instead of doing much of anything else. From the outside, it didn’t look that different. There was still the little buzzy thing you had to use to get to the stairs to the top floor; the windows were still placed in a haphazard fashion; the green gate at the side was still patchy and rusted; and although the Arlington Road sign no longer said Arselington Road, he could almost pretend the last twenty years had evaporated like a smoke.

Not completely. Twenty years ago, Harry was still the mere concept of Elvendork, and Regulus wouldn't be caught dead here. Sirius was a little disappointed he'd done the paperwork to revive himself, or that would have been an excellent joke.

"Don't put your foot on the second step," Sirius warned. James had originally mucked about with it, so even if Remus had not, it'd never been exactly right. One of his neighbours sprouting spontaneous hair growth all over her body had been funny at the time, but he'd seen what James's hair did to combs, brushes, and all manner of hair products. Harry wouldn't thank him.

Regulus lifted his brow. “Does it creak, or did you do something to it?”

Sirius gave him a pointed look. "Why do so many of our interactions begin with the words 'did you do something to it'?

“Because history strongly supports such a conclusion,” Regulus asserted with an unapologetic tone as he passed over the step in question.

Though Sirius could definitely argue the point, he supposed he wasn't entirely wrong about the precedent. "Why would I do something to my own step?" he grumbled, as he heard a snort from Harry. He was trailing behind a little. "Alright, Harry?"

"Yeah," Harry said, ducking into the hallway. "It's not what I thought."

"Because it's muggle or because it's not gigantic?" Sirius asked.

Harry looked embarrassed for a flickering moment. "Both, to be honest."

"I've had muggle neighbours my whole life. I merely never met them." Not even because they were muggle, though that played a part in it for a while. Mostly because they were old, and he didn't see the point. "I also don't require that much space. I'm not a fan of clutter, and I don't keep things for no reason."

Sirius let the door shut behind him and heard the mechanism lock. He still wasn't exactly sure how that worked, but it's not as if he knew anyone he could reasonably ask. Ted, maybe, but he always
seemed like such an adult. Even if he was one himself, Ted was more of an adult. Arguably, most people were more of an adult, but he wasn't going to give ammunition by asking how the weird buzzy thing worked. Lily had promised to tell him; it could wait for the day she perhaps could.

"Need to grab the basement key. Door's not locked," Sirius said, mostly because it never had been. They'd relied on spellwork, their own wards, and passcodes. The old lock had never worked properly anyway.

Stepping inside, there was still haphazard and fairly mismatched shoes in the corner. Some looked a little more trampled, likely by the Aurors. The wallpaper was patterned brown and cream, as he'd remembered it. A lot more faded. Despite the wallpaper, the decor was - much to the pride of his eighteen-year-old self - nothing much at all like Number Twelve. He could see the mismatched dining set that Remus had partially bought from home, and chairs they'd seemed to simply accumulate. The walls did have photos on them, but they were stuck up with spellotape and mixed in with old band posters and a cross-stitch that Dorcas Meadowes had once given him with the words F*CK DEATH EATERS upon it.

He slipped into the second door of the hall, and found himself in his own room. Not as he'd left it; the space had clearly been upturned. It might take him a bit longer than anticipated to find the keys. "Give me a sec," he called back out. After a beat, he remembered; he actually did have his wand on him. "Accio keys!"

Which meant that several keys suddenly came flying from the mess and forced Sirius to duck as they embedded themselves in the bedroom and hall walls. "Duck," he said, lamely.

Regulus quirked an eyebrow, glancing first at the keys, then to Sirius. "Your timing is a little off."

"My ducking is a little off," Sirius answered, before pulling out a couple of the embedded keys. Where had all of these keys come from? He didn't own that much. His motorcycle keys had gone to Hagrid, though he might have had a spare. He might have had the keys to James's, but he couldn't recall ever having used a key. "I have no idea what half of these are."

"That looks like it comes from Hogwarts," Harry said, picking up one of the old, larger keys.

He was right. It did. Had he nicked one of the keys from Hogwarts and never given them back? Borrowed - or 'borrowed' them from Hagrid? Then, with a sudden startled laugh, he remembered where this particular key had come from. "Well-spotted," he said. "It's the broom closet down at the Quidditch pitch."

"Is that something you get as captain?" Harry asked.

"Probably," Sirius replied.

"It is," Regulus confirmed in turn.

"You would know." Sirius gestured the key in the direction of his brother pointedly. "I was never a captain. I'm not the overachiever around here. This is from a very long, very involved story about us lot - not your mum, she'd gone home since she had a lick of sense - and some accidental trespassing. Really probably not a repeatable story just yet."

"Why?" Harry said, stiffly.

He thought it was something bad. Ever since that pensieve, he'd noticed a little bit more trouble when talking about his father's school escapades. Sirius could at least stomp that down. "In part, because it was just a really stupid thing to do, even if it was funny at the time. Mostly because what
I know of this story is second hand. It involves one of the first times we ever met the Order, two Death Eaters, ill-advised apparition, splinters in uncomfortable places, and - from what I've been told - Dumbledore's brother chasing Remus and your father out of the Hog’s Head in his nightie. I wasn't there; I lost them with a floo mishap." Come to think of it, whose bathtub was that he'd ended up waking up in? "I think I ended up at Vance and McKinnon's, but since they went through flats every five minutes back then, I'm not sure."

On second thought, it's not like any of that sounded good to tell someone's child. But it didn't involve stringing anyone up, even if they did deserve it, so it was probably alright.

Harry handed him the key. "Why were they having to move a lot?"

"Because Marlene McKinnon never met a fight she could back down from." As if Sirius could claim he did. "Tiny, but terrifying. Think of your Ginny, for example."

"She's not-" To his surprise, he watched as Harry turned pink for a moment right to his ears. "I mean, she's just - she's Ginny."

Oh, for the love of Merlin, not another one. Was this his penance, now? He was doomed to spend his life dealing with flustering crushes and teenage yearning? At least this was from an actual teenager.

Pointing to his own room, Sirius abruptly changed the subject. "I know there's a bunch of stuff of theirs under the desk; I can see Quidditch stuff from here. We better go and see what mess the Aurors have made of Uncle Alphard's things. I'm sending Tonks in to eat the faces off them if they've damaged anything worth keeping. You coming?"

Regulus tipped his head in a slightly uncomfortable nod and stepped forward to move down to the basement.

"Do I need to check your mouth?" Sirius said, bouncing down the stairs again, and this time, taking a utility door to another stair set. "I appreciate all the tongue-biting, but if there's blood, you should probably rinse it out."

“My mouth is fine,” Regulus said stiffly as he stepped onto the second stair set after him.

“I'd keep all decisions on that to yourself until you see what mess the Ministry's made in here,” Sirius replied, feeling the telltale cardboard at his feet. There definitely was a wider walkway around the boxes than he'd had, and he doubted he left them stacked that way. “I really need to check what might've been impounded, but I'd need to check the old inventory sheet. He wasn't Grandfather, but he might've had a few things they found a bit iffy.”

“I suspect it does not take much for them to deem it questionable,” Regulus remarked, shaking his head.

“That's the Ministry for you.” Sirius pivoted around some old horoscopes that probably contained something of value. “Have you decided what you're telling them? Whatever you say about your own circumstances, it's going to end up implicating others in the process. How you say it will decide who you screw.”

“I know,” Regulus said uncomfortably, expression pinching with an awkward pause. "Fortunately, most of the people I interacted with have already implicated themselves at this point."

“It's not the implicated people that I thought of.” Sirius replied, trying to ignore the uncomfortable expression. “But you will only have absolution from what you admit to, and no matter what, you
will end up having to lie. You're part of the Ravenclaw Rebellion these days, and figuring out what
you want to say with Dedalus and what you're willing to say will help get through the parts you'll
have to lie through.”

Regulus nodded slowly. “I know. I’m not going to sell out the Order.”

“I knew that!” Sirius rolled his eyes. “I'm talking about if they go looking at the other houses and
try to get you on a technicality of you owning a restricted object, or deciding who knew what and
when if you don't fancy putting someone like Narcissa in the firing line for obstruction or lying.”

With a furrowed brow, Regulus nodded, mouth pressing to a quiet line again.

Why did he always think that Sirius would believe the worst of him? Regulus had worked hard to
prove himself, and he wasn't even enjoying the benefits of it. “It's going to be hard enough on you
with Bellatrix,” Sirius added, quietly.

To that, Regulus let out a heavy sigh and nodded. “I'm not looking forward to it.”

An understatement of the century. "You keeping Crouch's kid out of it?"

“I suppose it depends on what they ask,” Regulus responded with a frown. “I don't want to drag
Barty into it unnecessarily, but I suppose his involvement is a bit obvious at this point. I don't want
to trap myself with a superfluous lie of omission either.”

"It's not as if it'll make much of a difference at this point," Sirius commented. "You can't give
Bellatrix another life sentence; she's already got one. Another is just greedy."

“I don't think she would see it that way,” Regulus said wryly, “but I know it doesn't make much
difference for them from a legal standpoint.”

"No decent person enjoys being a snitch," Sirius acknowledged. He pulled out a drawer and
coughed against the sudden, musty smell it let loose. "But it's what it looks like from the outside. A
kid getting involved with something half their family was before freaking out when they realise it's
a murder and torture club, and no, their parents or grandparents didn't lift a finger to stop it because
they all figured either he was such a little adult he didn't need the help or his lovely cousin and
friends would take care of him. It doesn't hurt your case. It's just not flattering."

Regulus sighed, scrunching up his nose. “There is not much in the way of flattering explanations.”

Finally, one of the boxes had a set of photographs. Set was probably overstating it; it looked more
like individual ones all shoved in there and forgotten about. "Better than Death Eater," Sirius said,
before tapping the side of the cabinet. "I think this is the personal things. The rest is just
accumulations."

Regulus nodded, approaching the cabinet. For a moment, he eyed one of the brightly coloured
masks (couldn’t say the country of origin) laying on a smaller cabinet to the side, then turned his
attention to the box of seemingly random photographs. Picking up a few, Regulus fanned them in
his fingers to look at the three at once: One of Alphard on what looked to be a ferry, and two baby
photographs. One of the photographs was of the two of them, taken the Christmas that Uncle
Alphard got his camera, but the other definitely wasn’t.

“It looks like this one is from before Uncle Cygnus was born,” Regulus said in reference to what
was probably a picture of their mum (looking characteristically unpleasant) and Alphard when they
were little.
"They didn't change much." Not entirely true, as while their mother had always been a tall and imposing woman, there was barely two years between her brother and herself. Not unlike them, Sirius thought, with some discomfort. "You're right; he was born around Uncle Alphard's first year at school. Maybe second. This is definitely before that. I've never been so thankful our own had no interest in each other like that. I think I'd have thrown up again if we'd ended up with another one when I was thirteen." Sirius tapped the picture where his toddler self was, red-faced and clearly upset, looked on the verge of doing exactly that. Even the thought was enough to induce a shudder. They were not affectionate people, their parents, not even really with each other, and it made it a little more palatable that they just treated everyone like that. It wasn't personal. "You were just destined to be the baby. A bit terrifying to think the baby before you is Tonks's - and Draco Malfoy's - grandpa now."

“A loose definition of 'baby,' as ever. I think everyone is a little bit uncomfortable with that fact,” Regulus said, letting the photos drop back into the box and picking up a few others. “Or at least those who are aware of it. I would expect that Draco is not.”

"Baby is the youngest of a generation." Sirius waved his wand at Regulus pointedly. "Like you. But how would he know? He's his own generation, far as everyone's concerned. Tonks may be his cousin, but she's not family, and thus, doesn't count. No wonder he's spoiled."

“I’m aware of the circumstance,” Regulus said without looking up from the photographs, having picked up a small stack to flip through. “But that didn’t make it less strange to realise he doesn’t know you were a Gryffindor. Not that I would expect it to come up when you are historically a Non-Topic, but it is still jarring.”

"Damnatio memoriae, the fate of traitors. Nothing to do with me is meant to be passed down." Sirius gave a dry huff. It was supposed to be a punishment, but the tree hadn't mattered to him for a long time when he'd been sixteen. There might have been other things he missed, but the idea of his life being just another part of a lineage wasn't one of them. It was freeing. "There's not many sentimental people, and even our own parents were not chatty. It doesn't bother me. I wouldn't know much about our parents’, their generation, or our grandparents’ school days beyond a few stray details." Sirius tapped the photo splayed in the box. "They probably hadn't finished school when this was taken. I can't remember if it was just Andromeda's parents who got married when they were still in school."

“No - they were the second in a row, if you look at the birth years,” Regulus replied.

"One doesn't always mean the other," Sirius replied. "But your ability to instantly know all familial facts never ceases to impress and slightly disturb me."

“I suppose my memory suits it,” Regulus said with a half-shrug, flipping to the next photograph.

"You alright down here if I leave you to nose about?" Sirius asked, before glancing upward. "Harry's been alone long enough that trouble is probably about to start."

“I’m fine, yes,” Regulus said, spared him a glance for good measure. “Go ahead.”

Sirius nodded. “I'll get you when we’re heading out.”

It felt different to walk in alone. Not truly alone, for he could hear Harry in the bedroom and knew logically that Regulus could probably spend a week down there looking over anything before he'd notice time passing, but alone enough to process how it looked. Though he’d had many places to call home, Sirius had only created one space for himself his entire life. It looked like the first home
of two teenage boys, which is what it had been, but it had been crystalised and ransacked through. Some bits still had dust, and the corners were still cobwebbed, but most things had been scuffed up and rifled through as if it hadn't been anyone's home at all. Sirius spared a thought to Remus living through this happening and felt, not for the first time today, that he wanted him to be here.

It was harder still to glance into his own room, and at a fleeting look, Harry sitting on the floor was almost indistinguishable from his father. His life of late had consisted of nothing but moments like this; of exploring Number Twelve in a way he hadn't since he was a small child, though this time he was trailing behind to see what his brother was doing rather than the other way around. He'd gone to the same beaches he'd spent his childhood on, gone and sat at Andromeda's and let her fuss and dury in the way she had always done for as long as he'd known her, and here, he could feel it again. The ghost of what used to be.

In the present, he watched Harry run his fingers under his glasses in the same way that James had always done when he was upset about something, but trying to hold it together. What he'd been feeling at the time had always been written all over his face, no matter what, but while Harry had the same subtlety (or there lack of), Sirius rarely saw him outright emotional about anything.

“What have you got there?” Sirius asked quietly.

Harry looked up, a deer caught in headlights. “It's, er. It's a letter.”

“It does resemble one, yes.” Sirius took a few steps in and almost tripped over an old pair of shoes. That could've been Aurors, but honestly, it could have just been him. He wasn't the most organised bloke at the best of times.

“My mum wrote to you.” Harry made a motion as if to hand him the letter, but then stopped himself.

“Sometimes,” Sirius agreed, with no small amount of confusion. “Is that so strange? You write to Ron and Hermione all the time.”

“No,” Harry shook his head, and the frustration of what he was trying to communicate was more than evident. “It's just reading her writing, it's different from a photograph. It's almost as if I can hear her talking, like I know what she sounded like when she – I mean, I do know, but only a little, and I'm not explaining this right...”

“It's more personal.” Sirius managed to give him a weak smile. “Anyone can look at a photograph, but not everyone will hear her voice in the words she writes.”

Harry looked at him and took a long shuddering breath. “She wrote about me.”

“Of course she did.” Sirius did smile this time, genuinely. “Why would she not?”

It didn't appear Harry had much of an answer for that one. “We had a cat?” he said, suddenly.

“Yes,” Sirius said. “James had a feral stray set up shop when he was a kid, called uh, Patch. No, second name was Patch.”

“The cat had a surname?” Harry asked.

“First name Cabbage, often referred to as Mr Patch unless you wanted your hair clawed out.” Sirius caught the look Harry was giving him and bristled. “Don't look at me like I'm the crazy one here. It was a well known fact that James was not allowed to name things anymore. We all learned this the hard way. You were nearly called Elvendork, till your mum got him to use his grandfather
instead."

"I'm named after my dad's grandfather?" Harry interjected.

"You didn't know that?" Sirius asked. That was hardly unusual. Sirius was named after his as well, and Regulus after both their grandfather's younger brother and their grandfather himself. Recycling names had its upsides.

Harry shook his head. "So there was another Harry Potter?"

"I think his real name was Henry," Sirius mused, as he tried to think back to the spare conversations he'd had with James and his father. "He was on the Wizengamot, so there should be a picture down there. Ask Arthur, or whoever you're with, to run you past the offices."

Harry nodded, but seemingly more to himself this time. He lifted the letter, now finally showing Sirius the contents, if not handing it over. "It was about my first birthday."

Sirius swallowed thickly. "I have a picture of that, but it's at Grimmauld Place. Tonks swiped it for me. If you see any indentations around the furniture around here, that's probably why."

"You bought me my first broom," Harry said, as if this was something important. "You didn't tell me that."

"Didn't I?" His memory wasn't what it used to be. "You loved flying, even then. It used to be the bike. I had this motorcycle I used to love; it was a 50's model, and it was beautiful. I used to take you on that a lot when you were a baby, and you always squealed the place down. A broom seemed like a safe bet. It's why I wanted to see you fly."

Harry smiled at that. "You could've saved yourself a lot of trouble if you'd just talked to me then. Or any time you tried to get into the dorm, actually."

Sirius gave a bark laughter. "And you'd have believed me, would you?"

"I'd have heard you out," Harry said, with such an earnestness that Sirius could believe him. James would probably have heard him out too, now he thought about it.

"As hard as it's been," Sirius said, tentatively, "I'm glad I didn't. I wasn't in my right mind, if I ever am, and I don't like the thought of you getting caught in the way of that. I'm sorry to tell you that I got my temper from my mother, and I don't handle it well when I'm upset. I don't handle the anniversary well. It's why I'm not going to the memorial."

"Memorial?"

"You don't know about the memorial?"

Harry made a noise of frustration. "I told you, no one tells me anything!"

"When did you tell me that?" Sirius asked.

"A few weeks ago," Harry said, distractedly. "What memorial?"

Sirius took a breath. "There's one in Godric's Hollow, where your dad was from. Every year, on November 1st. Remus goes, so do Emmeline and McGonagall. If you want to go, you – could ask her." Even the thought of going anywhere within a hundred yards of that house made his stomach drop and his blood run cold. But if it was something Harry wanted, he'd try. He owed him that. It
was half his fault that he was clinging onto a letter from his mother instead of the real thing.

For a long moment, Harry said nothing. Then he pointed to the letter. “There’s a page missing. Do you remember the end of it?”

Sirius looked at the run off sentence about Dumbledore and shook his head. “Probably about what a little toerag he was he was young. I heard he was wild as a teenager.”

“It’s hard to imagine Dumbledore as a teenager,” Harry said.

“It always throws me off to see him in old pictures,” Sirius agreed. “He was ginger at one point.”

Harry laughed, “Really?”

Sirius nodded, “Regulus has been pulling this, that, and the other out of the attic lately. There's some group school photographs from Mum's and Dad's days, back in the ’30s. He was a bit ginger in them.”

“Was that when Voldemort was at school?” Harry asked.

“Year below my dearest mother,” Sirius said. “It’s almost understandable. Six years around my mum would turn into anyone into a homicidal maniac.”

The following day, the grand family tour continued its path to the coast of Wales once again, this time landing where their Great Aunt Cassiopeia had once lived - more recently, where Sirius and the kids had resided during their stay at Porth Iago.

Curiosity had prickled, at the time, but Regulus had not carved out the time on those lazy days, merely dancing around the idea of distant burn marks. The past was a steep step into deep waters, and the dams had since burst open, pushing forth a certain momentum of discovery. He had visited Great Aunt Lycoris’s house, the day before, but there had been nothing out of the ordinary from what he would expect from the Family. Stepping through those doors had triggered a rush of memory - from his escape from the inferi cave, rather than anything as a child - but he’d stuffed the thoughts down swiftly. A variety of interesting objects and (acknowledge) family photographs were spread throughout the house, but there had been nothing to build upon his search. Now, Regulus once again found himself in a dusty attic with aging wood slanting around him, surrounded by a different great aunt’s eccentricities and memories alike.

Just a few minutes before, Sirius had abandoned the rifling in favour of searching the house for anything he might have left during their stay. Regulus suspected it was actually just an excuse to get out of the attic, but he appreciated that his brother had come at all, so he did not comment on the suspicion, instead continuing to gather up any related curiosities that seemed worth bringing back to the house.

As it turned out, there were no pictures in the attic, so he soon turned his search to the house itself. It was terribly invasive, poking in a dead person’s room - and when Sirius had passed by in the hallway, his brother had not spared the opportunity to make a rude remark about ‘taking his time looking through an old lady's drawers’). Even so, for all the invasiveness, it was in the personal spaces that he found success. Aunt Cass had kept her photographs in a bedside drawer. Family did not visit much, at least not within Regulus’s own conscious memory, and he supposed her cats were unlikely to be harsh on the judgement front. Even Regulus had kept the photos of Sirius hidden in his room, angry as he was. He wondered a little about how Aunt Cass might have felt, but the mix of his own memory stung swift and sudden, tugging at the train of thought.
The metal tin of photographs was no longer than his hand, easy enough to carry, so Regulus had it clasped securely as he wandered back down to the ground floor where he found Sirius still milling around.

Sirius eyed the tin, perhaps curious or perhaps simply wanting to leave. "You done, or are you going to faff about a bit more?"

“You don’t have to stay, you know,” Regulus said dryly, though he could not drum up too much annoyance when Sirius had stayed longer than Regulus might have expected at the start. This house was probably only interesting to him when Harry was in it. “I can manage some old houses by myself, if you’re ready to leave.”

Sirius looked back at towards the door, clearly restless but also torn between staying and not. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other once, twice, and then seemed to decide. "Are you sure?"

Regulus tipped his head. “You can go on. I’ll see you back at the house.”

“Yeah, alright.” Sirius was barely out the door before the crack of apparition sounded.

Breathing out a sigh, Regulus looked at the small tin in his hand, then strode out the front door and turned around to look at his great aunt’s mismatched house, struck immediately with the smell of the coast. They had not often visited her as children; even with all those summers here in Iago, it was Aunt Cassiopeia who had come to them, rather than them making frequent trips to her eccentric house of quirks and cats. He wondered if that bothered her or if she might have liked it better that way.

With a crack, he apparated to the house he had spent so many summers in, growing up - the one he had gone back to, just this summer. He searched its attic, too, but he was unsurprised to find it lacking in additional insight. This was not the place to hide embarrassments, nor points of shame and despair. Traitors weren’t meant to mix in Iago - not even the memory of them. He would not have thought their ancestral home was either, but it was not the first aspect of his investigation that struck him as confusing or difficult to swallow, and there was nothing to do but tuck away the information and try to make the most of it.

By the time Regulus had left the second family home of the day, the sun was hovering over the horizon, not yet touching the water, but it had already cast its amber glow over the slow-rolling waves. He could feel his hands clamming up just a little at just the thought of the settling night. All over again, he was frustrated that he couldn’t go sit on the beach like a properly adjusted person - if he could call his youth ‘properly adjusted.’ He probably couldn’t.

Steeling himself, Regulus instead set off on the path he’d walked with Emmeline, just a month and change before. Society had not wanted her here; Society had not wanted a certain few people in his tin of photographs, either. He could feel himself slipping into such an ostracised category, if this summer was anything to go by, and that made his hands feel even clammier - but he knew he couldn’t go back. Didn’t even want to, really, at least not in full, but months into the process, that still did not seem to matter much to anyone.

The rocky ledges rose on each side of the path, and after a short stroll, he found a nice nook of sorts that opened up to the grassy knolls and hills on the other side. He apparated up without ceremony, but he did not dedicate much time to the Welsh scenery before opening the small tin. There was a little boy in many of the pictures, and judging by the ages of Aunt Cassiopeia and his grandfather Pollux, that was probably the burnmark within their branch of the family. It was strange, how she had only kept photographs of him when he was little - the ones of her cousins...
stretched into adolescence, which helped a great deal with their recognisability. As Sirius had speculated in passing, Great Aunt Callidora had some photographs in the stash, too, of her and Charis and what must have been Cedrella - Arthur Weasley’s mother. How normal, it all looked - a far cry from the blackened char on the tapestry, and further still from the complete erasure from all conversation. There was no information notated on any of the photographs, but he supposed Aunt Cass wasn’t intending for them up to be found.

For some time, all Regulus could hear was a subtle breeze and the faint sounds of waves breaking along the beach, but it was the sound of loosened rocks that caught his attention first - loosened rocks, a blast, and the sudden sensation of falling as that blast knocked the ledge out from under him. All at once, the world was whirring stones of brown and grey, jutting out with sharp jabs that he couldn’t quite grasp. He hit the ground before he could fumble out his wand. His knees and legs felt like they were shattering out from under him with a blinding white pain that caught his arms next, then knocked out his breath out of his chest as he tipped over in a tumble. The debris was sharp and grainy beneath his hands - his whole arms, both of them, felt a bit like they were vibrating, but it was his legs that were searing with even the tiniest shift.

Everything felt like dirt and agony, but when a photo of the little boy landed by his hand, he remembered the tin up at the top. In a haze, that tin felt like the most important thing, and after pulling out his wand - thanking his lucky stars it had not snapped in the fall - Regulus cast a silent summoning spell for photos and tin alike, more because he still couldn’t breathe properly than anything else. The descending cloud of pictures, as well as their container, zipped towards him. He was closing them inside and slumping against the rocky wall when he heard a voice.

“I should have gotten a better angle to spare the ledge,” came the dryly mocking tone. “But I suppose this is fitting too. Playing in the dirt does get you dirty.”

Trying to pull his mind into focus and ignore the pulsing pain, Regulus narrowed his eyes towards the voice and saw a Death Eater in full garb, standing there in the Iago pathway like it was perfectly normal. Perhaps it was more normal than Regulus liked to openly let on, but he really hated the sudden twist of panic in his chest. It hurt to grasp his wand, but it would hurt a lot more to get blasted to bits, and he did not particularly want to give whoever it was the benefit of the doubt by assuming it had been meant as a joke.

“That was incredibly rude,” Regulus muttered, biting back a hiss as he shifted his weight off of his legs. Wand still in hand, he barely waved a shield charm in time to stop the follow up curse, and his mind was reeling, but not in a particularly helpful way.

With another swish of his wand, Regulus knocked the Death Eater back into the rocks just as a blast of fire connected with his arm, catching the sleeve. Immediately, he felt the searing pain and smelled the burn of flames catching his skin, but a rapid Aguamenti stopped it from spreading beyond the sleeve.

A follow up shot from the Death Eater was already on the way, and Regulus cast another shield charm just in time to block. Shooting a blasting curse at the rocks above the Death Eater dropped a stream of debris; this accomplished little in the way of harm, but it seemed to distract the assailant enough to follow up with a petrification spell. With frustration, Regulus saw the spell miss - his poor grip at play, perhaps - but he didn’t waste any time thinking about it further. The Death Eater, whoever he was, could be seen fumbling for the wand he had dropped, and Regulus took that extra window of time to shove the tin under his arm and apparate back to London.

Appearing in the street in front of his house was not a risk Regulus typically favoured - one never knew when a muggle might be looking - but even a shift of his legs was blinding, and he refused to
drag himself from the shroud of trees in the park just across. He was visible for no more than a few seconds, appearing just outside the bounds of the charm, then shifting inside with a concentrated attempt to ignore the splitting pain.

When he reached the front of the house, Regulus collapsed against it with a shaky, steadying breath. Part of him wanted to apparate straight to his room to avoid a measure of humiliation, but it was difficult to concentrate, and he was probably pushing it, apparating even once without splinching. He could not have said how long he sat there (no more than a few minutes, though it felt like much longer), but when his breathing had calmed to something less frantic, he waved his wand again to make the serpent knocker on the door clunk its three rapid raps - then rested his head back against the house with a sigh.

There was a knock at the door. As a rule, no one knocked the door of the Order Headquarters. Most people who knew the Headquarters were there simply walked in, and then made their presence known. It happened on occasion with meetings, when someone was known to be coming, but as far as Emmeline was aware, no one was scheduled to be coming there who'd knock. She wondered if she ought to go and find the resident house-elf, though perhaps she was the reason he had not materialised. He certainly didn't seem to like appearing around her.

The only real options then were to either open the door and have it look extremely peculiar if it was someone not on the ward, as no one would see her, or go find the house-elf. She supposed she could just ignore it, but it seemed a little rude. So would opening the door and getting stabbed. Why did her manners often conflict with her vigilantism? She lost more houses that way.

Bounding up the stairs, Emmeline did not find a house-elf, but she did find Sirius. "I thought you'd gone out," she asked.

Draped over the lounger in what could only be described as a casually dramatic fashion, Sirius shrugged. "I did, but going through an old lady's drawers has never been my idea of fun."

A blatant lie, given the continual desire to get something from McGonagall's private quarters at school. "The door knocked."

Sirius sat up. "What do you mean, the door knocked?"

"I don't mean that I think it did it by itself," Emmeline replied. "I mean someone knocked the door, and I don't know of many occasions where knocking would happen."

Sirius twisted himself back into a sitting position. "Since Death Eaters don't knock, that means it's either Andromeda looking for me or Regulus, or Narcissa Malfoy." He stood up, and went over to one of the windows to the front of the place. She hadn't considered doing that. She hadn't actually been sure that would work.

It was entirely unexpected for him to just bolt out the door. Not in general - Sirius had always been a bit of a jumping bean and rarely stopped to explain himself, but wouldn't some form of communication be so pleasant? Uncommunicative pains in her backside, the lot of them, at times.

"Well, which is it?" Oh, there goes that bloody portrait again. It was so easy to forget about when it was quiet in the house.

As she got to the bottom of the stairs, Sirius opened the door and there was a sudden crack of apparition. Some of the ridiculous dramatics in this place were enough to make her want to tear her own hair out. He couldn't have gone far. Surely, opening the door didn't mean you could just
apparate out. Did it?

"Vance!"

No, just right back where he was. With a heavy sigh, she started back up the stairs. She turned back into the drawing room, and her stomach dropped. There was Regulus, looking considerably worse for wear on the same lounger. He wasn't looking particularly happy about it, either.

Emmeline hurried over. "What in the hell happened?"

For a moment, it looked as though Regulus - pale as a sheet - was going to rub at his temple, but he did so for only a second before looking at the scuffs on his palms and lowering them. After flicking a glance over at her, he let out a slow breath and leaned his head back. "Experienced a bit of conflict, I suppose one could say."

"I see your talent for the understatement continues to thrive." Emmeline grabbed a pillow from one of the other chairs and tapped his shoulder lightly. "Head up."

"Not too bloody. Keep him out of trouble for a minute," Sirius moved to stand up. "I'm going to go find that useless elf and find out where the pain potions are. I'm not calling him in here; he'll wail the place down, and Mum's already got that job well in hand."

"I think you ought to call Hestia to be safe," Emmeline replied. "I've seen nightgowns with more colour to them. Where is it worst?"

"Legs - fell from a ledge," Regulus said, holding his face neutral, save for a shaky wince. "Most of the rest will likely do fine with a salve, I should think."

"Fell, or got pushed?" Sirius pressed.

"Is this helping?" Emmeline pushed at the air near him, being unable to reach. "I don't want to risk healing it in case the bone shattered, and no one should be subjected to your healing attempts. Hestia, salve, painkillers, go."

For a moment, Sirius dithered. However, a good strong glare always produced excellent results when you were right in the situation.

"Painkillers will need to wait for Hestia, or they may mask something wrong." Emmeline took a quick glance over him. "Salve should be fine, though. Do you want a drink? You look ghastly."

"I'm fine," Regulus responded, pinching his eyes closed for a moment.

"I have the most horrendous feeling you could be bleeding to death and say the same thing," Emmeline said. She conjured a flannel nonetheless. "Let's see those hands. There's probably some grit in there. Do you know who did this? We should try and make sure the right Auror gets it if we're calling them."

Regulus held out a hand - the right one, first - and frowned. "I'm not sure. The Death Eater was an adult man, from what I could tell; but I didn't recognise the voice or mask, so it wasn't one of the Lestranges. Anyone else I might have recognised is dead or already in prison - or in Severus's case, on our side."

"The game has changed," Emmeline agreed quietly. "There's very little blood, aside from where you've obviously tried to shield yourself." She turned his hand over, making sure there was no glass or anything in it. "That usually means old pureblood - they will kill, but they do feel strongly
against large spills of pure blood, so it's never messy. I think Sirius has been one of the few exceptions to ever be bled badly, but he will taunt. Other hand?"

For a beat, Regulus was staring hard at the ceiling. His right hand had retracted, but the left - the one with what looked like tattered burns - hesitated before he held it out.

Concerned, Emmeline touched it lightly. “Do you think it might be broken?”

“It is possible, but I'm not certain if it's a full break. I was able to grip with my wand hand, but not well. I have not attempted to use my left to the same extent,” he responded in a quiet, measured tone. “Moving it is painful, but that is not exactly unique to my arms at the moment.”

"If you want to play Healer, you're going to need an outfit." From behind her, Emmeline heard the telltale bustle of Hestia Jones and her (extremely) magic bag. "You should probably have dinner first, too. People will talk."

Her words were light, but there wasn't much tease in them. She was in job mode, which Emmeline could well understand. "He had an altercation involving a Death Eater and a ledge. At least one leg is probably a nasty break."

"Okay then." Hestia pulled out some cloth and a few potions bottles. She turned to Regulus now. "Do you want me to shoo the hovering people, or you okay with me doing this here?"

“Here is probably fine,” Regulus responded. His eyes had closed again with a subtle pinch as he shifted.

"Can you tell me where the worst of it's coming from?" Hestia said, moving around to the end of the chaise and moving to take his shoes off. "Did you hit your head at any point?"

“No, managed to break the fall before my head could hit,” he responded, letting out a huff as he opened his eyes again. “I do have a headache, but more from the jolt than any serious impact. My legs got the worst of it.”

"Can you wiggle your toes, or is it too painful?" Hestia prompted.

He paused for a beat, scrunched his face slightly, then shook his head.

"I think the amateur is on the mark, then. I'm going to want a better look, make sure I can't see the bone through the skin before I start working, so you're going to have to disrobe enough that I can see. Arms too - I don't want to start and realise I've got more pieces to work with than I expected and have them heal wrong." Hestia dropped her voice to a slightly conspiratorial whisper. "That offer to shoo still remains."

Face reddening a little, he muttered, “Shooing would be better.”

Hestia nodded. "I'm an excellent shooer, best in my department." She suddenly clasped her hands together. "Right! Sirius, you can go down and inform your mother this is a quiet area. Afterwards, we're going to need a change of clothes, loose and comfortable. Emme, these are particularly disgusting pain potions, so we're going to need some of your continental hot chocolate, cream, the works. It's also better not on an empty stomach, so I think biscuits will not be optional."

"That's not subtle," Emmeline said.

"Let's leave something for the wedding night, shall we?" Hestia replied. "Go on, hurry up. Let's not leave one of our own pain, we're supposed to be the good guys here.”
Emmeline pressed her lips into a thin line, "Yell if you need anything?"

With a hint of embarrassment still creeping through his expression, Regulus nodded in response and looked up at the ceiling again, letting out a heavy huff.

With some reluctance, Emmeline cleared the room. She had thought to ask Sirius about what Regulus had even been doing, but out in the hallway, it would be hard to hear over the noise of Walburga Black, the one-woman screaming show. Sirius made an indicator towards going downstairs, and they broke formation as he went to the usual wrestling show while Emmeline headed down to the kitchens.

It took a few deep breaths for her to move on to doing anything at all, let alone the rich, liquid chocolate that had been requested. Her heart was still somewhere around her throat, beating too fast for her liking with the feeling of worry; and the frustrating thing was that she knew she'd feel like that. This was why she wasn't sure she wanted to even attempt to focus their relationship in a non-platonic way, because he was sitting there, a martyr in the making ('fine', he says, with shattered legs, totally fine), and this was another worry she'd be introducing to her already worrisome and hectic life. But...perhaps it didn't matter. Would she feel less for someone simply because the relationship was platonic? If Sturgis or Dedalus had come in the same fashion, would it have hurt any less? Feelings, by and large, were complicated, annoying and persistent, but they were at least consistent. She would care, regardless. She did care regardless.

There wasn't the right sort of chocolate to melt for the right kind of drink, but she hoped she had added enough cream that it wouldn't matter. She hadn't the slightest clue whether Regulus had a sweet tooth or not, but hot chocolate was something she had promised him before, and he'd been amenable.

When she arrived back upstairs, Hestia was coming out of the door and closing it after. "Getting changed," she explained, though she looked a little troubled. Emmeline was about to ask if there was something more seriously wrong, but she shook her head. "We'll talk later. He should stay off that for a day, take it easy for a couple more. Salve three times a day, and don't ingest it."

"Ingest it?" Who would ingest a salve?

"You'd be surprised." Hestia poked her tongue out theatrically but moved along. "I'll check in tomorrow."

Emmeline nodded. She waited until Hestia had gone from sight, counted another minute or so, before knocking as loudly as she felt able without risk of more screaming.

“Come in,” came the muffled reply.

Shoving her wand into her hair, Emmeline shifted the tray to one hand and opened the door. "Tea service?" she laughed. "Well, actually, grossly over-sweet chocolate service."

Regulus had been staring at the ceiling, and there was still a bit of a distant look on his face when he looked over at her, but the hint of a smile was starting to tug at the corner. "Hopefully she was right about it masking the potion’s aftertaste; apparently, it was not an overstatement."

"I'll do it occasionally for Remus with wolfsbane. If it helps that, you'll be fine. That stuff is stomach churning." Emmeline pulled a table up and set down some of the silverware carefully.

"How are your hands?"

“Not terrible,” he responded, looking down at them for a brief moment, then turned his attention
back to her. “They started feeling stiff once I’d settled, but the potion’s already helping.”

Emmeline smoothed down her dress so she could sit down onto the floor properly. She really hoped they’d gotten everything weird out of the carpets. "What were you doing?"

“Looking at the photographs I found at our Great Aunt Cassiopeia’s house - the one where Sirius stayed with the kids this summer, in Iago,” Regulus said with a little frown. “I should have looked then, but I wasn’t quite ready to pull at those threads, I suppose.”

"I thought the photograph quest was mine," Emmeline commented. She flicked her wand to begin pouring the viscous liquid into the ridiculously fancy cups. "What was it you had to prepare for?"

“On the tapestry - the burn marks,” Regulus began. “I’d been wondering about them, so I started looking for people I don’t recognise. Surprisingly enough, Phineas was actually rather obliging when I asked after the ones around him, but it’s probably best to keep that between us. I don’t think he fancies being viewed as too cooperative.”

"I rarely have the pleasure," Emmeline replied, dryly. "You haven't broken into the Ministry for their census records, nor Hogwarts for their student lists, so I suppose you haven't gone completely mad with it. What is it you're looking for, in the photographs?"

“Nothing in particular - anything that comes of it,” Regulus said, taking the cup for a slow slip as his eyes flicked around the immediate area. When the cup lowered again, he added, “I think Sirius left the photographs outside.”

As if anything he ever did qualified as ‘nothing in particular’. "Would you like me to get them?" Emmeline asked.

He turned his glance over. “If you don’t mind.”

"I'm here to help." Oh, well, that didn't sound ridiculous at all. If she was going to start getting flustered, this was going to make life unbearable. One small mercy was that the tin remained on the inside step, so it had hardly been a chore to leave, grab it, and bring it up.

"My gran has a tin like that," she said, as soon as she set the retrieved tin down beside him.

“Thank you for bringing it up.” He tipped his head at the tin, eyes lingering for a moment before he turned them back to her. “Do you know what your gran keeps in hers?” he asked, taking another small sip of the hot chocolate.

"The last I saw? Sewing supplies. She's crafty. I'm sorry to tell you that I'm not at all." Emmeline put her hand on the tin, and then tapped it lightly. "May I see?"

He nodded, mouth flicking with a little smile. “Of course. I don’t know if they will hold as much interest to you, but you are welcome to have a look.”

“I'd consider myself an expert in your family photography.” Emmeline had gone through an impressive amount of staunch, serious pictures in her quest for something she could determine an embarrassing picture. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

“Probably,” he answered, pulling off the lid and fitting it neatly underneath. “I think Arthur’s mother is in a few of them - with her sisters.” He thumbed a few photos aside until he came to one with three young women, two with dark hair and the third with blonde hair that stuck out amongst the sea of brunettes in the tin. “I don’t know for certain yet, but it seems likely.”
“Is nothing labelled?” Or were they removed? Emmeline had to admit that as yet, she was still unfamiliar with the nuances of disownment. 

“I cannot say for certain. Labeling has been inconsistent. Whatever the original state was, I don’t think Aunt Cass wanted to erase them, or she wouldn’t have kept the photos in her room,” Regulus said, staring hard at the small pile.

It just seemed so sad. It was different to what she'd expected, but even to Emmeline, she had to know not everyone would be furious and ban the people they once loved, or at least were blood relatives of, from their sight. "I realise this is a serious conversation, and you are a little bit medicated, so you can tell me this isn't the moment if you like." It was only fair, as it could be construed as taking advantage. "But it seems to me like, despite their removal from an unofficial, if very historic, document and a dismissive public face, most of the people on that list of burn marks seemed to have people who loved and missed them. Is that not considered a valid choice? Does one action really speak for everyone?"

“That’s a complicated question,” Regulus began, breathing out a heavy sigh and tapping the photo lightly against the lip of the tin. “It does speak for everyone; but it doesn’t necessarily represent everyone.” A brief pause, and then: “You asked what I was looking for, and I suppose that is part of it.”

"What you represent?" Emmeline asked. "Or if anyone else didn't have quite the same desire to slash and burn their bridges?"

“Both, I suppose,” he said with a small, tight smile as he let the photo drop back into the tin. “It all felt very… certain - and final - back then.”

"Everything does when you're young, and it all feels so very out of your control." Not so for Emmeline herself, though she had seen it with others. If anything, the reverse was true for her own childhood. It was all within her control then, and everything had become so uncertain. "I don't know if I can understand what it is that can cause a break of that magnitude within a family, especially when it seems to make people angry and miserable. I know there must be some boundaries, given the fanaticism and murder threats, but I really don't envy the job. Besides the formality, these girls look happy together. It's difficult to imagine that not too long later, they wouldn't be part of each others’ lives, get to know each others’ children, grandchildren, for no reason other than her husband believed in the rights of those who don't have magic. It’s quite tragic, in its own way."

“It is,” he agreed with a frown. “For all that time, I did not feel sorry for them because it seemed they'd done it on purpose… and I did not think it bothered anyone else in the family because it only seemed to make people angry if it came up at all. Anytime I was upset about Sirius, I felt as if I was committing some terrible betrayal.” Again, he looked up at the ceiling with a heavy sigh. “The irony is terribly depressing.”

"It is. I can't believe that all of these people woke up one morning and decided that they didn't want to be a part of their family anymore. There's always more to the story. Given your age at the time, it's not a surprise the complexities were lost on you.” Ever the problem of dragging children into it, and now it was happening all over again. She had not joined the Order with the knowledge that she could end some child's life because they were driving themselves to an impossible ideal. "I can see why you want to know their stories. It gives them back a certain measure of the immortality that you get from that tapestry, to have their stories known by what's left of their family. It's how you keep people alive when they're gone, with their words, their pictures, and their hot chocolate recipes."
Turning his eyes to her again, Regulus looked at her for a quiet moment, then nodded. “That is it, exactly…” Pulling over the tin so it was nestled next to him on the lounger, he seemed to busy himself with separating them into two piles. “There was nothing that scared me more than getting erased and forgotten. I don't want to forget them either.”

“That's nothing you have to fear now, is it?” Emmeline said, quietly. "In fact, I believe you've seemingly already survived such an ordeal as being without your given name, and you're still you at the end of it. If the worry is that you are somehow easily erased, that's ridiculously dramatic, which I do expect from you, but also quite foolish.”

She took a glance to the doorway, given the discretion at which this secret was unveiled. However, there was something in his demeanor that made it seem like that 'was' afraid was very much an 'is' afraid, and she could set that straight at the very least. "Let’s look at this logically. You are the first person to walk away from the Death Eaters and survive it. The first to uncover the secret of that bastardised immortality. You chose to join the Order of the Phoenix, and to protected those who needed it. You have simply accomplished too much, and been too integral to be at risk of being forgotten. If it's something more personal, a worry of family, or of...love, of that being forgotten, then I'd like to point you to the fact that you very much do have that. It's smaller, more complicated, and different in form than what it perhaps once was, but not something that can be yanked away at a moment’s notice, for the good and the bad. I don't say it as an insult to the memories of these people, but rather to draw your attention to the fact you can't suffer their fate, and though you can't change it, you can, I have no idea, write a book or something someday. You have a slightly terrifying, passionate, varied, and intense family history full of very unique people. It'd be fascinating.”

He thumbed at the photos for a silent beat, his expression pulled to a thoughtful focus. “That would be some book.” He looked over at her, then, and when his mouth flickered at the corner, it reached his eyes, too, despite the twinge of sadness lingering. He picked up a photo from one of the piles - a little boy, maybe five years. “There are yet more holes to fill.”

"Not for now. For now, you're resting," Emmeline reminded him as she raised her cup. "Are you one of these people who are difficult if they're ill or injured?"

Regulus tipped his head. “I suppose it depends on how you define ‘difficult’.”

Not a terribly good sign. "Do you argue about the need for rest, resist rest, do explicitly the opposite of what the Healer has told you, and stop taking potions before you're supposed to because even though there's still pain, you want to be a bit of a martyr about it?"

“Only when it’s important,” he settled. “With that being said, there are more meaningful things to martyr oneself for than broken legs, so I will make an effort to comply with the given instructions. Encroachment though it might be, at least it is only a few days.”

"Find a good book, and be a gentleman of leisure with it,” Emmeline replied, approvingly.

“I do love a good book.” Regulus smiled again, meeting her eyes as he took another sip of his hot chocolate. “Do you have any recommendations that you would like to put forth?"

“Fictional or factual?” Emmeline asked. Most of her reading these days involved buying books and saying she’d get around to reading them, then delving into textbooks and old works instead to look for Order-related work. “Or muggle, which is usually a mix of both. Or perhaps totally factual, and no one’s thought to corroborate it magically.”

“Lupin once said something of the sort, about the mix...” he said, setting down the cup again with
a soft clink. “I’ve no significant preference at the moment. I was investigating additional wards and protective spells, but it’s probably best I keep the serious casting until after the potions have run their course.”

"Remus would know; you should see some of the werewolf books. Perhaps something a bit less serious," Emmeline suggested, the hypocrite that she was. "Bawdrip's got one about spells that were invented when they were looking to try and invent something else. It gives me hope one day Experimental Charms will have a reason for existing that isn't turning half of Archival Administration into large, gooseberry shapes."

His mouth tugged up into a little smile. “Bawdrip, it is, then.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Warning for discussion of child abuse/neglect (focused in the Reg&Callidora and Reg&Sirus scenes, if you find it upsetting to the point of thinking you might want to skip those sections - no major plot missed).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

With a brood of Weasleys expected to descend upon the Order headquarters, it was of no surprise to hear a massive commotion on Friday morning. However, when Emmeline managed to emerge long enough to track down the noise, she was met with a different yet altogether welcome surprise. Standing on the second floor landing was Remus Lupin, looking somewhat shabbier and skinnier than usual, but also quite content chatting with Sirius, who was extraordinarily animated for this time of the day. She did a little calculating in her head: two days since the last full, moon. A little more scratched up as well, she imagined, though he had always hidden that aspect well before wolfsbane.

“Good morning,” Emmeline said, by way of greeting.

Remus turned around to face her with a large, if tired, smile. “Still here, then?”

“Trying to find a good magical place in London without worrying about having it burnt down is every bit as annoying as I recalled,” Emmeline replied, taking the few requisite steps down to give him a quick, one-armed hug. “Is this a visit, or are you done?”

“Done for now.” Something he looked very relieved about. “I may have to return later, but the resource is currently exhausted.”

“It’s not the only one,” Sirius said. He gave Remus a poke to the shoulder. “You should grab some sleep before the kids get here.”

“I’m fine,” Remus yawned. No one should ever put him or Regulus in a position to be gravely injured. They would both insist they were fine until one or the other drops dead first. “A long soak would not go amiss.”

“You know where the bathrooms are,” Sirius replied.

“I do, but I got accosted outside of it before I could.” He didn’t seem as if he minded too much, though.

“Alright, fine.” Sirius held up his hands. “I should make sure Harry’s up before everyone gets here.”

“I think I’ll invest in some coffee,” Emmeline said, leaving the two still talking on the landing as if they hadn’t both decided they should be doing something else.

As the drawing room door was still ajar, she poked her head in to confirm her suspicions. “If that’s not you relaxing-studying rather than study-studying, should I be chiding you?”
Regulus met her eyes with the hint of a smile, then held up the book in question to reveal that he was nearly to the end of *Weaving Wards and Other Protective Spells*. “Guilty - but in my defense, I read Bawdrip yesterday.”

"I see drastic measures need to be taken," Emmeline said. She wanted to seem stern but knew the smile threatening her was probably messing with any attempt to devote to her scowl. "I wasn't planning on going until my birthday, if only to run away from a truly terrible 'surprise' party that's sure to occur, but I'm happy to adjust my schedule. Do you still want to attempt to camp with me?"

“I do,” Regulus confirmed with a little nod, letting the book settle on his lap again. “Everything seems to be going as planned as far as recovery goes, so that should not be a concern. What day would be best?”

Emmeline brightened for the second time that morning. "I was thinking during the week, as it would be less crowded. I did a little research, and the best option without a large body of water required to be near is a forest in the Scottish highlands. You can see the swirl of galaxies without the need of anything; you just look up, and this time of year, you can often see the Northern Lights, which would be lovely."

“Lovely, indeed,” he agreed with a smile. “I trust it will live up to the months of suspense.”

"Oh, I haven't even started suspense yet. You just wait." Emmeline looked back out into the hallway, wondering if that was Remus coming out already or the shuffling grunt of a half-asleep teenager. Or it could also be Harry. "That's Remus back, if you didn't hear him. I'm going to guess he used the floo or is more adept at entering quietly than most."

“I've found that he typically is,” Regulus said approvingly. “It has been a while. Sirius is pleased, no doubt.”

"Quite excitable for the morning," Emmeline agreed. "Though I know I had no way of knowing about the whole animagi business, I'm a little disappointed in myself for not noticing. In retrospect, he does act a little my old neighbours Yorkshire terrier whenever someone or something new enters the place.”

“I expect you took the news better than I did,” Regulus said wryly, shaking his head.

"I'd take that bet," Emmeline replied. She couldn't help the sudden wince when she thought about Peter. He had to have been involved with Marlene’s death; the timing was too circumstantial, and it was her home and her entire family. It was enough to make her stomach turn. "The revelation had the secondary side-effect of realising I'd likely been attending memorials and sending cards to the person responsible for my dearest friends’ murders, let alone Lily or James or everyone's life that got torn asunder for a peace that couldn't last. I did not take that well."

Pressing his lips to a thin line, Regulus nodded. “It came as a surprise to me; I can only imagine what a shock it must have been to all of you.”

"Everyone except Kingsley. It was the information he'd been missing." Emmeline sighed wholeheartedly. Had it really been over a year since that? "I feel much the same these days. If people are going go around doing things that put them on my mortal enemy list, I'd like it to be accurate. Don’t you?"

Regulus nodded, mouth set with certainty. “That is my preference, as well. Vengeance is much more difficult when you don’t know who to direct it towards.”
"Perhaps one day, when we're not about to be overrun by teenagers, we can compare notes," Emmeline said. "I wouldn't be surprised by duplicate names."

"Neither would I, these days," Regulus responded with a dry huff. "That time is coming up, soon enough."

"Doubtless that Remus's return will help ease some of the concerns about Sunday morning, though. Tonks said she'd keep an eye on the train," Emmeline replied.

"That ought to help - in both cases." Regulus nodded thoughtfully. "It's a potentially vulnerable time, knowing that Harry will certainly be there."

"It’s a Ministry escort," Emmeline said, with a huff of laughter. "I find the automobiles a little claustrophobic."

"I suppose I’m not missing out on much, then," came his dry response, mouth quirking a little.

"I fully expect Sturgis to drag you into one of them at some point," Emmeline said, dismissively. "You can’t do worse than Mr. Bones - Edgar, he started screeching about combustible engines and infernal contraptions. It was quite safe. It used to be Fabian Prewett would test Sturgis and Gideon’s work. Oh, and Sturgis has promised he’ll give me that pensieve camera when he’s done some tests, so when he does, you can grill him as to how it all works. I haven’t the foggiest. I just want some pictures of you camping for posterity."

"How am I supposed to vehemently deny I’ve gone on a camping trip if there are pictures?" he asked with a subtle (but no less dramatic) sweep of his hand.

"Two steps ahead of you there." Emmeline smiled. "If I were more akin to villainy, this is where I would be introducing a maniacal laugh."

"A quiet demeanor does not fool me. I’m inclined to believe the maniacal laugh is merely implied," he quipped back.

Emmeline put her finger to her lips. "Do not blow my cover."

"Should the photographs be undignified, I can promise you no such thing."

Regulus was propped on the drawing room lounger later that morning, a pair of crutches leaned against the side; yet instead of using them, he had his wand in hand, swishing books back and forth from the nearest bookshelf; he had been doing so for the past few minutes, but he could not settle on the entertainment for this last stretch of recovery. Helpful though the crutches were, he did not much like the indignity of hobbling, and he was relieved that each passing day took him closer to moving about freely. Tomorrow, he ought to be rid of them, but he didn’t want to give anyone an excuse to gripe at him for not following ‘the healer’s instructions’ when magic suited just as well. He’d done very little in the past few days, which was normally a blessing. Finding a quiet space to read was one of the great joys in life, but something about being restricted to it damaged some of the fun in it.

The pain was lessening - and with it, the potion dosages - though he was starting to feel the stiffness and occasional sharp twinges as his dull haze was whittled away. Hestia had checked in briefly, albeit a bit uncomfortably, he thought. She’d seen the Mark on his arm as she tended the burn blistering his arm. Regulus had insisted he could apply the salve himself, and he wondered if she perhaps wished she had allowed him to do so. Although he expected they must realise it was there, in moments like that, he wondered if it was possible they did not. He had felt no compulsion
to bring it up, and he was admittedly unclear about what they did or did not know about the process of becoming a Death Eater, even now.

When a flicker of movement drew his eyes to the doorway, Regulus brushed off the thought. “Welcome back.”

"Hello," said the familiar tones of Remus Lupin, who poked his head through the door. He appeared pale, with some fresh red streaks that could be scarring but he didn't seem particularly bothered by it. Instead, he indicated Regulus himself. "I heard you were the walking wounded. Or rather, the not-walking wounded. I'm surprised you don't have a canine companion unwilling to leave your side."

“I suppose he figures I am not going anywhere at the moment,” Regulus responded. “Or all of the reading bored him. Perhaps both.”

Remus made a glance around the room. "Or he's got Harry's cloak. A bit of a down side to him being here."

“That is so unsettling.” Scrunching his face, Regulus, too, glanced around the room. Wryly, he added, “Though I cannot decide if it is more, less, or equally unsettling when compared with the map you all apparently used to spy on everyone in school. I’m noticing a theme.”

"Oh, seen that, have you?" Remus didn't seem particularly apologetic about it. If anything, he looked a little proud. "I don't know how much of what we did counts as spying, so much as making sure the coast was clear. Perhaps we ought to have thought to look at what everyone else was doing, but we were too carried away with ourselves."

Regulus would have thought of it immediately, he knew, but decided not to say as much. For that matter, it would have made sneaking off to the Restricted Section markably easier, too.

“Indeed,” Regulus commented instead. Stubbornly, he fought the temptation to let his mind wander down the trail of personally-offensive mischief that Sirius and his friends would have been clearing their coasts for. Pushing his mind forward and past, he added, “Harry seems to enjoy it.”

"As I understand it, the cloak is the only family heirloom he has access to. It's very old, his great grandfather's at the least." Remus gestured around the room. "I'd think you'd know something about how attached people can get to those things."

“I would,” Regulus agreed with his mouth slanting up slightly. “It must have been a high-quality cloak. I did not think they maintained invisibility for that long, unless it was recharmed along the way.”

"Dumbledore said as much," Remus confirmed. "As long as he's not being malicious with it, there's little harm in Harry using it. Other than the occasional stalking."

“Occasional stalking of Draco seems to be the common way of it,” Regulus said, though it immediately stung to think of Narcissa’s son. Spying on Draco could become problematic if Harry was hidden from sight effectively, especially now that Draco had involved himself with the Death Eaters, but that was a concern that went beyond the convenience of an invisibility cloak. “Even so, it does seem harmless enough.”

"They take turns. Draco stalked him last year, so it's his go now," Remus said. He leaned against the doorway, perhaps betraying some fatigue. "If that's the only trouble he gets into this year, we can all sigh with relief and get on with things."
“I suppose we shall see if he can manage as much,” Regulus agreed, eyeing him for a moment. “You are welcome to sit down, by the way.”

Remus hesitated. "I don't want to intrude. I have no doubt you've had more people than you'd like crowding your space lately."

“How refreshingly considerate,” Regulus said, though he had not minded the majority of the social interactions as of late, if he was honest. The house was bound to get much more chaotic when the children arrived again. “You are welcome to do whatever suits you. I’m merely book-browsing.” He held up the one in his hand - a book detailing the known history of various colonies of Merfolk and the artifacts that came from wizarding contact - then set it down again.

"Living without the social niceties for a while makes you appreciate them more." Remus smiled tightly. "It's funny how much can change in a month. Are you aware there appears to be a tent in your dining room?"

“Ah - yes. There is,” Regulus said as he felt a little leap in his chest.

"Brilliant," Remus nodded, more to himself than Regulus. "I was wondering if I'd been given spiked hot chocolate, but I feel reasonably confident if you've also seen it, it's not imaginary."

“I became aware of it prior to the administration of pain potions, so I do believe we can say with some confidence that it is real,” Regulus remarked as he sent the book on merfolk back to the shelf with a flick of his wand and summoned another from the shelf to replace it.

"Good choice," Remus said with approval. "Most written viewpoints on Merfolk are written by people running away from them, so they're not what you'd call accurate. I can recommend some if it's something you're interested in."

“I have not decided what I am interested in this morning,” Regulus admitted, “but I am continuing to accept recommendations, nonetheless.”

"Because you're unsure when you'll be interrupted by the stomping boots of several teenagers?" Remus asked.

“From what I hear, it could happen at any moment.” Regulus glanced down, as if to peer through the wooden flooring. “I expect it to be a noisy affair.”

"I heard that Tonks is escorting them, so I fully expect your mother's portrait to greet them promptly." Remus gave a small huff of laughter. "She may come back for the farewell business tomorrow, as she's more inconspicuous than the rest of us for Sunday morning. I also believe she has once ridden in a car so won't gape at it."

“Emmeline was saying as much earlier this morning,” Regulus commented with a nod, “in respect to both Tonks and the car."

"I did forget you had an in house news system," Remus replied. "Perhaps I should be asking you what's going on."

Regulus’s mouth curved up slightly. “She's typically thorough, but I would rather hear it twice than not at all.”

"I believe you." Finally, Remus appeared to make a decision and wandered into the room. He sat down gingerly on the chair, heaving a sigh as he sunk into the comfortable surroundings. "You can ask if there are things you want to know. I'm sure one of us knows, or can point you in the right
direction. Like the, er, misnamed Ravenclaw Rebellion, we do try to work collaboratively and appreciate fresh eyes when they want to engage."

Regulus tipped his head in a nod. "I must admit it is a less aggressive environment than I once anticipated. The willingness is appreciated."

Remus nodded in response. "I wouldn't like you believe you were being purposefully excluded."

"It has gotten better, in that respect," Regulus admitted, though the cost of those improvements did become more and more evident any time he thought about Draco and Narcissa. "This summer has been a strange one, to say the least."

"In light of your upcoming work with the Ministry," Remus started quietly, as if he were unsure if it was his place to ask. "Have you chosen whether or not to report being attacked?"

Twisting his mouth, Regulus paused for a beat before nodding. "It's probably best to have it on record. Tonks or Kingsley seem like they would be best options."

"They are both highly capable," Remus agreed. "The more evidence you have, the better it'll be. Scrimgeour may not be Fudge, but the Ministry isn't an easy thing to predict. Umbridge has returned to her post."

Regulus wrinkled his nose. "Indeed. I do not wish to take my chances. A pardon seems like the sort of thing that would be difficult to just 'try again later.'"

"Speak to Dedalus the next time he's here," Remus recommended, with a pinched expression. "Dumbledore will come in and say his piece, but he doesn't prepare. He just does it. That's what happened before. You will probably want the preparation time."

With a nod and a well-resisted sigh, Regulus acknowledged to himself that he could not keep pushing it off, especially if the Death Eaters were no longer sparing him their aggression. If they wished to make a fight of it, there was even less benefit to sitting on his ticket out of prison. Physical damage was not the only weapon they had; truthfully, Regulus would argue that their information was a greater danger.

"Preparation, yes," Regulus echoed. "It's a delicate situation to try to convey."

"That it was for a limited period a long time ago will help." Remus gave a huff. "Believe it or not, being around Harry is going to do the most help. He's not very happy with them, a situation they'd like to remedy, and while it's not the most comfortable thing to consider, you have more possible strings being pulled there than most in favour of your ability to have a record wiped clean."

"That suits me just as well," Regulus admitted; connection to Harry had been mentioned before, and though it had not been his original intention for getting along with Sirius’s godson, he would not complain about the benefits, either. "Whatever helps convince them."

"Dumbledore has always tightly regulated access to Harry, even if Sirius seems to be deciding to run with what he thinks is best for now. I'm sure Dumbledore is just letting them get some time together." Remus gave an uncomfortable smile. "I believe Sirius saw him again before I did. I don't believe he's ever gone to anyone else's home but the Burrow, either."

"Really?" Regulus slanted his mouth in thought. "That is rather limited. No wonder Harry was so delighted about the beach."

"You heard about Frank and Alice. Harry is protected by his blood, but no chances have been taken
whenever possible. No one is allowed near him without Dumbledore's trust in them.” Remus gave a light shrug. "Being around him so consistently does speak volumes.”

It was strangely reassuring, though it had felt more like a matter of necessity, considering this house belonged to Regulus; coming to visit Sirius or coming for Order-related meetings along with his friends would naturally set up the situation as such. However, Remus sounded sincere enough about it, and he supposed there would have been other options for Harry to do either of those things, were Regulus considered to be too terribly untrustworthy. “I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

Eyeing Remus’s tired expression, Regulus added, “Do you have anything set out, now that you are back? Or will you be enjoying the opportunity to relax?”

"I'm going to try and get everyone's patronuses corporeal. The amount of dementor attacks has been worrying." Remus grinned fleetingly. "Without Harry in the house, I may even keep Sirius's attention for it for more than ten minutes."

“That ought to improve your odds significantly, yes,” Regulus said with a little lift at the corner of his mouth. “It helps to know your audience.”

"If I were doing that, I would only have to point out that you're fully capable of doing it and he isn't," Remus replied slyly. "I'd guarantee he'd be doing it until he got it down for the rest of the day."

At that, Regulus’s mouth turned up with more noticeable amusement, the mental image as clear as crystal. “Motivation is a remarkable thing.”

Remus smiled, though it turned into a yawn. "Excuse me," he apologised. "A few months without wolfsbane has played havoc with me."

“I can only imagine.” Truthfully, Regulus did not really want to imagine the mild-mannered Remus Lupin, stuck roaming around with a pack of feral werewolves, cut off from comfort and civilisation. “If you would like to go rest, there will be plenty of time to resume discussions later.”

Downstairs, there was a sudden and unmistakable crack. "I believe Tonks has arrived," Remus said dryly. "She has my house keys, so I had better retrieve them while we are all still able to hear ourselves speak."

“Fortunate timing.” Remus looked just a little bit uncomfortable as he stood, though he seemed to be visibly attempting to hide it, so Regulus did not comment further.

After their polite goodbyes were exchanged, Regulus watched him disappear back out into the wallway, then looked back to the books. Time for his search to resume.

The telltale cries of Walburga Black drew Sirius's attention from the downstairs landing. He could hear talking, likely Remus and Regulus discussing books or messy habits or whatever it is those two talked about over tea and biscuits, but had not wanted to interrupt. The desire to hover over his brother was conflicting with the fact that Regulus seemed to have long periods of calm, doing very little that was exciting or dangerous, and then all of a sudden, wallop! He gets himself into trouble. Usually at the exact moment Sirius has turned away, making him feel foolish for not expecting it. He's lucky it wasn't worse.

Harry beat him down the stairs, which was of no surprise. By the time Sirius himself had sauntered slowly to the ground floor, Tonks had taken on his mother and the curtains, and Ron, Hermione,
Harry, and Ginny were shouting over the noise. It took Mrs. Weasley shushing them, moments after the portrait went silent, for them not to set her off again. They filed down to the kitchen with brief waves and spilled out into the basement. Kreacher had been poking about; the sound of him disapparating echoed the moment Hermione showed up. He'd never found someone so obsessive about wanting to talk to house-elves that house-elves were deeply disturbed by her.

“Good rest of the summer?” Sirius asked, shutting the door behind Ginny so they could talk without an elfish eavesdropper.

“Yeah, it's been decent,” Ron replied. He and Harry seemed to be in a contest for who could grow more in a short space of time.

“Except for her,” Ginny replied, darkly.

“Ginny,” Mrs. Weasley said, from where she appeared to be taking on the role of a meal without thinking of it. It was a mother tone; not his own mother’s, of course - she had no concept of volume control - but he'd heard it enough elsewhere. Danger ahead.

Ginny gave her mother a smile much too wide to be real, then mouthed later. Okay, then. He could deal with a little family dramatics. They were his bread and butter, after all.

“How has everything been here?” Hermione asked, before she released the ginger cat from her luggage. He didn't look too pleased about having been in there, giving her an indignant look before going to have a good sniff about.

“Few minor incidents, nothing important.” Sirius waved them off.

“Aside from Malfoy,” Harry muttered.

None of them looked surprised by it, so clearly Harry had told them when he went there. He could understand the irritation. Sirius didn't like having his space invaded either.

“What did he want?” Hermione asked, looking genuinely confused.

“He wanted to snoop around,” Sirius replied. “It was better to let him, and 'see' there's nothing here. He did get more nosey than he should've and ran into one of Regulus's little traps the twins were mucking about with last summer. How're they doing?”

“Wonderfully!” Mrs. Weasley replied. “They're so busy these days. You'll have to see the shop.”

“You weren't with us last time?” Ron asked.

“I swear, you have the observational ability of a dungbeetle sometimes,” Hermione replied.

“No, Harry was with you lot,” Sirius said. “I was sure any Death Eaters were going to bite off more than they could chew if they tried anything.” They noticeably preened at the statement. “I had to keep an eye on my idiot brother, who gets himself into trouble when he's left to his own devices for too long. I do want to see it, though. I've heard great things.”

“It's not any better when they're older brothers,” Ginny said, sweetly. Ron tossed one of the bags of what looked like sweets at her, and she caught it with ease.

“She's after your position, mate,” Ron replied.

“I'll take any spot,” Ginny replied, coolly. “Is Tonks coming back down?”
“I’m not sure,” Sirius said. It was likely she'd gone in search of further awkward interactions with Remus. “Remus is upstairs, so she probably went to see him. He's only just back.”

“Is he going away again?” Hermione said, worryingly.

“Not for a bit,” Sirius said, in what he hoped was a reassuring tone. He didn't feel all that reassured himself. “He's done all he can with the ferals. It'll pay off later.” He almost added 'we hope', but it'd have undercut his calm. “Besides, they've managed to get the Ministry signing off on Tonks as your Ministry escort for Sunday morning, so she'll be here for that.”

“Is that why we're going from here?” Ginny asked.

Sirius nodded.

“Who all's going?” Harry asked. Perhaps he was a bit worried about making a spectacle of himself, even more than he normally would just by being him.

“Me, and Tonks, and Remus with Kingsley on hand if things get out of control,” Sirius listed off. “Regulus will stay here, because one Death Eater run in a week is my limit for him.”

“He was in a duel?” Hermione gasped. He'd almost forgotten they'd spent half of last summer being swotty together in the library.

“He's fine,” Sirius said. “Some shattered bones, Hestia Jones – she's a healer – she's already been here and sorted it. He’s just needed to be careful for a few days.”

“Arthur's been so intense about the precautions,” Molly said, mournfully. She turned to look at the children with a creased brow. “Everyone's in so much danger now. You will all be careful at school, won't you?”

“It's not as if we go looking for trouble,” Ron protested.

Harry added, “It just seems to find us.”

The next day ushered in a sense of freedom for Regulus, clearing him to wander at will, and with that freedom, he had steeled himself to send Deimos out into the world with a letter for his Great Aunt Callidora. Although Regulus had told himself that the delay was purely because he did not want to say anything strange with potions fogging his mind, in truth, he still did not know how she was going to react to him reaching out. Even when he was a child, surrounded by the myriad branches of his family, Callidora had never remained close with the rest of them after she was married into the Longbottom family. Weddings and funerals and societal events that she would have attended anyway were reliable enough, but rarely did she show up for anything beyond that.

Callidora’s response was cordial and obliging, though he wondered how well informed she was in respect to the summer dramatics - or even to his living status, though she said nothing blatant in her letter. An invitation to her home in Yorkshire was extended for the following day, and when he arrived with select photographs slipped neatly into his pocket, he paused a moment to let his eyes graze over the pale brick, reaching up for two levels. Fleetingly, he thought that he had never visited her house before. Her husband Harfang Longbottom had passed two years before Regulus’s mother had - he had seen as much on the tree - but he knew little beyond that.

When the door opened, Regulus was greeted with an old house-elf who ushered him inside. They passed a sitting area and a number of pictures - some he recognised vaguely, some he did not - and through to a door that led them back outside again, this time to a patio where Callidora was sipping
a cup of tea and reading the day’s *Prophet*. Upon hearing the door, she glanced up and closed the newspaper in a neat fold. Her manner was prim, as he would expect, and her eyes flicked from his feet up to his face again.

“You are much taller than I remember,” she said wryly, and when he stared at her for a silent beat, she gestured to the chair across from her, white-painted metal twisted in an intricate design. “Take a seat. Dippa, fetch some tea for our our guest. You do take tea, don’t you?”

“Yes, thank you,” Regulus said, glancing first at the elf, then settling in the chair.

“I must say your letter was a surprise. Lovely colouring on your owl, by the way.”

“Thank you,” he said again, thinking that for all his mental preparation, he felt less prepared for the small talk than he was for the gut-wrenching dragging up of old wounds. Perhaps it was all the practice with the latter, as of late. “He was a birthday gift.”

“Stunning, if a bit vocal. I will admit that word of your visit to Iago long preceded your letter, so it was not as jarring a surprise as it might’ve been, but what brings you out to Yorkshire?” she asked keenly as she took a sip of her tea.

The house-elf cracked into being just next to him, setting on the table a fresh pot of tea.

“Family,” Regulus began, his face taking on a thoughtful expression, and he saw the look in his great aunt’s face sharpen slightly. “So many of them are gone now. When I was in Iago, I went by Aunt Cassiopeia’s house by the water, and she had some photographs I found to be curious,” he continued, hazing the timelines a little with a careful - but nonetheless even - tone.

“Oh?” At the mention of Cassiopeia, her manner softened, if only a little. Perhaps they had been close, though he couldn’t really think of any human his Aunt Cass had been close to. Perhaps it was to do with Callidora’s absence, or perhaps it was pity. He did recall a general air of agreement that Cass was a little bit batty.

“I beg your pardon if I am over-stepping, but…” He pulled out the photographs from his pocket: copies, all of them, in case something were to happen, or in case Callidora wanted them by some chance. “Are these photographs of you and your sisters? Charis and Cedrella?”

She did not seem to expect him to say the name, based on her subtle recoil, but it was sadness he saw in the taught lines of her face - not anger.

“You know her name?” was all Callidora said, though her tone was hard to read.

For a moment, Regulus hesitated, watching for any sign of a bite in her manner, but if he had to assign an interpretation, she seemed to be entertaining something like curiosity. “I spoke briefly with her son. One of them, I suppose.”

“You did, did you?” She lifted an eyebrow, though her expression remained otherwise impassive. “No wonder the rumours are so unflattering. I do not think your mother would have liked that very much.”

“No, certainly not,” Regulus said with his tone held still against the tension twisting in his chest. There was no accusation in her tone, but it still took a stuttering moment to drum up the rest of his response. “I know very little about what happened and even less about how you might have felt about it… but it was difficult for me when Sirius was disowned. Presumptuous though it might be, I thought to share the photographs I found, by chance that they might be meaningful. There has been a great deal of loss - for everyone.”
Callidora slowly picked up the picture, eyes locked on the three young women huddled together for their pose. “So much loss,” she agreed in muted tones, something changing again in the subtle movement of her face. “Cedrella was such a fool for that boy. She tried arguing it, that he was just as pure as any other matches they could direct her to, but you know well who won that debate.”

“You can keep them, if you’d like,” Regulus offered, though he was half-worried he might break her nostalgic spell by speaking.

For a moment, Callidora did not look up, but she did nod. “You are surprisingly thoughtful.”

Regulus thought it was a bit much to call it ‘surprisingly,’ but he bit his tongue. After another beat, she lifted her head and spoke again.

“It does not bother you, her indiscretions with a blood traitor?” Callidora asked, her voice still measured as she watched his eyes.

“Does it not bother you? You are still listed on the tree, so you could not have been in favour,” he said, perhaps a bit bluntly. Though it had become abundantly clear that the tree was a much less reliable indication than he once thought, it served to pull out a response, as he’d thought it might.

“I was wounded by her choice, but perspective can play a remarkable role. You were already missing by then, but it was your cousin Bellatrix, a Black, who participated in the torture of my nephew Frank and his wife. One of the Fawley girls.” Something fierce had lit behind her eyes, and though his own face was still as stone, he held that look. “A line was drawn somewhere, but I don’t know that the line truly even knows where it is anymore if two respectable and successful purebloods can be tortured so carelessly. It could have been Cedrella and her husband, had they more grit to them. No remorse.”

“Have you ever said anything of the sort?” The words sounded like a challenge on his tongue, despite his calm tone. He could see her bristle, but he steeled himself against retracting them.

“To what end?” she asked stiffly.

“Drawing attention to the hypocrisy,” Regulus offered, though it sounded naive even to his own ears, in light of all the terrible responses that kept beating up against his attempts. Her expression suggested it sounded similarly to her ears, as well. “I realise that a single voice may sound foolish against the din of whatever everyone had thought for such a long time… I only mean to say that I once aligned every thought in my mind with such an expectation. You spoke of perspective, and I suppose I have experienced a fair few doses of that, myself. It makes me wonder who else might feel the same.”

Her eyes lowered to the thin stack of photographs still faced downwards beneath his fingers. “What are those?” she asked.

Regulus picked up the pictures and flipped them to face her. “These were at Aunt Callidora’s, too. I did not recognise him as showing up in any of the portraits or pictures I’ve ever seen, so I wondered if it was perhaps her little brother. There’s a burn mark next to her name, between her and Dorea.”

If it was possible, Callidora’s expression pinched more painfully as her eyes locked in on the little boy, no older than seven in any of the photographs.

“Marius,” she said tightly.
“Marius. “What happened?”

“He was a squib,” she answered a little distantly. “He died.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in as Regulus stared at her, a little dumbly, but she had not yet looked up from the picture of the little boy. “Died?” he echoed, though the word felt clumsy. He wanted to ask how it happened, when it happened, but his mouth would not cooperate.

“Marius appeared to be a late bloomer, you could say, later than any Black in known - or at least catalogued - memory. The same happened with our Neville: treating the child carelessly, permitting or even contriving dangerous situations, leaving cabinets unlocked that even a magical child ought not be permitted to risk, no matter how reliable their uncontrolled magic ought to be in protecting them.” Callidora’s voice had gone cold, yet it was as weightless as the drifting snow. “I tried not to think too hard about it, at the time. No one talked about what had happened, save for the spreading confirmation that he was a squib, accompanied by the scorched spot on the family tapestry. Cass took it the hardest.”

“Does that mean they killed him?” Regulus asked hollowly, feeling his stomach drop.

“Not directly, I suppose. They didn’t cast a curse or bust his head open, if that is what you mean, though Cass said to me once that they might as well have.” There was something a little harder in her tone, like it was someone else talking, but she spoke on. “I cannot say if she snapped or was merely playing at willful madness, but she got a bit odd, after that.”

“Her brother was dead,” was all he could say at first. Flashing across his mind, he saw Sirius and Bella hurling curses at each other, and with a sudden lurch, he felt ill. “How old was he?”

“Turning seven, that year,” Callidora answered, and her face had split a little now, turning down into a deepening frown.

Turning seven - had he still been six, or did she mean it in a general sense? It didn’t matter really, for the returning lurch. Regulus anchored an elbow on the table to pressed arched fingers against his closed eyes, though it did little for the mounting pressure. Merlin alive, there weren’t any pictures older than seven because he didn’t live past seven-

“Are you okay?” she asked, and her voice was a little bit gentler for a moment as she shed the drier tones. “Perhaps I should not have been so blunt. I assumed…” She shook her head, as if to brush off whatever her trailing thoughts had been.

He smelled the steaming tea beneath his nose before he saw it, but when he moved his fingers to open his eyes, there was the cup. A blue outline of some sort of flower spread itself all over the white surface, and for a moment, he stared at the flowed so that he didn’t have to look at anything else.

Callidora didn’t ask him again if he was okay. Instead, she took a slow drink from her own cup and looked out at the garden, her hand resting on the folded up Prophet as if she was considering whether to open it up again.

Regulus thought it might have been better if she did, even if it would be considered poor manners. He was worried she might ask him to speak if he looked up, but when he, too, turned his eyes to the garden, still coloured with the late summer blooms, no further inquiry of any sort came.

That realisation was accompanied by a flood of relief, if it could be called that. His mind reeled with flashes of his family, with names and faces that were each jarringly familiar. Squib or not, a
child had died in their care, covered up and written off as a charred smudge on the tapestry. Regulus had heard of no public squib blemish, so it was unlikely that the scandal had spread beyond the family, particularly with it being that recent. He’d always heard the insistence that Blacks did not have squibs in their line, without exception. Seemingly, that was true in the same way that they did not have Weasleys or Tonkses in their line.

The little boy - Marius - had just vanished. How many had mourned him? Did they just pick up and move on? Were they relieved to be rid of the shame?

Again, Regulus’s stomach turned. Those who were strong would persist and survive - a sentiment not always said but always felt. Those who were not would be burned away and trimmed, swallowed by their fate. Forgotten.

Though he had asked to know, for a moment, Regulus almost wished he could scrub it from his mind, could un-hear the uncomfortable implications that crawled over his skin in little bumps.

In silence, they sipped their tea.

It was late into the afternoon on Saturday when the door opened without the usual screeches of Sirius's own dear mother. The most likely event in this case was that Regulus had returned from his little outing to see his - great aunt? Cousin however removed? Sure enough, a glance over the bannister found Regulus doing his usual routine upon re-entering the house. A bit stiffly, perhaps. It was possible the meeting hadn't gone well. Either Callidora was not so obliging in person so much as accustomory, or Regulus hadn't dealt well with going out again this soon after the attack. If anything, it reminded him they needed to set up a better failsafe, not to mention something for the imperius. Perhaps he was simply lost in glorious contemplation about the most noble house, but something niggled that this probably wasn't the reaction of that.

"You look terrible," Sirius informed him, as loudly as he dared without awakening the portrait. Regulus glanced up, pausing only briefly before he started up the stairs to the first landing.

For a brief moment, Sirius ran through the possibilities. He hadn't done anything to upset him lately, not that he knew of. There was the actual possibility of imperius, but Regulus did train against it, so hopefully not. He settled on merely asking, "Are you alright?"

“I’m not hurt... Just thinking,” Regulus dismissed vaguely with a frown, pausing for a lingering second before turning to walk into the drawing room.

Sirius opened his mouth to quip about how painful it looked, and recommending he not do that anymore. However, it would have fell on an empty landing as Regulus disappeared into the room at the end of the landing. Sirius followed, now more curious about it. Perhaps he'd gotten some of the answers to the missing names, and he wanted to look at the tree.

In line with his suspicion, Regulus stopped in front of the sprawling family tapestry. Briefly, he glanced back at Sirius, meeting his eyes for a beat before looking back to the front to stare hard at something.

“What?” Sirius asked, bordering on terse now from irritation. “It’s the same thing you stare at all the time.”

Pinching his expression, Regulus folded his arms across his chest. “Aunt Callidora told me about the photos I found the other day. The ones Aunt Cass had at Iago. Cedrella was within my expectations, but…” For a second, it seemed as though Regulus might go quiet again, but just as
the silence was starting to settle, he continued, “Did you know there was a squib in our grandparents’ generation?” This time, Regulus tapped the charred spot between Cassiopeia and Dorea.

"We discussed it at length during all of those long, deep, and heartfelt conversations I had with our grandparents." It stood reason enough; almost all magical families had one or two, even if they didn't admit it. There was nothing wrong with it. Some of the best things came from people who didn't have magic.

“If you don't care about what I'm saying, by all means, go back to whatever it is you were doing,” Regulus said with a sudden tightness in his tone, though his gaze did not waver from the spot.

"It was a daft question.” Sirius shrugged forcibly. If he didn't look quite so distressed, Sirius'd have snapped at him by now. "How would I know that? The official stance has always been we don't have any squibs, which is ridiculous; all magical families do. Where do you think muggles came from?"

“I really - don’t care where muggles came from, right now.” Regulus’s tone still had a strange, sharp quality to it, his expression frozen if not angry. “The point I’m trying to make is that this child,” - he pulled out one of the pictures from his pocket without actually looking at it - “doesn’t have any photographs past this age because that is when he died. She said it probably wasn’t the intended result, but - I just - I don’t know what to do with that, so if you could bite back the sarcasm for a moment, I would really appreciate it.”

Now they were getting somewhere. This would have been this house their grandfather had lived here as a child, and this would have been his younger sibling. Their grandfather must have loved that, having a squib for a brother. Half of their dramatic genes came from that side of the family, as their mother well attested, and no way they took that one well. “Intended result of what?"

“I don’t know; she did not specify outright, and I couldn’t bring myself to ask for details - if she even knew them.” Regulus folded his arms again, the picture tucking up under. “She only indicated that he was put in harm’s way on more than one occasion, perhaps to startle the magic out of him faster... but there presumably wasn’t anything to startle out.”

Though Sirius had heard of the practice, he'd only ever known it in the context of successfully drawing magic to the surface. He supposed no one really told the story if it failed. "Daily,” Sirius gave a humourless huff of laughter. He made a vague indication to the house. "This place is dangerous enough. You warned me of that when I first told you the kids were coming here."

“I wasn’t thinking about them dying,” Regulus said with a frown.

"I don't think they would have, they're teenagers." Not that teenagers couldn't get into the same trouble, but Sirius had to figure after everything they'd been through, a few bolt-spitting clocks or cursed boxes were not going to phase them. "But we explored when we were children, even though we weren't supposed to. You feel safe here."

“I know.” The frown pinched a little, but Regulus didn’t say anything else.

"I don't," Sirius stated, simply. There was a point he must have, because he knew from personal experience what was in half of the problem areas and had little problem exploring them. Even the things not on display in the attic, they had never shown much care with. To his horror, Sirius found himself with a lack of surprise where he wanted there to be some. It was always about proving you could handle the name, wasn't it? "Since Iago, you're no safer than I am, here, but you love it. It's just no place for people without magic. If they didn't think it was worth their child's safety, then it's
just another generation who should never have been parents in the first place."

Regulus pressed his lips to a line, saying nothing, this time.

"The house is everything," Sirius pressed on, but with an increasingly bitter edge to his tone. "And you're nothing without it. So why would they place a child's life over the risk of losing that? They had spares."

“This isn’t making me feel any better.”

"I can't make you feel better," Sirius said, honestly. He didn't drink, clearly getting his leg over would take till he was fifty at the rate he and Vance were going, and he couldn't laugh it off. "I can only commiserate. Most of this, I've come to terms with and did a long time ago. This just opens exciting new avenues of horror, wondering about how, where, and unmarked graves."

“Horror is right,” Regulus admitted slowly, shaking his head. “It’s unsettling.”

“Is there anything about this entire family that isn’t?” Sirius asked. “You’ve got mass murderers, torturers - pureblood torturers too, so completely inconsistent - and sadists, a screeching banshee in the front hall, the most hated headmaster Hogwarts has ever had, parents who care more of heritage than for their child’s wellbeing or - Merlin forbid - their happiness, or people who don’t want children at all but do it because it’s what they’re supposed to do. Any time anyone shows any indication of questioning it, they’re shoved back in line or thrown away like a toy someone is done playing with. You can be proud of the exploration, alchemy, spellwork, but it doesn’t change the fact half of the family are or were horrifying. I’m not surprised. I want to be. I want to think someone around here gave two shits about their children, but as the only person here to have first hand experience of that throw away, I’m thinking I got off easy.”

“So it seems,” Regulus said distantly, face still pulled to a point.

“I thought you'd argue that.” Sirius admitted quietly. He didn’t like to see him defeated; indignant, even angry was better. He thought back to what James had said in this situation - You're worth ten of them - but he didn’t think it’d be comforting to repeat. “It’s only what it was. You’re not them.”

Regulus breathed a deep sigh and nodded. “I didn't think there was that big of a gap between the two.”

"You don't see people as a means to an end," Sirius replied. He very much doubted Regulus ever had. Even as a kid, he'd had too much heart to do that. "You're a terrible Slytherin; you don't like using people. A bit of cunning, vengeful plenty, but...you definitely asked to be put there. No way it was that hat's first choice. But the only choice for you, because you needed to be worthy of something that should be freely given. Let's face it, if there was anyone who actually shaped up to be a half decent parent and didn't get blown off for their trouble, it was a long time ago.”

“I’m not a terrible Slytherin. It’s not just about using people,” Regulus countered, though it was in the same settled tone he had been speaking in for the past few minutes.

"If you only want people when they think how you want them to think and abide by your rules so you can get something out of it, it's using people," Sirius replied. Still, it was nice to hear at least an obligatory argument for it. Watching the fight go out of him now would be terrible. "I just described most people on that tapestry, and they're all Slytherins. It's a pattern. You said it yourself, that they wanted something from you without considering what it would do to you. It's a shit thing to do, and it's using people. You don't do that. You see value in treating people as individuals with choices, not good and bad statistics to be weighed and measured."
“I maintain that being a Slytherin is not a bad thing,” Regulus responded, a bit stubbornly. He exhaled another huff, though the worst of his despondent demeanour was fading, at least a little. “However, I appreciate the point you are trying to make.”

"I didn't say it was a bad thing. Just that it's a common house trait, especially in this house." Sirius took a few steps towards the tapestry, and tapped it with his fingers where the burn mark was. "Don't take on the blame for other people's mistakes. If you think it's cruel to burn out a child for dying, just fix it back."

Some of the tension started to loosen in Regulus’s face, and he tipped a little nod. “I’ve been thinking about that, with all of this.” He waved the photo with a subtle gesture before slipping it in his pocket again.

"It's not as if you can ask if they want to be put back on, but a little kid probably doesn't deserve the same fate as those of us who made a choice," Sirius said. He had no idea what Andromeda thought of it all, but he didn't like the idea personally. A piece of old tapestry doesn't define the be all and end all of family. "But you've got the picture, you - I assume - have a name. You can go from there if keeping the memory alive is important to you."

“His name was Marius,” Regulus said without pause. “And it is. Important, that is.”

*That’s because you are a half decent person.* “So between 1915 and 1920…” Sirius looked along the line curiously. He did went through a mental list of who would have been around at that time. If you were going to memorialise someone, you should at least know something about them. “Slughorn might have something. He usually does the Iago circuits, or….Phineas, I suppose, though I don’t believe Phineas will talk about it if he knows the truth.”

“He was forthcoming about his sister and son, though this is a bit different,” Regulus said before pressing his lips to a line.

"A squib and a traitor is not the same thing. A squib can't help what they are." Sirius thought briefly for a moment, before realising it was unlikely Regulus knew about Arabella. "There's one in the Order. She saw the dementors when they attacked Harry, so they must retain some magic."

Glancing over, Regulus lifted his eyebrows. “Hm. I did not realise.”

"Whether that's just Arabella being Arabella, you never know," Sirius replied. It stood to some reason. The Hogwarts caretaker interacted with the school that non-magical people couldn't see; both of them were able to communicate with their resident animals; and the ghosts could interact with them just fine. Outside the room, the sudden sound of loud clambering footsteps drew his attention. It seemed they were done with their mock Quidditch.

"Who won?" Sirius called out.

"I don't want to talk about it!" came Ron's reply, as presumably he and Harry clambered back up to Harry's room.

Having had some experience with the annoying event of a sibling winning consistently, Sirius well understood the tone. "Congrats, Ginny!"

"Thanks!"

Sirius turned his attention back to his brother. "Didn't Aunt Cass have a cat called that? A little black one?"
Regulus looked thoughtful for a moment, then responded, “I believe that one was called Mars. Nonetheless, the name is certainly close enough to make a case for it. Aunt Callidora said that she was very upset.”

Given it was thirty years ago, Sirius was surprised he even remembered that much. Trust Regulus to remember with clarity. "Her brother got killed. It's not something you get over. Add in the burn mark, I'm surprised she didn't hit someone. I wonder what he thought about it all." Sirius tapped on his maternal grandfather's name. "Unless he was too busy with a baby to notice."

“He was rather strict, too.” Regulus frowned at the tapestry. “I don't know.”

Strict is one word, mental would be another. "You want to be left to obsess?"

“'Obsess' sounds like a bit much, but there is plenty to think about.” The corner of his mouth flicked back up a little, though it couldn’t really be called a happy expression.

"You're doing that look at the tapestry as if it has all the answers." If that wasn't obsessive, what was? "It would never be you, doing something like that. You're terrible at putting conditions on caring, and you can recognise when a child needs protecting. Keep it in mind."

Regulus nodded as a little bit more of the tension loosened from his shoulders. “I will.”

That night - the last night before their swarm of children were to clear out for Hogwarts - the drawing room was buzzing with evening activity. Quidditch was playing on the wireless - Pride of Portree versus the Ballycastle Bats, so no one was particularly worked up among the listeners huddled on the sofa, at least as far as personal favourites went. With a book in hand, Regulus’s mind was flitting back and forth between the pages before him and the announcer’s enthusiastic relaying of the game. He was perched somewhere between the Quidditch sofa (on which Harry, Ron, and Ginny were situated) and the reading corner (where Hermione had settled), and he was reminded with a funny twinge that it was not unlike the first time he had met most of them. So much had changed in a year.

Emmeline had vacated the room as soon as Quidditch was turned on; Sirius, on the other hand, had been flitting in and out with all the attention span of a interested but very restless gnat, and Tonks had been going between busying herself with preparations and popping in to hear updates on the game. Regulus hadn’t seen Lupin since supper, but he’d looked exhausted enough that he could very well be sleeping already.

It was almost easy to ignore the oppressive stretch of the tapestry in light of the flurry of activity that the children always brought... or if not ignore, at least delay the temptation to dwell. Several hours had passed, but his mind was still sticky with the jarring truth about Marius. Though he still did not have birth or death dates, Regulus had magicked the name back in its place that afternoon, a strange conviction knotting up in his stomach despite how pointless such a thing probably was in the grand scheme of it all. He did not like the way thinking about it made him feel, but even more than that, he did not like the way dismissing it made him feel.

His thoughts had started to drift when a score by Pride roared out from the wireless, drawing his eyes from the wall back to the group.

"Still don't think they'll win?" Ginny stated, with so much certainty in her tone that you could be forgiven for believing she had insider information. Regulus privately acknowledged that he might have misjudged the chances of bickering, but it was, at least, still more mild than the time Ginny’s brothers had called the honour of the Harpies into question.
Ron rolled his eyes. "I'm not getting into it with you again."

Harry put his hands up in a surrendering position.

"Don't do that at tryouts," Ron warned him. "They'll eat you alive."

"That's definitely what I'm worried about," Harry deadpanned. "Death Eaters are just the warm up act."

Hermione spoke up without looking up. "I saw Angelina last week. She asked if the DA was going to continue."

"She's not in school anymore," Harry replied.

"Do you have to be?" Hermione looked up. "Learning doesn't stop just because you leave school."

Ron shot her a mild look of disgust. "I thought you said we weren't doing it anymore. Umbridge is gone."

"And you think Snape'll be better?" Ginny gave a dismissive huff, as an advert came on for de-gnoming your gardens. "He'll spend the whole lesson telling you what's wrong with it without explaining why it's wrong or how to fix it."

"Teaching is not his strong point," Hermione agreed, tentatively. She reached into her pocket to reveal a small coin. "She wanted to know if they should hold onto this, just in case."

Harry seemed to consider it for a minute. "What did you tell her?"

"That it couldn't hurt to," Hermione said. "There's always Hogsmeade, if you do decide to get everyone back in one place."

"I was keeping mine anyway," Ron said. "It's still ruddy good charmwork."

Hermione ducked behind her book for a moment, but she was smiling when she lowered it. "Hopefully you won't need to."

Holding a hand open, palm to the ceiling, Regulus looked to Hermione and asked: "May I?"

Hermione shuffled forward in her seat and placed the coin on Regulus' palm. "I suppose you were in too much of a hurry last time to see them. It's just a coin for now. I haven't had the chance to destroy the list or the master coin."

Turning it over in his hand, Regulus thought - not for the first time - that it would have been a far preferable method compared to the permanent mark on his arm, but there was nothing to be done about that particular issue, as far as he could tell. Joining the Death Eaters was not really supposed to be a membership that dissolved or came to a voluntary end; it was natural that the system of alert would not be, either. As he returned the coin to Hermione’s hand, they had moved on to further discussion of the DA, presumably, at least based on the context:

"You know Marietta Edgecombe never got that jinx off completely," Ginny said. "She still had 'sneak' jinxed across her face on the train."

"I might've been a bit enthusiastic with it," Hermione admitted.

Lifting his brow, Regulus asked, "Why did she have 'sneak' jinxed across her face?"
"Because she is one," Ginny responded.

"It was a failsafe," Hermione explained. She pocketed the coin again before settling back into the chair comfortably. "If someone betrayed the DA to the Ministry, then there would be consequences."

"Hm." It made sense enough; there were certainly people in Regulus’s life that he wished would be blemished with such informative labels upon their personal betrayals. “I suppose that is how Umbridge found your meetings? I heard something of the sort but not the details.”

"Yeah" Harry said, irritably. "She said it was because her mum works for the Ministry."

"-so does our father-" Ron added.

"-Right, I said that; she didn't have to say anything." Harry finished.

"It put everyone in danger," Hermione said. "It meant Dumbledore left, and Umbridge took over the school."

"Lucky Umbridge fell for Hermione's terrible fake crying confession when we did get caught," Ginny laughed.

"I thought you were too busy trying to kick out that IS member's knee to notice," Hermione replied.

Ginny grinned. "I was multitasking. Besides, even I almost lost it when you started talking about trying to find Dumbledore at the pubs."

"Lying isn't my strong suit," Hermione groaned.

“Never a dull year, hm?” Regulus remarked wryly, shaking his head.

"That was just this year," Hermione said.

"You didn't get to hear about the dragon or the troll when we first went to school," Harry added. Regulus recalled hearing a little, but he opted to let them chatter on about it in case more baffling details were to surface.

"It’s like this every year," Ron said. "Second year, it was a giant snake and a bloody great big spider. Third year - Sirius was a lot scarier when he was a mass murderer hellbent on stabbing you to death."

"Cheers!" came Sirius's voice from further down the landing.

"Me almost getting stabbed in my bed used to be impressive!" Ron said. "It just sounds stupid now."

Sirius poked his head around the door. "Sorry, always been my problem. My lack of desire to kill blood traitors and muggles has been disappointing people since 1973. Who's winning?"

Regulus shook his head with a wry smile. “Pride.”

Sirius didn't look at thrilled about it. “You lot packed?”

There was a resounding 'no' in the form of 'kind of', 'a bit' and a plain old 'no' - except for Hermione, who was mostly ready.
“Remus is staying here to watch over the other trouble magnet,” Sirius glanced to Regulus briefly. “But unless you want to arrive with a full Ministry escort, you'll have to get a move on in the morning.”

Rolling his eyes, Regulus looked down to his book again. “I was under the impression he was going with the rest of you for extra security. Not that Lupin cannot choose to stay if he wishes, but I can handle a morning by myself. I promise not to invite the Death Eaters over for a house party while you are escorting Harry to the platform.”

“Or tours?”

“That was a very specific situation,” Regulus countered.

“Your life is a very specific situation,” Sirius replied.

Regulus tipped his head a little. “True enough. But at least that means it is usually planned with warning.”

“Kingsley’ll be on hand if there's trouble, regardless. Call me if the Bats get their act together,” Sirius replied before ducking out again to the sounds of muffled conversation in the hallway.

“Do you think he suspected anything while he was here?” Hermione asked, tentatively. “Malfoy?”

Regulus shook his head, nose crinkling slightly. He did not want to badmouth his cousin to peers who already disliked that cousin, but the sting still lingered. Stubbornly, he smoothed it down. “I don't think so. He did try to sneak off and look around, but his demeanour did not suggest he found anything he was looking for. If anything, he seemed bored. A bit insulting, but not concerning. Any undesired conclusions he comes to could have been drawn without stepping foot inside the house.”

“So no different from usual,” Ron said. “He’s always bored and insulting. Really makes you miss the ferret.”

“We'll just have to be careful talking about it,” Hermione added.

“Yes, there is suspicion enough already,” Regulus said, pressing his mouth to a wry line.

"We managed to keep a secret organisation secret for most of last year. I think we'll manage," Harry said.

"With the help of two prefects," Hermione reminded him. "I'm starting to understand how that map was able to be made, if they had at least one prefect in their back pocket."

"Speaking from experience, it does help," Regulus admitted.

"Having a prefect in Slytherin is not the sort of help we'd like," Hermione groused.

Regulus lifted his brow. “The point stands that Slytherin prefects can be a great help when you get along with them.”

"The Slytherin prefects are Draco Malfoy and his girlfriend." Ginny scoffed at the idea. "Even if he wasn't a Death Eater, it would still mean trouble."

"We don't know he's a Death Eater," Hermione said, with a tone of exasperation.
"I know," Harry said, pointedly. "And you don't believe me."

"It just seems a little..." Hermione let her sentence run off.

"Because it's Malfoy," Ron winced. "It's not that we don't believe you. It's just hard to imagine him doing anything that doesn't involve saving his own skin."

"You don't think he'd do it to try and get his father out of prison?" Harry said. For a moment, no one said anything. "I know what I saw. Can't you just trust me?"

"Of course we do, mate," Ron said before Hermione gave a slight nod in agreement. "Afraid you'll kick us off the team otherwise."

Harry gave a surprised laugh. "I think that'd cause a mutiny, and Katie would have to take over. She might have to anyway."

"You managed with the DA," Hermione reminded him.

"That was just fighting Death Eaters," Harry replied. "This is Quidditch."

"Just fighting Death Eaters. The boy's perceptions were remarkably skewed, though Regulus supposed his own teenage years had gone a bit off kilter, too, even without a deadly face off each year.

"Are you nervous about your captainship?" Regulus asked, looking up from his book now that the conversation was turning away from the uncomfortable 'is Draco a Death Eater?' debate.

"A seeker isn't the most team focused position," Harry replied, with a frown. "I like watching it, but deciding what's best for a whole team isn't something I've done before."

"The Seeker may not be as connected during the game itself, but I assume you have an understanding of Quidditch strategy, or at least what has worked for your team in the past. If you are thinking about your team as a collection of skills to interlink, then it doesn't matter what you are individually doing on the pitch once the game starts," Regulus began, entertaining only the briefest thought that this wasn't the Hogwarts Seeker he had expected to be encouraging when a win for Gryffindor was a loss for Slytherin, but it felt a little less important in the moment than he thought it probably should. "For that matter, it sounds as though you can lead a group of your peers, from what I've heard about the DA. That says more for your fit as captain than your position does."

"A lot of the team are gone this year," Harry said, after a moment. "It's just me, Ron and Katie Bell, one of our chasers. That's two chasers and two beaters needing replaced. Aside from Ginny, I don't know what else I'll have yet."

"They'll have to be better than Kirke and Sloper," Ginny made an face at the idea. "They were barely half decent. Let's hope for good second years or we're doomed."

"I obviously can't speak for Gryffindor's prospects, but I don't see any indication of you being doomed as a captain, at least," Regulus said, shaking his head. "I recall well the stress of the additional responsibility, but I think you will manage it."

"I forgot you were a seeker as well," Harry admitted. "How long were you captain?"

"Just my last year," Regulus answered, privately thinking that he was a bit relieved he'd never had to suffer captainship at the same time James Potter was heading Gryffindor; he had been
insufferable enough from the perspective of a player, but Regulus bit his tongue on that particular thought. “Alongside NEWTs and prefect duties,” - and holidays with the Death Eaters, he added privately, and horcruxes, as well - “one year of chaos was enough for me.”

"You had a busy year," Hermione said. Her tone more than indicated that she was perhaps thinking of the holidays with Death Eaters too.

"I'll stick to just Captain and NEWTs," Harry sighed. "If I fail Defense, I have no chance of getting into the Auror programme.

“Of all the subjects, that doesn’t sound like the one you’re in danger of failing.” Regulus said, lifting his brow.

"Remember who's teaching it," Harry said glumly. "At least we won't have to worry about talking about HQ in Defense."

“Calling it headquarters will draw the wrong sort of attention,” Hermione said.

"We can just call it the house, Sirius calls it that. Just be glad you and Ron don't have to deal with Fred and George," Ginny said, reaching over to turn the volume back up on the radio. "When it comes to prefects, they've caused more nervous breakdowns than NEWTs. At least if you take points for being a Death Eater, we have a chance of winning the cup this year."

Regulus considered pointing out that it did not work that way, however much they might dislike Draco, but arguing the semantics of it in a room full of Gryffindor teenagers did not seem worth the effort. Instead, he took the volume switch as an excuse to turn his attention back to the game. That, at least, was a match up he didn’t have to worry too much about.

Any hopes that Harry'd had for not being noticed or causing much of a fuss went out the window the moment the group arrived at King's Cross station. The group filed out in the presence of two men in suits, one with dark hair and a calm expression and the other with a large and impressive mustache who looked deeply uncomfortable. They were ushered in and onto the platform quickly, with Tonks meeting them on the other side. Her hair was still the same mousy brown, but she had woven it into tight curls with flowers.

“Barbary and Gumboil,” Tonks breathed, as the Ministry people – hitwizards, it turned out – headed back through the entrance way. “They're pulling out all the stops.”

“Where's Kingsley?” Sirius asked, glancing around the sea of students, families, and animals at the station.

“Keeping a low profile,” Tonks said. “Are you going on together?”

Harry opened his mouth to say yes, but Hermione cut him off. “Ron and I have to go the prefects carriage, remember? Then rounds.”

“You better get on then,” Tonks said. She took a glance at the clock. “It's almost time.”

It wasn't the first time Sirius had come to see him off, but it was the first time he'd done it in a way Harry could actually say goodbye. He had no idea what he was doing at Christmas, if he'd stay at school or go to the Burrow or go back to Grimmauld Place, and it occurred to Harry there were all of these things he could have been asking about all summer, but he'd forgotten. It'd just been so jam packed, between going to the beach, back to Hogwarts, the secret of Voldemort's immortality, Malfoy, the photographs, the Burrow; he just hadn't thought to ask about what would happen when
he came back or when he would be. They didn't have time to ask now, but he could owl. There was no Umbridge.

“Keep your nose clean,” Sirius said, squeezing his shoulder. “Don't let the git grind you down. Don't go running off to fight Voldemort by yourself. I'm all for embarrassing him a fourth-”

“-Fifth-” Harry muttered.

“A fifth time,” Sirius corrected himself. “As funny as it is, it's not worth your life.”

“I wasn't alone,” Harry said, but hastened to add, “but I'll owl if there's anything more dangerous than Malfoy lurking.”

“Harry!”

He looked behind him to see Tonks on the train, only a couple of feet away. “Is she coming up to the school?”

“Just to Hogsmeade,” Sirius started, but he stopped for a beat, glancing around.

Harry was about to ask him what he saw when he saw a spark of blurred light and found himself on the ground of the platform. Suddenly, everything was moving – someone cried out, people were crowding together and yelling, and he saw a fleeting glance of a suit which made him think one of the hitwizards went past him. He felt Sirius yank him up by his arm, and push him towards the door of the train. On the side of the nearest compartment, Harry caught a fleeting glimpse of a black scorch mark.

“What's going on?” Harry yelled over the commotion, as he found himself being shoved into the compartment.

“The train's going to go any minute,” Sirius said, patting the compartment door. “Go find your friends; we'll sort it out.”

But he didn't have his luggage! “What about Hedwig? I can't leave her!”

“I'll find her!” Sirius promised. The whistle was already blowing to indicate the train was leaving. “Stay with your friends until they've done a sweep of the train. Go!”

With one last look at the commotion outside, Harry ran into the corridor of the train where he was almost immediately met with Ginny and Neville.

“What's happening?” Ginny asked.

“Someone blasted the train,” Harry said. “We better find a compartment.”

The platform had descended into chaos within minutes. Despite being only feet from the train, when Sirius had turned back to see where they were standing, there was nothing there. It was possible his luggage had just been added to the train along with everyone else's, but Hedwig was an unusual owl. She'd be noticed.

“Molly.” He waved her down when he saw the bob of a ginger head amongst the crowd. Her wand was out, but she was looking more upset than ready to fight. “They're all on the train.”

“They're searching it now. No one's getting on or off,” Arthur called from behind her. “They'll find them.”
With a sickening lurch, Sirius found himself doubting them. There had been Death Eater recruits in his sixth year, and in fifth, but he'd had no idea at the time beyond suspicions they were all purist pricks willing to glorify it. The person responsible could already be on the train because they belonged on it. That was too close to Harry to be a coincidence, and he didn't like that he couldn't find his luggage.

“Harry's luggage is missing!” Sirius replied. “So's Hedwig.”

“I'll tell Barbary!” Arthur pushed against the crowd and got an umbrella in his stomach for his trouble.

In front of him, Sirius heard the telltale sounds of the Hogwarts Express starting up again. *F**ck.*

Chapter End Notes

It’s not directly related to this Marius and Cedrella-focused section of the Black family tree drama, but an Andromeda/Ted one-shot has been added to the companion series - [tomorrow starts tonight](#) - for anyone who likes to keep up with those.
“We can reschedule,” said Emmeline. To leave and head off to the middle of nowhere for camping now seemed like abandoning the Order. What about Harry? Someone had taken a shot at him, and his luggage had gone missing. This wasn't a good time. Her birthday was still a few weeks away, and even then, the Order business took precedence.

“So you can sit about here doing what exactly?” Sirius replied when she'd told him as much. “Tonks is with Harry up at the school. They found his things, and McGonagall checked them.”

“What about the attack?” Emmeline asked.

“A noisy spell that would have given him a nasty burn, but it wasn't anything big. Like I told Regulus, no one was hurt.” Sirius shrugged it off in a way that looked entirely too practiced to be real. There was no way he was being nonchalant about Harry. He was never nonchalant about Harry. “It was probably one of the Slytherins.”

“Not everything is house politics,” Emmeline insisted. “What about you?”

“Piss off, Vance. I'm thirty-six. I don't need a babysitter.” Which was not at all what she had been getting at. He had long since made his dislike of being in this house alone very noticeable, and she was doing exactly that.

“There's just so much going on,” Emmeline replied. “It may not be a good time.”

“There's never a good time in the middle of a war,” Sirius said. “It's one night getting away from all of the crap to go be swotty at stars. You'll be back tomorrow. I'll try not to burn the house down.”

It was a legitimate concern. “Is Remus staying here?”

“For a bit,” Sirius replied. “Because I haven't seen him in a while, not for any other reason. Besides, you promised me camping pictures that I can lord over my brother for the rest of what is going to be a very long life if I have anything to say about it.”

“He is bringing a camera too, I believe,” Emmeline responded. That would mean they'd have an excellent muggle-magical cross section, if the Northern Lights did decide to put in an appearance. “I don't think he's truly too concerned about being seen camping.”

“It's true; he's growing up. Going camping with girls and muggle technology, modifying the house and tree, saying muggleborn.” Sirius thumped his chest twice. “So proud.”

“Well, if you're going to be a pillock about it...” Emmeline rolled her eyes, even if she couldn't suppress a smile. Sarcasm and 'humour' probably meant he wasn't going to go up to join Tonks without telling anyone. “You'll send word if there's a problem?”

“Even the Order can survive without you for a night,” Sirius replied. “I know that's hard to believe.”

“You should take the time to work on your messages.” Emmeline said. In actual fact, she didn't believe she'd seen Sirius's corporeal patronus since...well, not since the ‘80s, if truth be told.

“I didn't ask for homework,” Sirius said with a little too much snap to it for her liking. He was hiding his expression behind a mug, so it was hard to tell if she'd crossed a line. Perhaps she'd
bother Remus into pushing him a little. He could push further than she was able to.

“You studied three years to become an animagus,” Emmeline reminded him. “Don't act as if you're not studious in your own right.”

“That was different,” Sirius said. “That was for Remus.”

“And this is for Harry.”

Sirius gave her a dirty look. “Too much time around the resident Slytherin. He's rubbing off on you.”

While Emmeline could easily contest that – she had to be a little good at pushing people to do what she wanted in her line of work, after all – she instead said, “Chance would be a fine thing.” It probably wasn't very hygenic to cause whatever he was drinking to be coughed and spattered across the kitchen table, but as far as shutting him up went, it worked a treat.

The sun was just tapping the horizon when Regulus and Emmeline arrived at their camping spot. Regulus still found it a little odd to say as much, even within the confines of his own mind. Camping was not an activity he had done before, nor an activity he had particularly planned to start, yet the fuzzy idea that they had been talking about for months had finally taken form. Here they were in the Scottish highlands with a tent and a stretching night sky.

Despite the drama ruffled by the stray shot at Harry, they had been urged out the door. In his stomach, anticipation had been stirring for months, buried by one stresser after another, but surrounded by the open stretch of grass and the bordering trees, the world seemed to peel away. Perhaps it was nervousness that squirmed, or perhaps just the off-footed feeling of yet another new experience, but whatever it was, he found it was overall positive, if he had to put a qualifier to it.

Looking around, he saw no sign of other tents, and when he twisted around, Emmeline was swishing theirs up into position with a flick of her wand. Meeting her eyes, he tugged a little smile and walked back over.

“Not the grandest of accommodations, but I'm sure roughing it will not kill us.” Emmeline wiped both her hands together. Her usual pinned curls were pulled up in a ponytail, which she seemed to pull out of the way of as the winds were coming up. “Besides, we want to be outside.”

“Indeed. There is little point in camping out for the aurora if one is not outside to see it,” he agreed.

“Did you end up bringing the muggle pensieve camera?”

"Sadly not." Emmeline placed both of her hands behind her hips. "As a rule of thumb, never expect anything you give Sturges back when he says it'll be ready. He tinkers. I suppose I don’t blame him taking some time. It would be nice to see some old footage. After a while, you can't quite remember what people sounded like, or how they moved in a hurry. It's important to preserve what memories I can."

Regulus nodded, feeling a little twinge. “Certainly. Time will do that.”

"You'll simply have to work on not getting in trouble until I can get the camera." Emmeline glanced over him, with her eyes lingering around his legs. "If it's possible."

“It has only happened one time in seventeen years,” Regulus countered pointedly. “I'm sure I can manage.”
"They've only known about you for a few months, and last time ended very unpleasantly."
Emmeline took several steps back, perhaps gazing at the orange of the horizon. "Yes, I think this is a good spot. It's several hundred feet until any main water source; the muggles are largely down there, so no problems in the statute; we have our supplies, so no need to worry about refueling...just need to set up the hover charm for the camera, and I'd say we're well prepared."

For a moment, Regulus considered the argument that leaving the Death Eaters at all typically resulted in a successful hunt, but it did not feel important enough to circle back, so instead, he nodded.

"The sunset alone is lovely," he commented, "but I hope the aurora is cooperative."

"We can come back if the experience is agreeable," Emmeline decided. She bent down with her wand, tapping on the ground before small flames erupted. "It gets a bit nippy up here at night. I brought a couple of blankets as well, just in case we wanted to sit outside without open flame. I did also bring some books on the phenomena. Did you know that at around two hundred feet, it has a low level noise?"

"You've thought of everything, hm?" A little smile tugged again at his mouth. "What sort of sound does it make?"

"Static." Emmeline's cheeks pinked slightly. "You joke, but you like that I'm thorough. I didn't pack a star chart, because I would expect you to know what you're looking for, but everything else."

"I do," Regulus said, smothering a flicker of awkwardness that rose alongside a rush of fondness, and he settled in a comfortably-padded chair they had transfigured upon setting up. It wasn't exactly unpleasant - she was right that he liked it beyond the point of mere appreciation, though it felt a bit silly to put to words. Perhaps it was the knowledge that his brother's eyes would be rolling out of his head, were he present, or perhaps that Narcissa's would be narrowing for quite another reason, but it was true, nonetheless. The feeling had been teetering on the edge of his thoughts for some time now, like feet dangling over the edge of some wall of conventionality.

He knew the rule, but it did not feel very important, at the moment. "There are a number of things I like about you, with your thoroughness among them," he added after a brief beat, the tone measured to something casual, though he continued rather swiftly: "And as it applies to the star charts, you are right in that, as well. Professor Slughorn informed me that I got an O for my NEWT exam, so I might as well put that to use in very important situations, such as this one."

"You left without knowing?" Emmeline made a full cringe. "That would have done me in, I'm afraid."

"I left the night we got back. It was a truly dreadful wait," Regulus admitted, watching where the sun was dipping still lower. "I put a lot of effort into those exams, all things considered - or at least a lot of stress. I didn't think about it much at the time, but it bothered me later."

"What did you end up taking?" Emmeline inquired. "I think we can both agree you didn't really have the constraints of bearing employability in mind."

"No such constraints, no," he said with a little shake of his head. "I took Astronomy, Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, Defense, and Ancient Runes. What about yourself?"

"I had a little bit of the constraints, so try to restrain your urge to mock the fact I took Divination." Emmeline transfigured herself an overstuffed seat, too, before settling into it. "I did also take
Potions, Runes, Arithmancy and Charms, but as you can see, I'm not terrible at Transfiguration. I'm just not terribly interested in it."

With a lightened tone, Regulus glanced over with a flicker of amusement "There might be a little bit of mockery, but I will do so in my head so you don’t have to feel bad about it. That counts as restraint, does it not?"

"It has its moments. Sight is a little bit like traveling a long hallway and being able to hear people talking inside. You never get the context or the full story, so it takes true analysis and luck to be able to decode it. Tangible answers are often not within grasp." Emmeline gave him a cheeky look. "You'd hate that. Or perhaps not as much as you'd imagine you would. You like to have your answers quite cut and dry, but at the same time, maintain enough spark you can keep searching into it and end up somewhere else. An active mind, as my father would have called it. No off option. I can certainly relate. Time is easier, more solid."

“What did your father do?” Regulus watched her face, thinking that she had not spoken of them much at all, since the attack on her house, but she did not appear to be visibly upset. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

"He was an authenticator at Montague & Cadwallader's, the auction house. It's the thin white building next to the Menagerie in Diagon." Emmeline nodded to herself, but gave a tight smile. "He was very good with portraits. You'd be surprised how many people want originals of a variety of people, from Dumbledore to Merlin. Especially if they're vocal. He could identify pigment origins, historical parchment inaccuracies, anachronisms in stylistic choice, inconsistent vocal charms." She lifted her fingers together. "A good eye for little details. I like to think I carry on that particular legacy."

“I would say that you do.” Regulus held her gaze for a moment, then tipped his head and looked to the low crackle of the fire. He thought then that he would have liked to meet Emmeline’s father, to ask him personally and perhaps see what other Emmeline-esque similarities might surface. It was a sickening cruelty, what had happened, though he supposed she felt it more keenly than anyone. “It sounds like an interesting line of work,” he added.

"It is," Emmeline admitted. "But too finicky for me. I require new curiosities or I get bored. It did mean I spent a considerable amount of time in your front hallway because, while I'm quite sure all of the portraits are in fact genuine, they still look as if they were painted for museums. They're not personal. They're detached, or only showing a very specific snapshot. With no disrespect, I don't believe I've ever seen anything quite like your mother’s. Given the other portraits’ purposeful representation of how they wished to be seen or remembered, it was very startling at first."

Regulus continued to find his mother’s portrait startling, even a year later, though it wasn’t polite to explicitly say as much, so he nodded instead. “It’s not very consistent with my experiences.”

"I know it must be distressing to see something like that. We don't have to discuss it." Emmeline shrugged a little. "It's only a curiosity among curiosities for me. I could imagine spending an entire lifetime trying to get all the details of that house down and still not completing the survey."

“That’s probably true. I’m still discovering things, myself,” Regulus said, shaking off the mental image of the hollow, volatile portrait behind the curtains at home. “Quite a few years were lost along the way, but I suppose the point still stands.”

"It enjoys consistently surprising me," Emmeline said, in a tone that suggested she had just decided this. "Of course, I knew Sirius first, long before I stepped foot in doors, and most of the time - and I do emphasise the word most - it's not much of a reflection of him as I know him. Parts, but
sporadic parts, rarely seen parts. Then of course, I saw more of the house before we spoke. I had no particular inclination to watch someone who I couldn't reasonably interact with, but I suppose what I garnered, I had an expectation. Then I believed that no, I don't believe it is an accurate representation of you - or what has lead up to you - either, for you are so deeply defined by your individual choices. I couldn't envisage a warmth there, a safety, a fostering of curiosity without danger, but it has meant that to more than one person in its current capacity. I like to think houses like that evolve and change with whomever has them at the moment. They have blood, and magic, in a shell not unlike us - and not unlike you, I think it enjoys surprising people who do not account for its intricacies. I do enjoy surprises."

"An accurate appraisal." Some of the tension eased as Regulus lifted a small smile and looked over at her. "For the most part, I prefer facilitating surprises as compared to experiencing them, but I suppose that works rather well for our purposes…” A brief pause, and then he added: “Though it feels strange that the house did not seem a very accurate representation of me. I suppose it has always felt so central.”

"I'll amend to I enjoy surprises from people I trust not to make it an awful one," Emmeline agreed. "The observation wasn’t an insult to either, but rather a difference in personality. You are understated, the house is very much not. You're quiet, no go there either. There is a brutality in many of the objects that simply does not reflect you, beyond perhaps a curiosity in how they function. You are both compassionate and empathetic, and have never once insulted my choice of hairstyle, and I can't say the same for that either. While I try not to take it personally - a portrait is not a person, but a moment in time locked in paint and magic - I will admit to it being a little grating in one's sanctuary to have to deal with that. Not that I'm not grateful, of course."

Regulus felt a little twinge of guilt on behalf of the house's less polite behaviour. There was a question as to whether his mother would have been easier or more difficult to listen to on the subject of Emmeline's presence in the house were she still alive, compared to the echo remaining in her portrait. The living commentary would probably be worse, though he felt guiltier still for thinking it.

"I apologise for their commentary. Your hair always looks lovely," he said, eyes flicking to the ponytail and back again.

"I like that you made my point for me there." Emmeline smiled widely before looking down in a slightly sheepish manner. "You don't have to apologise for something that isn't your doing. I can cope with some period appropriate purism, though the more recent examples do get to me more. My point was that while you are obviously respectful of your family history, you don't think in the same old patterns or traps. It's a priority, but the priorities appear to be the safety of others, the downfall of a certain so named dark lord, and preservation, but not necessarily participation. The only sad part of that is you don't prioritise yourself, which is very upsetting because you are a singular individual who deserves as much if not more."

In his chest, Regulus felt a pleasant little thump. He was not a stranger to compliments with a name that would have propped him through his childhood regardless of his academic and athletic efforts, but it was a different kind of earnestness - more personal and focused.

"There are a lot of factors in play, not just myself - but - I appreciate that,” he settled, meeting her eyes. “I suppose the perspective of it all is a bit different now.”

Emmeline nodded. "Because you're not eighteen - or was it seventeen?"

“Seventeen, yes,” he confirmed with a little nod, “but my birthday was a month later, so it depends on how you think about it.”
"I think eighteen was a long time ago too," Emmeline replied. "It may not be what you imagined, but you don't seem unhappy with how things have turned out. Frustrated, but that's to be expected."

"I'm not unhappy, no." His mouth tugged up a little at the corner, watching her face. The frustration was certain, but it was almost strange, how much more frequent the pleasant moments were - and embarrassing though it was, she was a frequent centerpiece in those moments, making it a little more embarrassing to think about. "Were it back then, I probably wouldn't be here…" When he looked back to the sky, he saw a smear of orange where the sun was steadily disappearing. "But I'm glad that I am."

"Me too." Emmeline smiled back. "But I think we should get a blanket out and do as the gazers do. While I can rough it lying against the ground, something tells me you're not a fan."

She wasn't wrong. He tended not to make a habit of lying on the ground, but when he looked up at the darkening dome above them, he felt that it mightn't be so bad, with the sight to come. "To do as the gazers do, I suppose I could make an exception."

"There's that adventurous side again," Emmeline replied. She stood up, flattening down her robes as she did so. "However, I still think a blanket to lie on is a good idea. Something crawling in the grass is not how I want to be interrupted tonight."

"Obviously. I'm not going to lay on the ground without the blanket," he said dryly, but the little smile remained in his lips as he glanced over. "There's mud down there."

"I think that's why it's the great outdoors. Mud, trees, a variety of insects to bite you." Emmeline wagged her finger at the sky with a stern expression. "You had better be worth the potential of all of that."

"I prefer the sky. It's much cleaner up there." He shifted his attention upwards in a mirror to her own gaze, sweeping his eyes across the little pricks of light creeping into view. "But despite my preferential feelings, her point still stands, so I expect an impressive display if I am going to lie on the ground."

She glanced back at him, "Have I let you down on one of these outings as yet?"

Turning his attention back to her, he met her eyes with a small shake off his head. "No. You have not."

"Then I suggest you trust me," Emmeline replied. "Even if the weather is uncooperative for a light show, there are no lights for miles. We should get a stunning view of the stars."

"I was talking to the sky just then, not to you," he said with a play at solemnity. "If you lower your expectations by saying 'just the stars are sufficient,' it's going to hear you and make less of an effort. We must maintain our united front."

Emmeline stared at him for a long moment before beginning to laugh. "Your ability to say 'the sky is listening' with a straight expression is proof you're still entirely ridiculous. Let no other Unspeakable hear you. They'll open an investigation into whether we do have an eavesdropping sky or not."

"Are you certain it hasn't been proposed yet? I'm rather sure one of them was talking to the ceiling in the Space Division during our tour." He cracked a little smile.

"That's the herbologist faction for you," Emmeline replied coolly. "I haven't done that since I was a teenager, and never on the clock. I get other perks."
“Such as the time loops, prior to their closing? I would prefer that, as far as perks go,” he agreed with a nod.

"I'd think access to that amount of experimental and exploratory magic, objects, and phenomena would be perk enough for you." Emmeline took another glance at the sky. "Do you want to stay here, or hike up somewhere higher for a better look?"

“I am in favour of a better look,” he said, shifting a little to glance at the landscape for higher ground. He had never done much in the way of hiking, but if they were going to come out here and make a night of it, might as well reach for the best of it. “As to the perks, I was considering it from a differential perspective between the rooms, but as someone who who is outside of the department, access to any aspect of your fascinating workspace has been a delight.”

Emmeline simply nodded and disappeared from sight for a few moments before returning with an old looking satchel. "What would you choose, if you could have chosen a department?"

“It’s hard to say,” he admitted, sifting through the memories of each room they had strolled through within the loop - and those they had not. “Space, time, alchemy, the manifestation of thoughts… There was only a glimpse into each, if that, so it is hard to say what would be most compelling with further investigation. To narrow it, study of the mind is interesting, aggressive brain tentacles aside, as is the exploration of astronomical bodies, though it is a bit difficult to take their mind-altering substances seriously.”

"I don't think making up your mind is your strong point." Emmeline sniggered. "Too much to see, too little time to do it all."

“There is a lot to consider when making key life decisions. I like to be confident in them,” he said, finding that his eyes were flicking to hers again. Taking a hypothetical job at the Ministry was one level of thought, but quite another decision had been prodding at him, and he wondered how much it had been prodding at her, too.

Certain strides forward could not be so easily backtracked: words could not be unsaid, feelings could not be untangled, past expectations could not be fulfilled as intended, no matter what efforts were made. Regulus supposed that such a point had come and gone at some point, but for all his considerations, it was hard to say exactly when.

He rose from his chair, then, to scoop up the other bag nestled against the tent, and as he slung it over his shoulder, he joined her at the edge of their tiny camp space. The view of the sky was lovely from the chairs, but from atop the hill, it would be even lovelier.

Finding higher ground hadn't been too difficult. This was Scotland, after all. Almost all of it classified itself as higher ground. It could never be said that Emmeline was the type to trek up hills very often, but with the required incentive, she could push herself to do so. It took a little wandering through some uncomfortably scratchy brambles to find a nice clearing without too clear a view of the lake.

She set aside the bag with its heated containers and spread out a large blanket and a few pillows, more for setting her elbows on than anything else. She then initiated the cushioning charm, as she could feel something digging into her thigh otherwise. The camera set up took longer - it was much fiddlier than it had been in the workshop - but perhaps it was just different with the wind blowing. Beside her, Regulus was snapping occasional photographs of the scenery with the magical camera and when she took a few test shots, they appeared agreeable. She left the automatic snap timings to take random moments of the sky and went back to situate herself. It took awhile for the green and
yellow glow to spread across the sky, separating a deep blue and purple sky in half between the streaks and the stars. There wasn't much view of the galaxies as there had been in pictures: there were too many shimmering streaks for that. It was still exceptionally peculiar to watch as the colours began to spread a change, a deeper green, purple, red. A wavering rainbow lighting up the night.

"It almost looks like thousands of candles twinkling in the wind," Emmeline whispered after a while, because it seemed like the sort of moment you should whisper. She shifted again from her position on the blanket, even if it was a little dizzying to look up for too long. "I suppose it’s early yet, but I am surprised how thick it is. I wonder if it’s the weather."

"Perhaps so," Regulus whispered in return, planted on his stomach with a pillow beneath his own propped up arms. Their shoulders had bumped a little when she moved, but he did not seem to react too much to it. “Whatever the reason, it is certainly breathtaking.”

"It's not cold, so it could be heat waves,” Emmeline theorised. She did try not to think about the fact she was a little sore about that, but while she was generally a fairly cuddly person in comparison to most people, it was a little harder to deny ulterior motives while blushing. She pushed her hand out towards some of the more pinkish area. "I think there's a new wave coming in there."

Turning his head towards her, his eyes flicked from her half-covered cheek to her eyes. With a shift of his own, Regulus bumped back at her shoulder with the hint of a smile. “Should you need any cooling charms, I would be happy to oblige.”

Was he making a joke about her mocking his insistence on wearing long sleeves due to his illustrious youth? He was barely able to look her in the face when speaking about it a few months ago. That seemed like progress. "Cheeky," she said, lightly. "I'm glad you're here, even if you are cheeky."

“I'm glad that you invited me along." He held his attention on her face for a moment longer before looking forward again to the rippling smear of colours. “Another line on the list of things I did not think I was ever going to do. I did not used to think I would like such a list very much, but I suppose I have you to thank for the beautiful view in more than one respect.”

Emmeline squirmed around, before moving to sit on her knees. "That was quite blatant for you," she noted. While there had been a vague flirtation going on, that was bordering on the subtext becoming very much text. It was inevitable after a few months of dancing around the issue. In a moment of impulse, she pressed the subject. "At the risk of making a pleasant night uncomfortable, I've thought about it extensively and have reached an impasse without input from you on the subject. We don't have to, but I do believe it warrants discussion at this point."

Regulus nodded, then pushed himself up to sit next to her. His eyes remained on the aurora ahead of them as his arms folded loosely over his knees, but he did not let the silence sit for long: “I have been thinking about it, too.”

"That's a relief. This would be much more embarrassing otherwise." Though Emmeline had to admit, it was plenty embarrassing as it was. Having a grandiose light display in the heavens above certainly would provide ample distraction when needed. "I suppose I should not beat about the bush, then. I do, in actual fact, find you to be quite attractive, physically, which is quite obvious, but more substantially, er, for me, as it is, more so mentally. You have an interesting mind, and you're not boring, and those aspects mixed with a good heart is an exceptionally rare thing and not something I take lightly. I'm not bored; I don't feel in any particular danger; and along with the variety of physical signs which I won't get into would all indicate genuine emotion rather than a
crush. Though I have other trepidations, I think I'm happy about it. What are your thoughts?"

A pause stretched for a few lingering seconds (punctuated by an awkward shift of his own) before Regulus responded. “My thoughts bear some similarities. You are lovely, without a doubt, whatever impolite commentary has come your way - but a keen mind rings far more interesting, and there is no other mind I would rather engage with.” He took in and breathed out a soft huff. “I did not come back to England with the expectation of collaboration, nor companionship, and truthfully, I did not even think I wanted it. Which would have been simpler, of course.” With a slight shake of his head, he continued, “You have been a series of exceptions to rules I did not feel particularly motivated to change - or permitted to change, perhaps… but being around you makes me feel happy. Guilty, sometimes, for being happy… but the guilt doesn’t make the feeling stop. The feeling just makes me want to stop feeling guilty.” Regulus tipped his head a little and turned to meet her eyes again. “To name a few, among a great many thoughts.”

"Everyone brings their history into a new romantic relationship. We'd have more than most. Neither of us make excuses for it, but it would be something that would require addressing." Some things, more than others, would cause problems in different ways. They had a history of conflict in that it was likely that his former cohorts did murder a considerable amount of her friends and family, though he had never shied away from it, nor the associated guilt or unfairness of it.

"There are the mundane things of previous relationships, and given the current climate and the one we both grew up in, I imagine those have their own associated scars." Taking a deep breath, Emmeline took the plunge. "You would have to deal with the fact I'm impure, whatever that truly means, and that this would cause friction within certain circles you're attempting to maintain. As much as I find the culture fascinating in its own right, I don't believe purity of blood is a real phenomenon, and I certainly don't believe I'm somehow less magical because my family have never been magic exclusive in their affections. I may not have been as vocal as my friends, but I am an ardent supporter of muggleborn equality; I believe in the squib rights movement; I'm not a fan of the legislation that keeps magic and muggle separate as long as our cultures as preserved and respected, and not merely because it keeps me from ever seeing inside giant telescopes or going to space."

There was every chance much of this was a moot point, but she pressed on regardless. "While I do not believe you see me as lesser than you, nor have I ever known you to be vocal about muggleborns in any way, shape or form, I do believe this could be a potential issue for both of us. You, because I believe some of your guilt would stem from the fact that having a successful relationship could end in a marriage which would not be socially accepted by some peers, nor ancestry. Me, because I'm not the type to take the judgement easily nor quietly, and frankly, my Nana might eat you alive. They are valid concerns, particularly in this climate and stage of life. It's not the biggest hurdle for me - that is very much the martyring and perhaps the knock on effects of vigilantism versus Death Eaters - but it is inviting trouble. I could handle it, but I have no intention of forcing it upon you and believe our friendship, given time, would be maintained regardless. I'm also going to take some water, because monologuing is quite taxing on the throat."

Regulus dipped a small nod as she grabbed her water bottle, then turned his eyes to the horizon again. A few more uncomfortable seconds passed before he gave any verbal response. “I've thought about all of that, as well… with little luck as far as solid solutions go, but I do know that I don’t like what these rigid restrictions have done to my family.” A hesitant, steeling breath, and then: “I found out what happened to my mother’s uncle - why he was burned off of the tree.”

It was not exactly the response she expected, but Emmeline pressed nonetheless. Sometimes it took a little dancing to get the point with him. "Oh?"
His eyes had trained again on the shifting colours of the Northern Lights, but it didn't seem like he was actually looking at them, for the moment. "He was a squib. He died when he was six - maybe seven... An accident, it sounded like, when the magic wasn't drawn out. I don't know who, but someone burned him off for it, afterwards. He was just a child." Shaking his head, Regulus looked for a second like he was going to say something else, but instead just tightened his mouth.

The gasp released unbidden, but aside from the anger in her stomach, Emmeline found herself merely saddened by it. A child could not be held accountable for the prejudices of the world. It wasn't unheard of; the rumour mill always grinded about the extremist measures to maintain a fully magical bloodline, but no less horrifying. "There does seem to be something of a pattern of placing responsibility of an entire house and its woes or successes on children in your family." She wasn't sure how he would take it if she followed on, but honesty was important. "While sacrifice can be noble, sacrifice for the sake of appearances is a horrifying concept if said sacrifice is your child. Though I will admit, I've heard some of it reflected from Arabella. She has a horrid habit of saying how she serves no use. It's an ingrained attitude, this idea that without exceptional magic, you are some sort of non-entity. I would posit children are not supposed to have a 'use' - they are simply your children - but I fear this is likely why the removal took place. I'm sorry for your loss."

Closing his eyes, he took in a slow breath, then let it out again, just as slowly. When he opened his eyes again, there was still the hint of a frown, but some of the tightness had loosened from his face. "I've dampened the mood further, but it has been on my mind, recently, and... isn't something I wish to perpetuate. My decisions as of late have... not been particularly popular, but I don't want that mindset to dictate what I'm permitted to do," he said, shifting a little to meet her eyes again. "I assure you that it's not a matter of 'forcing' anything upon me. Since before I can clearly remember, I've known the sort of reactions to expect for acting against expectations, and I will not pretend that I have particularly liked to see those reactions in action, but - I don't make decisions lightly."

Still watching her face, Regulus untucked an arm from its loose fold on his knees, then held out his hand between them, palm up.

"No, but you do make them in isolation." Emmeline scooted a little closer, and threaded her fingers into his. "I have not had a good few months. It was not a good last war for me either. I have lost too many people I care about, and your tendency towards self-sacrifice for the wider good scares me half to death. If you don't want to perpetuate decisions based on worth, could you start with yourself? Regardless of the outcome of any decision you should make, happy and alive is my preferred state for you. I'm prepared to deal with extremist viewpoints; with any particularly terrible thing you've done in your brief tenure as a Death Eater, providing you can deal with any participation I had in stopping Death Eaters you may feel attached to; and the sheer volume of teasing I can expect from my friends; but reassurance that you know you're cared for deeply and wouldn't run off without telling someone and at least talking about it first would mean a lot. I don't know how many more losses my heart can take at the moment."

Regulus paused a beat, eyes locked with hers, and then he nodded. "I can agree to that."

"Then I lift my concerns," Emmeline nodded. "Are there any I can help you with?"

"Those that are within your control have already been addressed." Shifting his grip, he then lifted her hand to press a kiss to the knuckles. "Perhaps it will be a disaster, but at least it is likely to be a happy and intellectually stimulating disaster," he said with a subtle flicker at the corner of his mouth as he gently squeezed her fingers.

Emmeline felt herself blush, but this time indicated her face with her other hand. "It's a good thing I
look nice with pink cheeks, because I think it'll be my semi-permanent colouring for a while. To intellectually stimulating but happy disasters, then. Not to mention the end of the ridiculous betting pool."

“Is the betting pool actually real?” Regulus lifted his brow, slightly. “I assumed Sirius was making that up.”

"Oh, no, it's real." Emmeline barely stifled a laugh. "It's leftover from our school days, but half the Order ended up in on it. I'm not sure who claimed September, but I rather hope it's Remus. Not only will it really annoy Hestia, but I'm quite sure I'm going to clean up with he and Tonks, and fair is fair. There's always several going on at once. We used to have one on how long till the next Prewett-shaped explosion, on relationships, word choices. It's a safe house habit, a little light entertainment to break up the crushing fear and angst."

Another flicker of wry amusement tugged at Regulus’s mouth, and he shook his head. “Of course. I should have assumed as much.”

"It's a legitimate concern. When Sirius comes out with something, it's either a bold lie or it's an audacious truth, but they have the same intonation, so who knows? It makes playing Truth or Dare very frustrating." Of course, Regulus would know that even better than she would. She would have to indicate a desire to try playing around them both to see what what happen. "If it truly upset them, I would do nothing of the sort, but the rumours can be entertaining. We rib each other. The muggle Minister’s wife reportedly made a sherry-fueled pass at Kingsley, for example, so for a week afterwards all he got were fake drunken passes. It's the curse of too many extroverts in one place. It’s loud, gossipy, and always something is going on."

“Another special mix of extroverts, from what I have gathered,” he remarked. With a deep exhale, he threaded their fingers loosely again and shifted his gaze back to the aurora, lined with bold splashes of colours that rose up to meet the dense expanse of stars that domed above them.

"Special is not the term I'd use,” Emmeline replied dryly. She gave his hand a slight tug. "I think we ought to go back to enjoying the quiet while we can. It won't last, at least until there's time to do this or something like this again."

Regulus dipped his head into a little nod, face relaxing into a look of contentment. “I think that is an excellent idea.”

That had gone surprisingly better than expected. It was done in private, whereas there would more likely be opportunities for frustration, embarrassment, and the intrusion of other issues when they returned back to the house, but for now, things were fine. Quite well, in fact. Reluctant to let go of his hand as it was actually rather cute that he'd done that, she did a little contorting to try and figure out a way to lie back at the same time, but it did involve quite a decent amount of scooting that really wasn't at all dignified. She let out a huff. This was the kind of trouble relationships brought. They were not dignified; they could be a pain to navigate; and trying to find out another person's preferences and rhythms in an intimate setting was always higher stakes. A glance at Regulus showed he seemed quite happy enough with it, and he did not seem to be chortling at her. Perhaps he was just being polite, but he’d shown no such hesitation in mockery before. Perhaps, then, he too didn’t want to shatter the moment.

At least if she was about to make a fool out of herself, caring for someone, she wouldn't be alone in the matter.

On the outset of the night, Regulus had intended to find time in his busy stargazing schedule to
sleep. He had even brought a vial of Dreamless Sleep along for the nightly lull, guarding against the nightmares that often crept in when he left his unconscious mind to its own devices, but never before had he seen a sky so beautiful. In that, he found a lovely excuse to keep awake - and in the reeling thoughts that stirred in the wake of his talk with Emmeline. Leading up to the trip, he had not strictly expected to lay those particular thoughts and feelings out on display, but he felt strangely light, now that he had.

For hours, they had laid back on the cushioned blanket, huddled against the chill and staring at the dizzying web of stars in relative (but nonetheless contented) silence. From the satchel he’d carried up the hill, Regulus had at one point pulled out the camera, snapping a few photographs of the aurora itself and the thick, glittering stars hanging above them. They would not do justice to the reality of it, he knew - especially in respect to the bold colours - but he was curious to see if the magical camera would capture the subtle, dynamic movements.

When at last Emmeline was starting to drift, just a few hours shy of sunrise, they returned to their campsite below where she had climbed into one of the beds inside. Regulus himself had wrapped himself in a blanket and stubbornly pushed past the pull of sleep, well into that hazy sort of second wind sometime around four in the morning. For once, it wasn’t the inevitable flood of disapproval from certain societal factions that he found himself dwelling on, but rather a pointed sort of relaxation in the moment, free from it all.

The first hint of morning light was just starting to glimmer on the horizon when Regulus heard the rustle behind him, coming from the tent. Blinking a few times, he twisted around in his chair to see Emmeline poking around from between the flaps, already dressed in her clothes from the night before - or more realistically, she was probably still dressed in her clothes from the night before, not unlike himself.

“Good morning,” he greeted.

Emmeline blinked owlishly in return. "You're very chipper for someone who must have had less sleep than me."

Though he was no stranger to sleepless nights, even when there wasn’t a beautiful sight to soak in, Regulus pressed a smile. “Sometimes it is easier to simply maintain momentum.”

“I should have tried maintaining momentum,” Emmeline commented before she raised her hand to cover a particularly effusive yawn. “It was still worth it.”

With a small smile, he turned forward again to look at the start of the sunrise, still flecked with streaks of green. “I must say I was not disappointed.”

"High stakes for next time," Emmeline replied. She tapped the side of her head. "Already planning."

“Such a view is difficult to surpass, but I shall look forward to it,” Regulus said, leaning back into the chair with a contented sigh. “Any ideas yet?”

"It depends whether we go big or we go small," Emmeline replied, barely stifling another yawn. "I have reasonable ideas for both, and a few unreasonable ideas for good measure. I think I'm going to light the fire again and bake some apples; would you like one?"

“I would,” Regulus answered as curiosity nudged at the edge of his mind. “Vague as they might be, the options sound promising.”
"You do have varied interests. It does mean weighing my options to see what is going to work and what's going to take some preparations." With a lazy swish of her wand, two green apples floated into the vicinity of the blackened ground and remains of a fire. They wrapped themselves in silver paper, then as the flame reignited, they dropped into a hover. "I'm considering a particular multipronged museum, which has a scaled celestial map and specimens retrieved from space travel that you can touch with your own hands. That sounds quite exciting. There's also a variety of skeletons and recreations of extinct species, exhibits on genetics and change at the deepest levels. Or there's a safari, I don't know if you've ever been on one? I may have a slight obsession with the baby giraffes at the sanctuary in Wiltshire; they will just lie on your knee. Leggy, unable to keep from bumping into everything, but very sweet and very friendly if you're not threatening."

Emmeline sniggered. "Oh, I think I just described Tonks!"

"Accurate, indeed." Amusement flickered at the corner of his mouth. "Well, I have never done any of those things, so it does not sound as though there is a wrong answer, in that respect."

"I believe I did tell you once you needed better experiences," Emmeline replied. "Trying new things can help that."

"You did - and have seen to it that there is no shortage there," he remarked.

For a moment, Emmeline looked unsure. "You'll tell me if I'm pushing too hard?"

Regulus nodded, and despite some aspects of his questionable adolescence, he felt it was probably true. "Should it pass the point of interesting, I will decline."

"I won't ask you to do anything unsafe without consulting you first," Emmeline said, in a serious tone. On the fire, the apples spat and crackled to punctuate the statement. "I'm sure there's also plenty you've done that I haven't."

Regulus was not, in truth, terribly concerned about Emmeline putting him into danger - typically, he had that managed on his own - but he simply nodded, rather than saying as much. Judging by her remarks the night before, she was aware of it already.

“That is true enough. The nature of those experiences has shifted every seventeen years or so, but they are experiences, nonetheless,” he commented wryly.

Emmeline gave him a look of sleep-dampened disdain. “Though admittedly first hand experience of certain magic has a certain appeal, and definitely did when I was seventeen, if you've really read every book in your library, your expertise in some obscure things must be considered unusual and interesting without dragging that into it.” Then she clicked her teeth. “Also, I can’t dance anything other than sad uncle at wedding dancing, so I imagine that too.”

“I'm afraid ‘sad uncle at wedding dancing’ was not part of any curriculum I experienced; in that, I expect your point stands.” His mouth flicked up. "As to the subject of obscure knowledge, Sirius would argue that I'm not allowed to count book expertise as experience, but I am inclined to prefer your criteria."

“The first of many differences in our respective childhoods, I'm sure,” Emmeline replied. “On both counts, as I don't have siblings let alone argumentative ones. Besides, all things are theoretical and based in knowledge alone until someone does them. Perhaps a fundamental difference in viewpoint. There are those who do things then work with results to theorise, and those who theorise and then test. There's room for both schools of thought.”

“Certainly.” He tipped his head in a nod. ‘A fundamental difference in viewpoint’ sounded
accurate. He and Sirius had experienced that on more than one occasion - some serious, some inconsequential, but frequent, nonetheless. Or rather, it had been frequent earlier in life, at the least. “I often tried to ignore Sirius when he expressed unsolicited commentary on my ‘boring life,’ but I rather like that view of it.”

“The fact he uses boring when you're life is a series of quiet moments intertwined with insanely dramatic moments indicates that he doesn't understand the meaning of the word.” Emmeline jiggled her head in an indecisive fashion. "Or that his standard for dramatics is so high that it seems quiet by comparison. If you're not in a life or death situation at least once a week, you must be a bore. I'd argue it's more difficult to have a less dramatic existence in your case, given the amount of drama-prone people and unforgiving, large-scale environments that you appear to be in or around day in and out. You are technically in constant peril. You just don't seem moved to act like it, or thrive on it."

“I find excessive dramatics to be stressful, after a point,” Regulus admitted, and though his brother was not the only one in his life that was frequently guilty of it, he opted to leave the comment vague. Even then, he supposed the worst of the dramatics were often in the safety of the house. “For that matter, they do not change the state of peril, either, though I had not put much specific thought into it in that light.”

“No, but it can be cathartic.” Emmeline pulled the wrapped apples from the fire, setting them lightly on a propped up box to cool. “I’m not surprised you didn’t think of it. As a rule, going from those I’ve met or heard of, you really do seem to be full on dramatics or none at all without much in between. That must be exhausting. Being a little dramatic now and then isn’t so bad. I can be quite melodramatic when occasion calls.”

“What sort of occasions tend to bring on your dramatics?” he asked with the hint of a smile.

"A few," Emmeline replied, perhaps with a touch of defensiveness to her tone. "Anything more than three glasses of wine and I start to become loud, clingy and incomprehensible. I know I got into a panic once because it was Saturday, but no one could prove it was Saturday because ever since the first Saturday, do we know someone kept meticulous score of which day it was? What if they overslept? It could have been Sunday, even Monday. There was no way to know for sure. Everyone just looks at a calendar and assumes. This may be a Time Department sort of dramatics, but it does show how I can escalate, especially if I’m tired or under some sort of influence."

Regulus's smile spread into a poorly veiled grin. “Well, that does sound like a very serious concern.”

"It's not always negatives. Sometimes, I get overly dramatic when I figure something out that I didn't realise I had been wondering about. It's like there's a queue of questions in my brain, and though the important ones take precedence, sometimes I'll find the answer to one in the queue and feel the need to announce it and possibly jump even if it's a little bit silly,” Emmeline admitted, looking down and away from him. "Or just very big questions. At what point does something you've charmed to respond or mimic a living thing become classed as a sentient being? If blood magic is often used in old buildings, are they in some form sentient as they seem to have quirks or preferences, such as the infamous Friday staircase at Hogwarts or the fact that your house doesn't listen to your mother’s portrait in regards to Sirius, despite the fact he's been removed from the family tree? I get dramatic when I get obsessed. I'm sure you relate.”

“I do. I suppose there is a correlation between the two for me, as well,” he granted. “A big investment - whether in action or thought - calls for a comparable response.”

"Given that we are about to embark upon quite an entangled investment, I feel the need to get that
picture of you camping for blackmail purposes," Emmeline stated, matter of factly.

“I was relying on you to forget in your state of sleep deprivation.”

"I told you." Emmeline grinned. "I don't forget. I just put it in the queue."

“There is a first time for everything, as the saying goes,” Regulus said, though he supposed it applied as much to the proof of camping as it did the prospect of forgetting.

"You look barely a hair out of place, so it's not much of a blackmail photo," Emmeline assured. "More of a memento."

“A memento is much better framing,” he agreed, though in some cases, the circumstances along were sufficient to function as blackmail. All the same, she was right in that it could be far worse if he were askew with bedhead. “Let us take our camping photograph, then.”

"Oh no, this is of you," Emmeline said. She wandered back into the tent for a moment, but called back loudly. "I look as if I've packed for a week in Italy under my eyes. You can do mine next time."

Regulus reached down to pull the other camera out of his bag (the magical camera, as it was), then held it poised in hand. As she slipped back out of the tent with the muggle camera, he snapped a picture. “Faulty logic,” he declared. “I didn’t sleep either.”

"Interrupted sleep makes you look worse than no sleep at all," Emmeline replied. "Since you don't look particularly different, either you never sleep or you do look better than I."

“It’s not so noticeable. I think you still look lovely,” Regulus said politely, and he did mean it, even if the lack of sleep had darkened the dips under her eyes. In truth, she wasn't wholly inaccurate in her supposition - he did not achieve restful sleep on nights that he opted to forego the potion, even when he tried, but he twisted back around without further comment on the matter. Lining up the magical camera with the campfire and the horizon, he snapped a photograph of the scene: the fire was still crackling, and sun had only just started peeking up over the hills.

From behind the tent, a silvery whisp thrust into their line of sight before twisting around and taking the form of a hare. From it, the voice of Dedalus Diggle, the Order's lawyer, suddenly sounded out. "Sorry to interrupt, but my home does appear to be under some sort of attack!"

Immediately, the relaxed mood tensed. Emmeline was already closing up the tent flaps. "It's in Tinworth, the street behind the butchers. Do you know where that is?"

As if an attack in itself was not enough, to the mention of Tinworth made Regulus's stomach drop; his experiences with the place involved a group of Death Eaters (himself among them) poisoning the water, the summer he was Marked. Although he had not known Diggle at the time, nor did Regulus know if the man had even lived there back then, he still felt a rush of guilt.

“I'm unfamiliar with the layout.” he answered honestly. His contact with the town itself had been limited to water sources, even then. With his wand in hand, Regulus stood and crossed to where she was standing. “I presume you can apparate us there?”

Emmeline nodded. "Remember what I said about not dying?"

Wryly, he nodded back. “I will make not dying a priority.”

"Thank you," Emmeline said. She took his harm, and with a quick wave of her wand, both
disappeared from the campsite.
Smoke filled her lungs before Emmeline could process any coherent thought upon arriving in the alleyway by Jones The Butchers. She put both her hands on her knees, giving several coughs, but as soon as she could breathe enough to run, she looped around the front of the shop and back up towards the little row houses which were causing the smog. There were several people huddled at the front in little groups, most still in their jimjams, but almost immediately, it became clear the threat had either apparated away or the Department of Law Enforcement was living up to their title and chasing the culprit down.

With a gust of relief, Emmeline spotted a shockingly hatless Dedalus standing on the far side of the street. In a moment fueled by said gust, she ran up and threw her arms around her friend. She felt him move as chuckled weakly, and somewhat embarrassed by the display, Emmeline pulled herself together and pulled back. "Are you alright?" she asked, as she adjusted her clothes back into their positions. "Where are they?"

"Oh I - fine, really! I fear I've overreacted!" Dedalus exclaimed. "I do think they were already gone, but when I saw the fire had spread, I just wasn't sure when the Aurors would get here. I'm sorry I interrupted your holiday!"

Emmeline glanced behind her to see Regulus, who she offered a weak smile before turning back to Dedalus. "Oh, it's alright, injected a little adrenalin into the old veins, better safe than sorry. It is Tinworth."

As Regulus stepped up next to them, his eyes had lifted to the sky where there was a smoky green dark mark still writhing about the rowhouses. Furrowing his brow, he brought his attention back down. "Do you have an idea of the fire’s source? Whether it’s possible they might have been targeting you, as opposed to this town just being more high-risk, historically?"

Dedalus deflated against the wall. "It's definitely me because I did look in the house, and it's my legal files in cinders!"

Emmeline turned back to look at the row of houses and wondered if it had been only that. "It seems a bit unlikely they just wanted your papers. It may have been you taking Sirius's case."

"That is what I thought," Dedalus added glumly.

"It's possibly one of your neighbours, though," Emmeline murmured as she looked around at the huddled people. "That's, what, three, four badly burnt? Who are your neighbours?"

"I'm afraid I don't know my neighbours!" Dedalus replied. "I've only lived here six years."

Regulus nodded thoughtfully, eyeing the neighbors in question for a moment. "Perhaps there are other factors, but it’s hard to say without knowing the other people in the area. I don’t immediately recognise anyone, but I have been comparatively out of touch." He turned back to Dedalus, then. "In truth, retaliation for Sirius’s case seems like reason enough. I don’t expect they will like you taking mine either, but I doubt they realise that is the case, yet."

"At least we don't have notes yet," Dedalus agreed, quietly.

"You don't," Emmeline replied to Dedalus, with the absolute certainty she was right, before indicating Regulus. "He does. He always has notes, though I'm not sure they're fire protected either."
“The notes I take are protected from prying, but they are admittedly not protected against fire, no,” Regulus admitted.

"Is the house?" Emmeline asked, with a brief flash of worry.

“There ought to be wards to account for that,” Regulus said.

"It's more likely a Weasley will set it on fire than a Death Eater," Emmeline replied before glancing back at Dedalus. "Are we everyone?"

"No, no, you were just here last!" Dedalus replied, much to her chagrin. She did so hate to be last at these things. "Arthur is with the muggle law enforcement, you know, until the Obliviators can get, and Mad-Eye went for a look around. The building isn't stable, so I'm not allowed back in!"

"Do you have back ups?" Emmeline asked. "Of the office work."

"In my office," Dedalus gave her a worried glance. "You don't think-"

"I think someone should check your offices," Emmeline replied, firmly.

“Agreed.” Regulus tipped his head. “Have they harassed you before? Are they likely to know right away where that office is?”

"His name's on the front of it," Emmeline pointed out, though she supposed there wasn't only one Diggle in the country. There wasn't even one Black, whatever the familial situation Regulus found himself in. "Ask Mad-Eye when he's done here. He can go frighten everyone into submission. You should come back to HQ; there's nothing you can do here for now."

Dedalus didn't look very happy with the idea. "What if the Aurors have questions?"

"Mad-Eye knows where you are," Emmeline replied.

"Mad-Eye is retired!" Dedalus declared.

"No one seems to be paying attention to that," Emmeline said. "Go let him know to check the offices. We'll pack up and meet you back at HQ where we can talk properly. Idle ears, you know."

Regulus tipped his head in a nod, then looked to Dedalus. “Should you require anything in the meantime, just let us know."

With their see-you-soons exchanged, Emmeline and Regulus disappeared with a crack.

Though the morning had been ruined by the rough and tumble of a fruitless quest to help defend a friend, Emmeline did not mind that packing up their belongings was a more sedate affair. In fact, there was something about the quiet that brought back the brimming and altogether most unlike her sense of excitement, the anticipation of something about to happen or unfold that she couldn't fully understand yet. It was hardly her first relationship, but it was the first one in more years than she cared to count; and fueled by the fact that (despite the tragedy of losing his home) Dedalus was well enough, she found herself smile at uneven intervals as they packed away the tent. The photographs had almost been forgotten in favour of experiencing the night as it happened, but she hoped there were a few good ones in there to help preserve the memory, nonetheless.

It was still barely mid-morning by the time they ambled back into Number Twelve, but she felt the heavi ness returning to her bones, regardless. It wasn't as if she'd slept well. Her mind had decided it
was going to be working overtime without pay, whether she wanted it to or not, and she knew that
wrangling it to the mystery arsonist was going to require copious amounts of a muddy sludge that
passed for coffee. She saw an inordinate amount of coats inside the closet, so it seemed that despite
the early hour, Order headquarters was in full swing as a hive of information, should she want to
help. She did. She wanted to make sure no one was hurt and no pivotal information had been lost
forever.

It was just that, well. A little personal time to examine her feelings - to discuss things that were not
war, death, and its acolytes - would have been nice too. For now, she would have to content herself
with no one having burst into the hallway to see if they were friend or foe coming in the front door.
At least Walburga Black had not put in an appearance.

"No rest for the wicked," she remarked to Regulus quietly, offering to take his coat. She supposed
the resident house-elf would be grumbling about her taking his job, next, but it seemed the
mannered thing to do.

With a little smile, he pulled off his coat and handed it over. “Indeed not. Quite a lot of
excitement.”

Emmeline smiled, pleased. “Undeterred?”

Tipping his head in a nod, he responded, “Undeterred.”

“We’ll see if it holds up to Hestia,” Emmeline said, only partially joking. He was a deeply private
person. It was possible the attention would be a struggle.

“An uncomfortable thought,” he said with a wry smile, “but I shall prepare myself accordingly.”

"It will get easier once I've moved," Emmeline remarked. As much as she appreciated the safe	house’s protection and the more intricate details of the house itself, she was more than ready to
have her own space again.

Again, Regulus nodded. “I imagine so. Do you have your eye on any particular place?”

"Not exactly," Emmeline admitted with a hard shrug. "But it's not as if you can put ‘Death Eater
proof’ on a list of what-to-buys."

“We can aim to make it as close to Death Eater proof as possible, ourselves,” Regulus replied.

"Warding sleepovers?" Emmeline asked, unable not to smile despite the situation and setting.

“I cannot say I’ve ever participated in a warding sleepover before,” Regulus said, maybe a little bit
embarrassed already, even though they had been sleeping in the same house for months now. “But
I do have something of a knack for protective measures.”

"Go back for a moment," Emmeline said, stooping almost as if it was some sort of very important
secret. "What sort of sleepovers did you have?"

Something pensive flickered behind Regulus’s eyes. “I would not apply the term ‘sleepover’ to
anything I did. I had a friend over on rare occasions, but he did not usually stay. His father was not
particularly fond of any of us - including his son. More typically, I would go out and come back.”
After a beat, Regulus looked at her and twisted his expression into a small smile. "Generally
speaking, this sleepless astronomy adventure is perhaps the closest I can boast. I must say it was
altogether positive.”
Emmeline prompted him. “Just the one?”

Regulus dipped his chin slightly. “We saw our peers regularly at various gatherings. Inviting them here did not seem very important, so it was generally just Sirius and myself, prior to school. At Hogwarts, I spent most of the year around them anyway, and then at Iago for much of the summer - with the exception of Barty - so that was sufficient social obligation for me.”

"I didn't have many sleepovers, but I suppose you had a ready-made playmate if one was required." Emmeline then thought of the differences in temperament and what they would consider to be 'play', and then added, "Whether you wanted it or not. I'm surprised the Crouches didn't make the rounds. They're old hats, aren't they?"

“They are, but his father made a concentrated point to be as unpleasant as possible,” Regulus responded dryly.

"In general, or with you?" Emmeline asked, curious.

“In general, as far as I am aware, but he seemed to make a special effort to be unpleasant on my behalf.” Regulus pressed his mouth for a fleeting moment. “The feeling was mutual.”

"I've heard stories from the people who worked more closely with him than I, but he was a no-nonsense sort of man. He had no mind for the curiosities and mystery of the world." Emmeline smiled. The fundamental difference of allegiance was no doubt the source of the conflict, but maybe a small part of it was just that Crouch was closed-minded and didn't believe in people, even when they'd earned it or shown the capacity for change. No wonder they didn't get along.

“That is one way to put it,” Regulus said in deadpan tones, shaking his head.

"You really don't like him," Emmeline stated.

“Not particularly, no,” Regulus admitted.

"I don't think I've seen anyone draw that level of ire from you who wasn't actively attempting to kill you," Emmeline remarked.

“I detested James Potter more, but Barty’s father was certainly high on the list, even before he sent Sirius to Azkaban without a trial.” Pressing his lips to a thin line, Regulus huffed. “But that is quite another matter. We’ve gotten off topic.”

"Oh, I'm simply delaying going downstairs," Emmeline confessed. "As much as I want to help, I despise scenarios where I show up too late to do anything but pick up the pieces and try to anticipate the unanticipatable next time. Helplessness is not something I...It was just my least favourite thing in the last war, knowing that everyone I knew had a target on their back and never knew when it would be their turn to be shot at. Being together and working towards something, it's almost easy to forget we are no longer twenty, and I dislike remembering whose seat is empty at a table. No matter how attached I am to the newer people that have joined, it doesn't lessen the feeling. It's not as intense if there's something I can actually do of consequence."

Pensively, Regulus nodded. “I relate, as you might expect. We can delay as long as you’d like. I am certainly not in a rush.”

"I'm not sure I'm much help with legal documentation or understanding which to prioritise. I have no real experience with lawyers in a professional capacity. I was only ever cautioned once, never formally charged." There was the matter of her parents, but it was melancholy enough without bringing it up. Nana had dealt with most of that. "There's a rumour one is still stuck somewhere
after nosing about while there was experimental work going on in the ‘bodies of magic’ area at work, but I cannot confirm it and thus am unlikely to be involved if they do ever show up again.”

Regulus eyed her for a beat. “I suppose it’s fortunate that Dedalus is helpful on that subject, then.”

"You have to admit, we are an odd group," Emmeline declared. "It's like one of those 'a leprechaun, a centaur, and a giant walk into a pub' jokes."

His mouth flicked up at the corner. “It does feel a bit absurd, sometimes.”

Despite the lingering melancholy, Emmeline found herself smiling. "At least we're absurd together."

“That does help.” Meeting her eyes, Regulus’s mouth tugged up more noticeably.

Behind them, the front door opened to reveal (a still disturbingly) hatless Dedalus. If that wasn't cause enough for concern, he looked even more miserable than when they had left.

"Dedalus?" Emmeline prompted, unsure if asking if something else happened implied that she felt he ought not look so miserable to have his home and possessions burnt beyond recognition. "No sign of the Death Eater?"

"Oh, no, they did, er, they did find where they went," Dedalus chittered.

To say she had a bad feeling about that was an understatement. "What happened?"

"They paid my local a visit," Dedalus replied. "Perhaps looking for me, perhaps not, considering..."

"Considering?" she prompted.

"I'm very sorry to report several injuries," Dedalus replied. "And a couple missing too. They still haven't found Mrs. Abbott or Mr. Parish, and Eustace swears up and down they were there."

Regulus frowned. “I don't associate either of those names with trouble-making or political threat. Do you happen to have any insight as to why, other than the result itself?"

"Well, no, not exactly, but I suppose there is always the usual excuse for that sort of thing," Dedalus said, a hint of frustration coming into his tone.

The mention of it prompted Emmeline's own memory. Given the shift in their relationship, the Death Eaters couldn't have timed this better if they'd actually meant to do it. "This is Caroline, isn't it?" she asked, as she tried to remember Parish's first name.

"Yes, and...Pat, I do think." Dedalus said, grimly.

Pat Parish. Better off with a number, really. Sadly, she supposed she ought to provide the context to their wayward wanderer. "They're both half-blooded, and married into pure lines." She was sure he wasn't about to miss the impressive, and frankly pain in the neck, timing of that implication. “I think they’ve got children as well.”

His frown twisted to a tighter line, meeting her eyes with a searching expression. “I see. That could be a factor.”

"Or just wrong place, wrong time," Emmeline suggested. It had happened before. "Looking for some fun since you were not available for a murder-date. It's possible they'll show up."
Dedalus did not look convinced at all. Emmeline imagined she didn't either.

"Rather needy, aren’t they?" Regulus said dryly, crossing his arms loosely across his chest as his eyes flicked between them both before landing back on Emmeline again.

"I blame the parents," Emmeline declared. It was only with great effort that she didn't look to the portrait at the end of the hall. "Shall we go and deal with the reporting to the rest, then?"

He lowered his chin in a slight nod. “We shall.”

The debrief was short and mildly uncomfortable as Dedalus reiterated his experience for the Order members who had gathered that morning. There was only so much that could be done in the aftermath, and the group of them were no strangers to Death Eater attacks (from either side, as it was). Most relevantly, they determined that Dedalus would be staying at Grimmauld Place, as well, until he found a safe option for himself. Avoiding Tinworth seemed like sage advice, as far as Regulus had experienced, but he thought it might be in bad taste to say as much, so he let that truth sit in wait.

No teasing surfaced that morning - held at bay by the somber mood, though he supposed it could still come later - and members started trickling out as soon as the meeting concluded. Exhaustion still clung like wet fabric, weighing him down, and as soon as he deemed possible, Regulus excused himself to his room, grabbing a vial of Dreamless Sleep along the way. When the door was shut behind him, he downed the half-dose and collapsed quite fully on the bed, his mind flitting off to sleep of its own accord.

His conscious mind had been silently raging with memories of a burning house, senses thick with the echo of billowing smoke, but sleep washed down his dry throat and coated his uncooperative thoughts with cool silence. When he had woken up again to the soft beams of a mid-afternoon sun, he felt a more bearable level of grogginess settling in. After sticking the vial (still in his hand, as suddenly as sleep had hit) in his bedside drawer, he had made sure he was once again presentable before descending again.

Regulus had wondered where Emmeline had vanished to - perhaps entertaining an extended nap to account for her own limited rest - but he had settled down with the warding texts he was still slogging through. None of their family-related spells on the house specified one member from another, regardless of their status on the tapestry, but keeping Death Eaters out was a higher and higher priority by the day, by the hour, and although his father had not felt it an important criteria to set, the motivation had been rather different, at the time, to be certain.

The days to follow had settled back into a calmer routine, the intensity of a Death Eater hit starting to fade again, but unfortunately, there were always more concerns to be found.

Several days after their trip (and the destruction of Dedalus’s home), Regulus had again holed himself up with his own variety of research - from wards to recently-neglected horcrux ideas, alike. Engrossed as he in the texts, he nearly missed movement in the doorway; when his eyes flicked up, he could see Dedalus was there with parchment and quill in hand.

"Oh, hello!" Dedalus said in a surprisingly cheery tone for someone who's house had just burnt down. "Er, is it alright if I work in here? If it's not an intrusion! Is it an intrusion?"

Regulus shook his head, gesturing first towards the overstuffed chair across from him, then to the nearby table. “It's not an intrusion. Is it work-related, or do you need assistance in finding anything?”
"It's just trying to keep everyone's documents together, you know." Dedalus pointed to a small bag that was half-hiding behind him before taking a few grateful steps towards the chair. "There's a lot of legal things involved in vigilantism, and this house, which I'm sure you know!"

“Yes, I can imagine so,” Regulus said, eyeing the bag. Even with the Death Eaters and the Order aside, there were quite a few… legally questionable items, when considered in that frame of mind...

"I have seen more filled places." Dedalus explained as he placed his bag down and drew some impossibly long parchment from it. "The little things - the illegal objects, spells, curses, you know - but not many as...up front, you know, as this one!"

Wryly, Regulus shook his head. “No, I wouldn't think so. Truthfully, there are some things in the house that I am not actually certain about the legality or illegality of their nature. They were not generally labeled as such, as children.”

"How interesting," Dedalus replied, and he did sound as if he truly meant it. "So in theory, even if immunity work goes well for you, you could end up arrested for something you didn't know you owned in this property, or another given your current status, that you had no idea was illegal!"

“I had not considered it very extensively before,” he began, glancing around, “but I suppose I could. Unfortunately. I expect they are not very understanding of such things?”

"It's all a little hypocritical, actually. There's plenty of wizengamot members who have old, dark artifacts because they're antiques or rare, but it was seen as much more acceptable in the last war.” Dedalus wet his finger and began to flick through several parchment strips. "I think the difference is that there was a lot of build up last time! There were times you wouldn't have known there was a war on at all, then it was unmistakable. Then of course, Harry Potter! No one expected it, so the result was most of the legal action taking place when we thought it was, well, over! The circumstances didn't really get out until the next morning, so there was jubilee like I've never known it before or since! There just wasn't the same drive to punish it, and with enough gold or persuasion, most people who weren't directly named or there wasn't a direct action that could be traced to them, it was all a bit glossed over. Crouch was never quite the same after, er, well. You know. So things became very lax! Scrimgeour, he's a hardliner, so I expect things will tighten hard again quickly!"

Regulus's expression soured. It was not Dedalus's fault that Barty's father was terrible, but thinking about the deceased senior Crouch twice within the span of a few days was twice too often.

“I did hear that they were accepting some flimsy defenses last time,” Regulus said, thinking of Lucius and Avery getting away with claims of the Imperius. He would not have wished Azkaban on them, but it still seemed an unlikely story. The gold probably made many things sound much more plausible. “I am not particularly thrilled about the harsher response in respect to my own situation, but if it is continuing to tighten, I suppose sooner is better than later.”

"You have a better defense than most people!" Dedalus said, though he did look a little nervous. "You were very young, at least by comparison, and spent one of the least amounts of time! They can't come here anyway because of the Order."

“So I hear,” Regulus said, his mouth flattening pensively. “Though I know they will be questioning me on the matter, looking at it as a whole, is there anything else I should be preparing for?”

"There are a few things that tend to get looked for," Dedalus explained. "As with all magic, intent is very important! Since this is not a trial, but a negotiation, it's more about building a narrative.
They're not looking for there to be anything in between villainy and heroics, and how a situation is framed is often the difference between the two! Severus weathered many a storm that way - that terrible things were done, yes, but there has been suffering and sacrifice for them, and that he came to Dumbledore of his own choice, and treads difficult lines to maintain secrecy. The questions were designed that way - as were any answers to questions we knew were coming, too!"

"I see." Regulus wore a thoughtful expression as he folded his hands loosely and drummed a thumb lightly on the back of the other hand. It was as he would expect: "So it's a matter of anticipating what they will ask and presenting the answers in the most palatable manner possible." There were a number of things Regulus had done that not even he found palatable in the least, but saying as much would be pointless; it was Azkaban and guilt or freedom and guilt, he supposed. "I should be able to manage that."

"I imagine so." Dedalus nodded emphatically. "You were long gone by the time of naming, so you don't have that to contend with. You were too young for apparition for a majority of the time, which means anything they want to try to bring to the table can't involve someone who apparated alone. There's a time frame to bring up the worst of it, but while I'm here - which please take no offense when I say that I hope will not be for very long - it could be an excellent idea to go through it and see what bits should go where. You have the beginnings of a change of heart heroism narrative already, having left at the point of legal adulthood, and of course, that you returned of your own free will, and perhaps the best! You were actively seen at the Department of Mysteries, fighting against Death Eaters. Worry not, I don't think you'll be my most difficult case!"

Regulus thought that might be a premature assumption, considering Dedalus had not heard any of the contending crimes, but his enthusiasm was a small comfort, at least.

“Considering vigilantism is technically illegal too, is my presence at the Ministry going to be a problem?” Regulus asked.

"You were not a vigilante when you entered the Ministry of Magic," Dedalus reminded him lightly. "You only went to retrieve Harry Potter, and his friends!"

Regulus nodded slowly. It was a true point; hopefully, truth would be sufficient because this was not a situation in which he wanted to get caught in a lie. “And that is likely to be enough for them?”

"We already have things filed from Sirius's case - Emmeline wrote up the Unspeakable reports, and Kingsley and Tonks have both submitted their law enforcement reports." Dedalus settled on one piece of parchment. "I imagine they'll ask Harry Potter himself, at some point, but I doubt he'll have anything incriminating to say! It is another high point - they'd like his goodwill, and are very aware they don't have it at the moment!"

Though he’d heard as much before, Regulus wasn’t certain he would ever get used to the idea that being vouched for by a teenager would actually make that much difference, but the past year had emphasised just how much had changed since he had been a teenager himself. He knew he probably ought to just get used to it.

In truth, Regulus mostly did not want to think about the prospect of laying out the details of his involvement, even if he knew Dedalus was probably right in respect to being prepared. He liked to be prepared; he just did not like to think about the conversation he was planning for... “What is the best way to plan out one’s ordering strategy?”

"I'll run though it with you, if you like," Dedalus offered. "It's difficult to say without knowing! Usually, I would say build a base of empathy, put the worst things in the middle, and round out with the positives."
It did not sound entirely like the sort of thing that ought to be coming out of the mouth of an incessantly cheerful Order member, but Regulus could not argue with the logic. “Running through it sounds equal parts helpful and horrifying,” he admitted with a huff. “Will they be asking a series of questions to guide it, or are they expecting a monologue?”

"If it goes how I think it will, you'll make a formal statement in writing, and across several sessions, they'll ask questions based on it to elaborate." Dedalus gave him a quick smile. "Dumbledore does often submit in writing as well, but he will likely make a small cameo appearance too. He has quite some flair!"

“That sounds dreadful," Regulus remarked, though he supposed that writing it all out and handing it over sounded slightly less terrible than having to spout it all out in a single moment. “But not as dreadful as it could be.”

"It could be worse! If you weren't coming in and were in fact brought in, instead, even people held for questioning have to wait it out in Azkaban." Dedalus gave a small shudder. "Even without the hordes of dementors, it'll be better to have all things in hand. I've probably heard worse!"

Fighting a cringe, Regulus’s mind drifted back to Mulciber. “There is at least one person there who does not like me very much right now. I expect there would be little motivation to be friendly, considering he cannot go to Azkaban for murder when he is already in Azkaban for murder,” he said in a stiffly even tone and shook his head. “As unpleasant as this might be, I would rather be prepared, yes.”

"It wouldn't be in the same place. There's different levels of security and different layouts per security," Dedalus replied before freezing, paper in hand. "Though I do think with the hardliner policy, they may run out of room without the high turnover rates."

“I cannot claim to know the details of the layout, but it doesn’t sound as though anyone is enforcing those levels of security, either,” Regulus said flatly, mouth thinning with another soft huff. “I'd rather not take my chances.”

"Quite right," Dedalus agreed emphatically. "Generally speaking, if you've never used the Cruciatius or Killing Curse, it will be easier. Not easy, but easier. Or children - the attempt at the Ministry is notable because it combined all three!"

Uncomfortably, Regulus glanced at the door to the study, confirming again that it was closed before speaking again. “I have not used either of them on people,” he began with a shift. “Just the Imperius. For the sake of context, that was specifically on a friend when we were practicing trying to break out of it.”

“Mad-Eye has done that,” Dedalus replied. “He's not been arrested yet.’

A bit surprising, Regulus thought, but not entirely… “That is something, at least,” he admitted.

"You won’t be the first Order member, either! Severus Snape, of course, and back in the day, Frank Longbottom and his wife Alice, and on one fateful occasion, Dorcas Meadowes. She was the senior lawyer back then! Very driven, very powerful woman.” Dedalus tapped his hand in what could be a nervous gesture. “I don't suppose you've heard, but You-Know-Who killed her personally. Terrible shock, but I've done my best without her. We had eleven - oh, excuse me, ten! - down in about four months, so I had plenty to do.”

Regulus eyed Dedalus shrewdly. “They all used Unforgivables?” he asked, making a concentrated effort to filter his tone. With his limited exposure to the Order, Regulus had assumed in the past
that they were too settled on high horses to deem such a thing permissible under any circumstances, though the past year had given him a very different understanding of the Order's more varied composition. “In relation to the ‘it's okay if an Auror does it’ movement within law enforcement, I assume?” It accounted for the Longbottoms, at least, if not the late Dorcas Meadowes.

"People have different theories of magic!" Dedalus gave by way of explanation. "Some people don't believe Dark magic exists, so much as Dark witches and wizards exist who use weaponised magic. It is part of the reason that Knockturn is a little bit tolerated within law enforcement; there is some leeway with it. Not the Cruciatius, not after the Longbottoms, but one of our esteemed Aurors, Gawain Robards - not one of ours, but I’ve always respected the man - he likened the Killing Curse to a matter of precision and an effective tool to be used where appropriate. Sometimes, you only have one opportunity to prevent further escalation. This is more difficult in more complex situations or when things are assessed wrong, but the argument has merit within the members of Wizengamot. But the Imperius has always had murky waters! Crouch was in favour, but I think it was Madame Bones who stuck her heels in against it. Magic’s lawful and appropriate use is political and context specific!"

“They were rather strict about it when I was here last, but I am in favour of a context-specific approach,” he said, Barty's father coming to mind yet again. The man might've approved his own exceptions, but Regulus knew those exceptions would not have extended to him. Regulus was accustomed to the acceptance of Dark magic in his own vicinity, but he had never had much chance to discover how far that extended beyond his family’s social circles... “I hope whoever handles this particular situation is reasonable in that respect. What else do you need to know?”

"Should I make a list and give it to you?" Dedalus inquired. "There does seem to be a lot of list to list bonding."

“I do appreciate lists,” Regulus admitted.

"I can give bullet points," Dedalus reassured. "Then we could reconvene and go through each one?"

“That would work well,” he agreed, some of the tension relaxing at what seemed like an approaching conclusion on this particular subject.

There was two sharp raps at the door. Before any answer could be given either way, Hestia Jones poked her head in the door. "Is Emmeline in here?" she asked, as if she might be perhaps under a desk or hiding behind a bookcase.

Regulus shook his head. “Just Dedalus and myself, at the moment.”

Hestia slinked in, and shut the door behind her with her back pressed against it. "You haven't got another one of your little trips planned for her birthday, have you?"

And so it would begin. Shifting in his seat and steeling against the prickle of awkwardness, Regulus responded, “Just the one.”

"On the day?" Hestia pressed.

“I assume there will be something…” Regulus looked to Dedalus, but he was busying himself with the unreasonably long roll of parchment again. With some lingering awkwardness, Regulus returned his attention to Hestia. “But we were not planning a trip. Why?”
"We, being Sturgis and I, were thinking of having a birthday party," Hestia elaborated. "I'd say a surprise, but if we all manage not to say anything, it'd be a miracle."

Emmeline had suspected just that, as he recalled, and his mouth tugged just a little. "At risk of bursting what remains of your surprise bubble, I think she is onto you."

"Of course she is." Hestia pressed her lips together with a grunt. "She won't guess what we have planned! We've got plenty of embarrassing pictures; I'm braving Covent Garden for her cake; an obscure trivia quiz that we can do some teams for; and I've gone scavenging through some old tapes for music. I think she'll have fun, even if she can't get the full surprise effect."

"I expect she will," he agreed with a little nod. He was not certain what the norm was for Emmeline's birthdays, seeing as he had never attended one before, but it sounded like it would suit. "I will protect the secrecy of your finer details."

"It was an invitation," Hestia replied.

In truth, such an invitation for attendance felt obvious, if only in the case of Emmeline. After all, Hestia was going to the trouble of telling him about it - rather rude if he was not. On the one hand, Regulus knew that she could have been merely seeking to avoid conflicting plans, but even if she had gotten a bit strange about his Marked arm during the recent healing process, she didn't seem to have fixated on it...

"Invitation accepted," he said instead.

"I wasn't sure how you felt about being in the public eye with us," Hestia replied, raising it at the end as if it were a question.

Meeting her eyes, the implication was clear, though he could not be certain what Emmeline had or had not indicated to her friend since their outing to the aurora. He did not intend to hide it - which was perhaps the very thing Hestia was inquiring about - but drawing that question to the forefront did make it feel awkward again.

"It won't be the first time, nor the last," Regulus responded simply.

"But hopefully no Death Eaters this time!" Dedalus added.

"No fancy dress either," Hestia nodded. "We'll do it all while she's at work so she can come back and attempt to act surprised, if that's fine by you."

Relaxing slightly, he dipped his chin in a little nod. "That is fine by me."

"Remember you said that when there's glitter in your great great grandfather or whomever's hair for the next three months from it," Hestia replied.

"Glitter was not part of the agreement just now," Regulus objected dryly, leveling a look.

"What birthday parties did you go to that didn't have glitter?" Hestia asked. "Were there at least streamers?"

"I expect we attended very different birthday parties." He shook his head a little, but his mouth had tugged up a little at the corner. Narcissa's were probably the closest, but live fairies flitting about the chandeliers was probably not comparable enough to mention.

"Oh dear," Hestia said, with the faintest hint of a smile forming. "This'll be an experience for you
“It sounds mildly alarming when you say it like that.”

In return, Hestia merely smiled wolfishly, and without further, comment left the room.

When the door had clicked behind her, Regulus shook his head, then turned his attention to Dedalus, who seemed to be finishing whatever he had been scribbling out on the parchment. Regulus returned to his own book, but only a few minutes passed before a section of that parchment was held out to him cheerfully, identified at once to be the list of questions and topics to prepare for.

Regulus’s stomach sunk again as he thanked Dedalus - reminding himself that it was not the lawyer’s fault that these difficult points had to be covered - and looked more closely at the topics.

All potential arrestable offences, dates, times, places, any known victims… details about his age at joining, length, instances of coercion, when he left, how he left… Relatives who were involved, connection to Harry Potter in respect to the Department of Mysteries, last engagement with the Death Eaters, point of contacting Dumbledore, any law-breaking since he left… (That would probably take some lying, or at least some very careful truth…)

The last section appeared to be focused on more personal factors. (His emotional state regarding the situation was something he could honestly identify as long-standing guilt and remorse, but in respect to his family…) Regulus’s brow furrowed slightly as he asked, “What sort of background detail are they looking for?” He shifted. “And asking about a family’s ‘mental health’ is a bit rude…”

"They would like to know any mitigating factors. To give an example, if perhaps Emmeline were arrested for vigilantism - I know Unspeakables are rarely arrested, but it is only an example - her mitigating factor would be the recent murder of her parents, along with the less recent but no less impactful murder of her best friend and former flatmate and her entire family." Dedalus slumped his the chair before he continued. "I wouldn't normally expect the question, but er, as wonderful as Sirius's conviction being null and void is, well, I don't imagine you saw the wanted posters, did you? They're disconcerting, to say the least. The point being that, even if we discount family members who have acted with doubts about their stability - such as Madame Lestrange - then your brother had a very public nervous breakdown, and posters of him in that state were plastered about half of wizarding Britain for over two years. They're going to ask."

Pressing his lips to a tighter line, Regulus breathed out a soft huff. “I did not see the posters, no…” He did not much like the thought of them all sitting around, discussing the varying degrees of madness within his family - even if it was more noticeable in some than in others - but going into that conversation blind would not put him in a better mood when the question inevitably came… “So I suppose the question is similar to the one about history. How extensive are they expecting the answer to be, generationally speaking? My own? Parents? Grandparents?”

"Only those with direct contact to you on a frequent basis," Dedalus replied. "You need not give more than a cursory response, or a direct answer to a direct question."

Regulus tipped his head; uncomfortable though it still felt, minimal responding felt slightly better than full disclosure. “In the written statement, should I preemptively address my brother and cousin, or would it be more prudent to wait for the question?”

"It's going to depend what you say," Dedalus replied. "I'll look over it! We can make sure it sounds as palatable as possible. I just won’t know till I see it."
Slowly, Regulus nodded again. “I appreciate that. I will let you know when it is ready for review.”

"Try not to worry!" Dedalus said, with vigor. "You're much easier to root for than most. Not slimy at all!"

It was easy enough to say and easy enough to hear, but Regulus wasn’t sure he would be able to smash down the uncertainty until he was on the other side of this pardon deal. With a thin smile, Regulus nodded, then leaned back in his chair with the section of parchment.

‘Easier to root for than most’ did feel like a low bar, considering the likelihood that Bellatrix - for example - did not regret a moment of it, but he would take it.

Harry startled as someone said his name. It wasn't something he was proud of. No one being called the 'chosen one' or whatever else he was being branded this week was supposed to yelp if someone tries to get his attention when he's lost in thought, but nonetheless, he did. He thought he noted one of the paintings giggling.

He'd come down to the first floor corridor to get a look at some of the paintings and tapestries. A ring, a diary, and a locket that had all been from Slytherin probably meant that anything else with a bit of Voldemort shoved in it was probably also Slytherin's, but he was willing to entertain the idea that it was just the founders in general since Regulus had mentioned it. Either way, he'd wanted to get a look at what famous objects might be or what they looked like, and he remembered passing through this corridor a few times.

He must've lost track of time, but when he turned the light of his wand around, it turned out only to be Ron.

“Are you alright?” Ron asked.

He'd be more alright if everyone'd stop asking him that. “Yeah,” Harry said. “Er, must've lost track of time.”

“I can see why,” Ron replied, as he gestured to the old tapestries of wizards and witches who'd been teachers and students at Hogwarts. Most of them must've been done when they were old, because the most common thing they had was getting irate at Harry for interrupting them sleeping. “The company here is a laugh riot.”

Harry winced slightly at the tone. “I'm looking for something.”

Ron lowered his voice. “Is this to do with the Dumbledore meetings?”

“Yeah, sort of,” Harry replied. He had told them both about the pensieve memory of Bob Ogden, and learning about how exactly Voldemort had come to be in the first place.

“Why portraits?” Ron asked.

“I just thought that...” Harry had to be careful; he had promised not to tell anyone else about the horcruxes, even if he was dying to tell Hermione because he was so sure if anyone knew anything about them, she would. There was nothing against him explaining stuff they already knew and jumping on from it though, was there? “I know there's a bit of Voldemort in me - that's why he was able to get into my head a lot - but like Ginny said, it wasn't just me, was it? The diary was able to get into hers too.”

Something in Ron always stood a little more seriously when it came to his sister’s possession.
“You think there's another diary?”

“You think there's another diary?”

“Or something like it,” Harry replied. “That's two bits of him, and he does keep coming up around here. What if there's another one?”

“In a painting?” Ron asked.

It wasn't a crazy idea. Dumbledore had hidden the philosopher's stone in a mirror, and it could only be retrieved under very specific circumstances. What if it wasn't an object, but a painting of an object or of Slytherin himself?

“There's a lot of founders things here. I thought since he made such a big fuss about being the heir of Slytherin, it might be something to do with him or maybe one of the other founders.”

Ron looked thoughtful for a moment. “You could ask the professors.”

“It's meant to be a secret,” Harry replied.

“You should tell Hermione then,” Ron said. “I think she sleeps with a copy of *Hogwarts, A History* under her pillow given how much she quotes it.”

The thought had crossed Harry's mind, but he hadn't been sure if he should. Hermione was already rushed off her feet from NEWT study, with her hair in a constant bunch and a crazed look in her eye during late night studying in the common room. Harry had been too, but Hermione always went above and beyond everything, so of course she was in a stress about it.

“I will,” Harry said, making the decision it was probably better to at least get her opinion, even if he couldn't tell her the complete truth about it. “Where is she?”

“On her prefect rounds, same as me.” Ron replied. “What are you asking me for anyway? You're the one with the map.”

Harry had meant to go and talk to Hermione about it, but when he'd located her on the map, she was with Malfoy and another student who's name he didn't recognise. Harry didn't fancy breaking that up.

He'd seen Draco Malfoy more in the last few weeks than he ever wanted to. It was almost as if he'd heard Harry wanted to keep an eye on him and decided he'd keep an eye on Harry instead. It would be just like him to copy that. He'd seen Malfoy looking over and sneering in Potions; he'd been giving a loud commentary on Harry's quidditch selections in the quad the day after he'd announced them; and even the morning after they'd arrived, after someone had taken a shot at him on the train and his luggage had gone missing.

(“Must be awful to be so famous that people will steal your things,” Malfoy had drawled from the Slytherin table.

“They'd have to be desperate to want those clothes,” Pansy Parkinson had added.

Malfoy had given given an exaggerated shudder, “I think I'd rather wear house-elf rags.”

In a moment of annoyance, Harry had snapped back at him. “It's better than going snooping where you're not wanted and getting a nasty shock.”

*The thunderous look on Malfoy's face meant he'd connected what he said to attempting to snoop*
about in Order HQ and triggering one of the defenses. He looked like he was going to say something else, but simply glared and turned his back to him.

Harry considered it a victory.)

The common room was deserted except for Ginny, who was sitting in front of the fire talking to – “Sirius?”

Ginny startled, but recovered quickly. Sirius merely laughed at them from the flames.

“Did something happen?” Harry asked, his heart beginning to thump in his chest.

“Not at all, just catching up,” Sirius said. “Apparently Hermione left a message yesterday, but you know what that bloody house-elf is like. I thought she might be studying.”

For the life of him, Harry couldn't think of what they'd have to talk about other than him, and that was too embarrassing for words.

“I'll head up now,” Ginny said, grabbing her bag from beside the seat. “See you, Sirius.”

Sirius gave a disembodied salute, as she hopped off. “Are you alright?” he asked Harry. “There's not been any other trouble, has there?”

Once Ginny had disappeared into the stairs, Harry shook his head and knelt down uncomfortably. “Everything's fine,” Harry said. As fine as things could be considering.

“You're not getting nightmares again?” Sirius pressed.

“Just normal ones,” Harry confirmed. “Not like the ones I had last year. I don't know why Hermione called.”

“So you're not wandering about the bowels of the castle like a wayward hinkypunk?” Sirius asked.

So that's what it was about. Apparently he couldn't go for a walk without people thinking there'd be trouble. Harry would be annoyed about it, but given his track record, maybe they weren't completely wrong. “I'm just...” Harry didn't want to say it outright, since someone could be watching the floo network, but he was pretty confident Sirius would get it if he phrased it right. He was sure he knew more about it than Harry did. “I'm trying to find more of what your brother found.”

Sirius looked at him like he'd grown another head. “You'd be better looking in Potions storage if you're looking for spines.”

Harry snorted. It had taken him a while to realise that there was some kind of affectionate insulting going on in their relationship, and even if it looked bonkers to everyone else, he guessed it made sense. Ron and the twins could drive each other crazy too. Maybe they’d still be doing it in their thirties as well. “Yeah, I'll keep that in mind, but I meant the, er, jewelry he picked up before he left school.”

Sirius still didn't look convinced, but Harry could hear someone on the stairs. “Listen,” he said, glancing to make sure no one snuck down. “Someone's coming. I've got to go. I'll owl you.”

With that, Harry smothered the flames just in time to see Seamus doing a sleepy shuffle down to the couch. Harry took the opportunity to bolt up the stairs before he decided to ask him anything.
Asking Hermione about the founders could wait until tomorrow.

“Oh no,” Emmeline whispered underneath her breath. It wasn't the most professional moment for a self-confessed professional secret keeper, but even in her mind, she had not imagined – this.

That's not to say she didn't know something was going on. For a bunch of illegal vigilantes, her friends had a remarkable amount of tells that something was afoot. Given the date, it wasn't hard to figure out that they were planning some sort of birthday shindig, but until now, she hadn't given much thought as to what that would look like. What that appeared to be was a bunch of old pictures done up like wanted posters (oh, ha, bloody, ha) with herself in a variety of compromising states plastered over half of the Black ancestry. It was unlikely then that Regulus had been involved in the décor, but regardless, he had definitely seen them and given their tit for tat, and the lack of him showing said tat, this was utterly foul play.

“Happy Birthday,” Hestia said, beaming from ear to ear.

“Thank you,” Emmeline replied, as she considered herself well mannered. “I can see why you chose to show my most embarrassing childhood moments here.”

“It's a long stretch of hall,” Hestia replied.

“And wanting to avoid the shrill tones of Mrs. Black, it's unlikely I'll throttle you out here without you screaming and waking her up.” Emmeline looked at the nearest picture – her two-year-old self staring back with a wild, wide-eyed look and running towards the camera in nothing but a towel. Tempting young children with chocolate for the express purpose of getting embarrassing pictures that they'll want to run from in their thirties ought to be outlawed, and she would like to know which department handled the creation of such laws.

“Come downstairs,” Hestia said, more amused than threatened. “If you still want to strangle me, you can do it with an audience.”

Onwards into the bowels of birthday surprises, Hestia hurried in before her, as if the five seconds between them was going to make a difference. However, it was hard to maintain a scowl when the kitchen was full of people and birthday paraphernalia. There was one cake, a smattering of cupcakes, nibbles a plenty and a set of party hats that she imagined everyone would need much more alcohol to actually wear. There were also sets of name badges, not unlike the ones visitors wore to the Ministry, and after a cursory glance around at the table, she saw people had blank name tags on.

“Oh, what fresh hell is this,” Emmeline replied, trying to control her ongoing smirk.

Hestia smiled. “We're meeting Dedalus and Kingsley at the Dozy Dragon for the pub quiz at six, so we thought we'd split into two teams. Winner takes all.”

“That's what, five a piece?” Emmeline asked, looking around.

“I'd have invited someone from work, but you don't tell us who you work with-” Hestia said, with Emmeline interrupting with the word ‘Unspeakable’ as she did. “I'd have invited Gert or Eunice, or someone else I know you get along with, but I thought explaining the Order would be difficult.”

“Isn't all of us being seen together going to do that anyway?” Bill inquired.

“It's a private quiz in the back rooms,” Hestia clarified. “Professor – wait, are we still supposed to call them professor? No matter, Flitwick said he'd take it, so you know it's going to be annoying,
frustrating, and exactly what you like.”

Actually, that did sound like fun. Flitwick wouldn't go easy on them. She'd just restrict any alcohol intake as being drunk in front of one's professors seemed completely wrong. “Who's going with who?”

“I thought we'd let the lions stay together,” Hestia replied. That accounted for Remus, Sirius and Bill. “Tonks'll go there too since she's got the attention span of one-”

“Cheers!” Tonks toasted her with a jubilation that made her think Tonks had already started on the plonk.

“Think of it as divide and conquer,” Hestia said. Houses - unless it was Slytherin, which could be felt everywhere in HQ - tended to fall out of knowledge once you got past Hogwarts, but she had to admit, Tonks didn't fit her idea of Hufflepuff while Hestia very much did. Though she had thought Sturgis was one and was surprised until she realised he was completely scatterbrained. The mark of Ravenclaw, she thought. “So that's Remus with Sirius, Tonks, Bill and Kingsley.”

“Why Kingsley?” Emmeline asked.

“She said Gryffindors,” Remus said, as if that were obvious.

“I honestly thought he was in Hufflepuff,” Emmeline said, somewhat shaken by that bit of information.

“Nah, he was in with Fabian,” Sirius interjected. “That's how we knew him, before he came over all respectable.”

Something she hadn't been actively thinking about but clearly had been mulling in the background came to the forefront with a click. Kingsley had not been a member of the Order in the seventies, but he had still known James and Sirius. She supposed she thought when he remarked upon James, he simply read it in Sirius's case file, but had he not been the first to remark about Harry's similarity to James? Why would he do that without first hand knowledge?

“Perhaps we stand a chance in this contest, after all, if we're already starting with something you didn't know,” Remus said, shoving the chair back.

Everyone followed suit in preparation for leaving, presumably, but Emmeline wanted a word with the dirty cheat. “I do hope any cheating will not be as flagrant from you in the contest,” Emmeline said, once she had milled through to Regulus. She was attempting her haughtiest tone, but she doubted it was the haughtiest he had heard given who he was related to. “Though I suppose if we're on the same team, I can't very well complain but I'd prefer to trounce them fair and square.”

Regulus lifted his brow. In light and haughty tones of his own, he quipped, “Unfair assumption. I don't need to cheat.”

"But you have," Emmeline replied.

“Oh? How so?”

"We had a deal," Emmeline crossed her arms, and attempted to look stern. "You see my embarrassing pictures when I see yours."

Realisation dawned on his face, a little smile tugging at his mouth. “That was not a matter of cheating, fortuitous - and fortunate - though it might have been.”
"Can you flirt and walk?" Sirius called from the door. "If we're later than Dedalus, we won't live it down."

It was sweet of her friends, knowing this would be difficult without her parents and had been half on the tip of her tongue all day. It was exceptionally so of Hestia. They'd only met a couple of years ago, but she was organised, and Emmeline rarely was. She should let it go.

"I will have my revenge," Emmeline said, instead. "But first, I must show my superior intellect."

“I have every confidence in both of those claims,” Regulus said, meeting her eyes with a tugging smile as they started towards the door after Sirius. “Let's crush them with our minds, shall we?”

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It was in a state of thoroughly predicted victory that Emmeline later returned to Number Twelve. However, as the kind and generous souls they were, her team shared the fairy cakes with the losers… while stating how they were the losers, because bragging rights were a wonderful thing. Still, only Remus, Sirius, Tonks, and Regulus returned with her to HQ. Both Dedalus and Kingsley had to go back to work, and Hestia needed to go to bed for her own shift tomorrow because Healers worked insane hours.

All in all, it was a very pleasant way to spend a birthday. She had the chance to show off her knowledge of xylomancy, and technically, since it wasn't here, it counted towards her yearly 'night out' quota when she was pushing herself to get back out there.

Things got a little odd when they returned through the threshold. Remus and Tonks disappeared down into the kitchens, talking about who knows what, but thankfully, seeming a mite less anxious and awkward than they had been. Perhaps they'd finally talked. It was going around. Sirius, who despite his constant insistence otherwise usually had the manners to say good night if he was in company, took the stairs two at a time like a fleeing teenage girl from a bad first date. Not that she'd ever done that.

Oh, damn it. There was proof of such dramatics staring at her from those posters. First thing tomorrow, those were coming down, and she was tempted to burn them if not for being touched by their efforts to make sure she had a good night.

"First pub quiz?" she asked Regulus.

“Well deduced.” With a slanted smile, he met her eyes, then looked back at the line of photos, settling on one of her falling off of a training broom, landing so that her legs were the only thing left in the frame. “I don’t see why you did not try out for Ravenclaw Quidditch team.”

Emmeline attempted to glare full on swords, nevermind daggers. “Because I still don't understand the point if a seeker ends the game. There’s no real point to anyone else.”

“There is a solution to that,” Regulus began, the smile unphased by her glare. “Be the seeker.”

He was the seeker, wasn’t he? Damn him. “You’re very cheeky,” Emmeline informed him. “I suddenly don’t feel bad at all for all of my Gryffindor support at their games.”

“My logic is sound. Cheek doesn't make it untrue,” he said lightly, a flick of amusement in his eyes as he met hers again. “Nonetheless, your photographs are charming. Perhaps undignified choices on the part of Hestia, but charming, all the same. I was not lured into embarrassing photography situations, so it was not a fair race from the start, but should you ever wish to see the normal variety, you are welcome to.” Gently, he nudged his shoulder against hers. “In the spirit of fair play.”
"I see why Slughorn liked you." In no way was she about to say it was because he reminded her of Lily in that way, because while Lily was often remembered for kindness and levelness, people tend to forget she was a cheeky cow at times. "I think it's just the perils of new friendships. We've only known each other less than two years, compared with Sturgis, who I've known on and off since Hogwarts. But if you want to volunteer to even the playing field marginally for you and I, I'm game."

He shrugged, a thoughtful expression on his face as he looked down the line of the hallway again. "Indeed." He paused for a beat, staring hard at something at the end, but when he looked back to Emmeline, he had pulled a lighter expression back into his face. "Would you like your present now, or would you prefer to open at your leisure, later?"

Emmeline could answer that honestly. "I'm torn between asking you what caused that look, and the allure of presents."

"Don't mind it," Regulus said, shaking his head. "Presents are the more celebratory option."

"They're not going anywhere if you do want to talk," Emmeline replied. However, she didn't know that for sure. Sometimes, she didn't trust her friends as far as she could physically throw them. What if there was some sort of animal? "At least, I hope not..."

"I was just thinking," he said, shaking his head. "Enjoy your presents. Any guesses as to what is in them?"

"I don't imagine so, but likely books you'll purloin at some point," Emmeline replied. "Are you evading because you truly don't want to talk about it, or are you being polite?"

"Perhaps a little bit of both?"

"We can do both," Emmeline offered. She got lost in her own dangerous thoughts enough to doom someone else to that fate.

"It was just a stray thought about friendships." He shook his head. "Stray, but a complicated feeling, and not really suited for birthday festivities. Books sound more enjoyable."

Given one of them murdered her parents, yes, she thought in a mentally bemused tone, friendships are complicated when they're with bastards. "Sturgis might have something muggle. I do have a muggle radio from when I was younger, I liked some of the music. I still do."

Again, he nodded. "How does it differ?"

"The music or the radio?" Emmeline asked.

"Either one," he replied.

"The music is more varied, with 'requests' being sent from people who listen along those communication lines," Emmeline replied. It was easy to picture hanging out with Lily and Mary while the New Seekers played. "As for the technical side, there doesn't really seem to be one other than power source, and Sturgis fixed that one."

Again, Regulus tipped his head in a small nod. "What sort of music do you prefer?"

"Mellow, even tones." It was hard to think of a particular style when she could only think of the actual songs. "Emotive, but not intense. Am I making sense?"
“You are,” he said with a little smile. With a subtle gesture down the hallway, he added, “Are you ready to set the gift mysteries to rest?”

He was not going to get out of it that easily. “I believe you mentioned photographs?”

“Ah, yes. So I did,” he said with lingering shades of a smile, sharing his head. “No time loops, but it was certainly another time.”

"You don't have them stashed away somewhere?” Emmeline prodded. “Possibly guarded by an evil plant?”

He sniggered softly. “The more personal photographs are kept in albums,” he explained, “which are in my room, at the present moment.”

Emmeline rocked her heel. "Then why are we standing here?"

With amusement tugging at his mouth, this time Regulus gestured towards the staircase. He held out his arm, then, waiting for her to take it before starting up the stairs, upward to the top landing where his room was.

"Are we keeping our voices down to avoid a portrait scandal?” Emmeline asked in a mock whisper. She was only partially joking. She didn't fancy dealing with that day in, day out.

“Unless you wish to welcome a steady flow of unsolicited opinions,” he responded in a mirrored whisper.


“In that case, I expect there will be no shortage of those opinions,” he said wryly with a gentle nudge.

“No,” Emmeline agreed. “But some people are worth such things, aren't they?"

A smile rose up to his eyes as he nodded, leading the turn up towards the last flight of stairs. “They are.”

As they reached the door - still adorned with its warning sign - Regulus opened it without ceremony and stepped inside, lingering inside for her to follow.

“Should I be asking for permission?” Emmeline asked, with no small amount of amusement.

“In light of my presence as an escort, permission is granted,” he responded, ushering her inside with a subtle flourish and a perhaps overly sincere expression.

Barely able to contain her amusement, Emmeline snorted. “Do you also do tours?"

A little smile cracked on his face. “Only in special circumstances.”

Emmeline smiled. "Must book ahead? Must show identity at the door?"

“The idea of unidentified individuals initiating self-guided tours through my spaces does not sit well with me,” he said, his tone caught somewhere between sincerity and jest as he plucked a photo album from the lower shelf of the nearest bookcase, just to the right of the doorway. “But I will waive the identification for you today.”
"I have identification," Emmeline replied. "It's all fake - Unspeakable and vigilante means that I rarely use my own information - but I do have it."

“As long as it’s legitimately illegitimate, I suppose that is fine,” he quipped.

Emmeline eyed the room with a renewed interest, but she kept her hands to herself. This was his space. She had no intention of invading it. "I hope Hestia hasn't been in here with her decorating," Emmeline said, thoughtfully.

He shook his head. “Off limits to decoration. Past this doorway, you are completely safe from assault by glitter and streamer.”

"You make it sound like battle preparation," Emmeline replied. That made some sense; perhaps of parties and battles, the latter was preferable as it involved less decor, less time, less socialising, and if people were raucous, you could reasonably curse them.

“Perhaps it is, a little bit,” he said with a pressed smile, then sat on the edge of the bed, album held in hand. With a little tilt of his head, he beckoned her over to sit beside him and opened the cover.

Inside, there was a picture with five children. If Emmeline were to venture a guess, the girls were Narcissa Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrange, and Tonks's mother, Andromeda. While Emmeline was sure at some point she had engaged with Lestrange on the battlefield, she had not met her personally but had met Tonks's mother once or twice in passing. Truthfully, the biggest tell of her identity was her furrowed brow as a clearly agitated toddler on her attempted to squirm off. She rather imagined if Lestrange had been tasked with him, the child would be dead already - especially given it was very likely Sirius. She had also met the Madame Malfoy at several events over the years, but even if she hadn't, she looked so different it was easy to tell who she was. As was the likely identity of the baby in question.

"I see your ability to block out any palava began at a very early age," Emmeline replied.

“Certainly tried,” he said with a little quirk of the mouth, shaking his head. “Cissa and Sirius did not see eye to eye, even then. He has always thought he was funny, she always thought he was not.”

"Cissa," Emmeline repeated. It seemed somewhat absurd to think of the foreboding pureblood aristocratic lady being known with a nickname, but it made sense for the little girl. "I suppose I have to agree. I'm glad to be an only child. My ability to share has always been abysmal. Sharing a room at school was nightmarish at best."

“Having a sibling doesn’t help with all aspects of sharing,” Regulus said as he turned to the next page. “but probably with some.”

"Well, that is adorable." The next page contained a picture of a man and woman she vaguely recognised but couldn’t pinpoint. Again, it was both boys together, and she would have to restrain herself from annoying Sirius with any of this the next time he got on her nerves. "You're both so small, those scarves are drowning you. Who are the couple?"

“Aunt Lucretia and Uncle Ignatius,” he supplied. “He was a Prewett, and she was our father’s older sister. This was taken just before Uncle Ignatius took us to a Magpies game, hence the attire.”

"Oh, that's why he looks familiar! That's Gideon's uncle. And Molly's, though I knew Gideon far more than I know Molly," Emmeline declared with a snap of her fingers. She peered more closely at the man in question. ” Yes, quite familiar. I think I've even met him, or at the very least, seen
“I recall you mentioning Gideon before; in light of that, I would not be surprised,” Regulus granted. “I always enjoyed visiting with Uncle Ignatius - and Aunt Lucretia, too. They were relatively relaxed, as far as family members went.”

"It was a big part of how the terribly named rebellion got started. I came in with a bunch of generally rowdy Gryffindors - do not let Remus fool you, he can be rowdy. Finding a group more suited to me helped." And no doubt he could relate to that, regardless of house. It was so strange then how people clung to their dorm mates, their houses, but she supposed that could be given as true now if you saw some of the way people behaved.

As Regulus flipped to the next page, there were a few more family photographs - most of which did not appear to involve Regulus or Sirius at all; and the next page, he breezed past even more briskly, with only a brief flash of the other Slytherin boys before they landed on the page to follow. “The next set is for quidditch and Slug Club, which might not be the most exciting.”

"You don't have a picture of Lily in here, surely."

“She is talking to Worple in the background of one of them,” he said, tapping a photograph with Slughorn, Regulus, and several others - including his cousin - in the foreground. It looked to be a Christmas party. “But aside from that, no.”

Emmeline couldn't contain her laughter. "Oh, I'm sorry, but this is the very last place I expected that!"

Regulus scrunched his expression a little, though he looked more awkward than annoyed. “It was irritating at the time, but I mostly tried to ignore it,” he said before flipping to the next page. There were a few of what looked to be Iago: some of which had Regulus, one with a blonde boy she didn’t readily recognise, and couple that appeared to be scenery, including one with snow. On the next page, there was another mix of family-centric photos, including one of what looked to be Regulus, no more than a few years old and holding a book nearly the size he was - upside down, from the look of it.

Emmeline imagined this was as close to an embarrassing baby photo as she would ever get. "Did you perhaps think you were deciphering runes?"

“It must have seemed that way,” he said, shaking his head. In the photograph, the toddler version of Regulus had furrowed his brow a little and was turning the page of the book, looking wholly focused on what must have appeared to be nonsense.

“You found a silly picture,” Emmeline smiled. It wasn’t silly by conventional standards, but cute nonetheless. “I’m so proud of you. We’ll have to make more.”

His mouth flicked up again as he shook his head. “I suppose one existed, after all, if it qualifies.”

"You look so serious in these." Not that Emmeline believed he was any less serious now, but there was a sparkl that was missing, a wryness, a certain comfort in his own skin. "Everything so life and death, hmm?"

Pensively, his mouth flattened again to a press, chin dipping a little. “Yes… The tension and tenuousness did not feel out of place, at the time, but I did feel its absence, in hindsight.”

"I have heard more than one accusation that you had no sense of humour, but I like to believe it was merely dormant and awaiting its moments to shine." Cheeky, certainly. Also dramatic. In all
truth, not unlike her own pictures, it was easy to pick up the parts of the person he became in the person he used to be. A troubling idea, given his past. "I'm not sure what I expected."

"I can make a guess at what you might have expected if your source of information was Sirius and his friends," he began dryly, shaking his head. "I had a sense of humour; I simply did not think they were very funny, which I'm sure they took to mean I wouldn't recognise a joke if it smacked me in the face. Literally, in some cases."

"Somehow, I don't believe anyone ever got away with literally smacking you in the face." He was too vengeance driven for that.

"Well, I'm still convinced that Sirius only joined the quidditch team so that he could knock bludgers at me on a regular basis without consequence," Regulus began, crinkling his nose, "but with the exception of Sirius, you are right in your skepticism. I would not have taken it very well."

While that certainly sounded like the usual brand of 'humour' from that lot, she had a lot of difficulty believing that despite an openly explosive temper, that Sirius could - or would - think that far ahead and plan for something like that. Regulus had been quiet enough to not truly be noticed, so it was possible that afforded him some protection against all but those who were likely to resort to physical violence. "Neither of you are exactly known for healthy communication methods," Emmeline said, gently. "There always seems to need to be some metaphor or excuse involved, rather than the decision then putting it into action. Case in point, he was lying through his teeth the first time we ever hung out independently of others, and you are quite a withdrawn person. I've met chattier Unspeakables. In fact, I am one."

"I suppose so." Regulus responded, but his mouth had started to tilt back up, a little. "What was he lying about?"

Emmeline made a vague gesture around. "He asked for help with warding. There is no way he didn't know more than I did, having grown up in a place like this. James and I were in something of an argument, wherein he attempted to threaten me - I had just figured out Remus's furry little problem - but I made some sort of commentary on the ironies of existence that someone with the name of Remus Lupin became a werewolf and someone who's family is infamous for cosmetic hair taming had a child with an unruly nest atop his own head, and it got rather childish after that. I imagine he was trying to assess the threat level, which I always applaud when either of you remember to do so."

"I don't often forget to assess a threat level. Whether I choose to respect that threat level is, perhaps, another matter," Regulus quipped, flicking his eyes over to hers. "But perceptive, nonetheless. I expect you are right."

"Bravery is assessing a threat level, then promptly ignoring it." Emmeline snorted. "Even to your own detriment."

"Foul play," he said with a bit of a huff.

"I think we ought to all try to be past equating our inextricable personalities with a rigid four category system," Emmeline said, with as mature a tone as she could manage. "Bravery is an admirable trait; it's the recklessness that causes havoc, and I don't believe you to be intentionally reckless, vigilantism aside."

"You are impinging on my petulance-by-principle. Being offended by each other’s house is very important to Sirius and myself," he said in what might have been mistaken for a complaint, if not for the lightness of tone and little quirk of his mouth as he met her eyes again. "But with that point
aside, no, I don’t aim to be intentionally reckless.”

“Bravery is no less - or more - impressive than the drive to succeed, or at least, survive.” She could do without the chairs that, after you sit in them for a certain amount of time, emit an embarrassing noise akin to an embarrassing bodily function. “So I'm afraid I must impinge somewhat. Regardless of history and upbringing or choice, you're both interesting and frustrating in your own ways. As are most people I surround myself with. I should get my head examined. Alas, I don't think I have the time or inclination to do so. At least you've been known to listen to me on occasion. That's more than most. And I am usually right at that.”

“You needn't fret so much on the matter; I realise that bravery isn’t actually an insult. It's in jest, at this point in my life,” he said wryly, nudging her with his shoulder.

Emmeline nudged him back, but she let herself smile, no matter how dopy it felt. “Was that true upon returning, or is it a side effect of the Weasley invasion?”

He shrugged. “I've felt neutral enough since returning. Houses were a non-issue for a decade and a half, so it wasn't worth the emotional energy to think about it. Although it does still come up, it lacks the weight it once did, too.”

“Does it feel strange to look at these pictures, then?” Emmeline inquired, as so much had changed.

This time, he nodded. “It does - very much so. Some more so than others.”

“I’m sorry to drag it up if it truly upsets you,” Emmeline replied, and meant it. “Was that your friend I saw, the blonde one?”

“Barty, yes,” he confirmed, shifting a little. “There are upsetting aspects to it all, but those years were difficult for everyone, as I understand it. You needn't apologise.”

"No," Emmeline supposed she did not need to. "I sincerely hope it never achieves such levels again. We should make time for looking in more places."

“What are you thinking, in that respect?” he asked, meeting her eyes again.

"Potential other receptacles. We can't leave all the hunting to the teenagers," Emmeline replied. "Or if the schedule serves, we won't make any progress until next June. We should at least try, even if there’s only a remote chance."

“Of course,” he agreed. “Back to it.”

Silliness would have to wait. The war beckoned, and however pleasant the night had been, reality must ensue. They still had people to stop - still had to find parts of an arrogant sod who thought having his name in French would make it more threatening. It was time to begin a new to-do list.
Chapter 18

Dear Sirius,

Thanks for your letter. That owl was loud enough that I was awake enough to get down to Defense in time. Snape still isn’t happy with my nonverbals, but no more detentions yet.

All clear here. Everyone’s trying to act like nothing’s wrong, but it’s different to last year. People keep looking to see if anyone they know is dead, and apparently, everyone was searched when they entered the school. (I was with Tonks giving her a report.) Some people have already been pulled out of the school. I’ve only really seen Dumbledore once. He keeps disappearing. Do you know if he’s okay?

No one’s tried to kill me yet, but it’s only been a month. It usually takes at least two. Ron and Hermione are okay too. I’m guessing you’d know that from Ginny. We’ve been down with Hagrid, he’s a bit down. Witherwings says Hi. Hogsmeade is on the 12th if you still want to go to the Hog’s Head.

I wanted to ask you about something. There’s no such thing as wizarding royalty here, is there?

Hope you’re doing well,

Harry

Harry sealed up the letter and gave it to Hedwig. He knew that the burnt orange owl - Deimos - wasn’t Sirius’s, even if he’d used him, so he didn’t think he’d find him waiting in the owlery. He gave Hedwig a treat and sent her on her way.

It didn’t take long to track down Hermione. Even if everyone seemed more serious about their studies this year, Hermione was still giving off a unique level of frazzled into the air around her. One of the Prince’s spells, Muffliato, would have been really handy about now, but Hermione disapproved of them. She’d refuse to say anything at all if he used it, and even if she was being ridiculous, he still wanted to know what she thought about the idea of a horcrux. It would be hard enough to explain them without giving too much away.

“Er, Hermione?” When she looked up from her books, her hair had almost doubled in volume, her eyes were somehow both wild and glazed, and he could’ve sworn he saw a second year backing away slowly behind him. “Can we talk?”

“Is it about dodgy spells?” Hermione asked, bluntly.

“No,” Harry said, but if he could hear defensiveness in his tone, Hermione definitely did. He sat down beside her. Thankfully, the scary aura around her had cleared the general vicinity. “It’s about, er, you know.”

Hermione looked at him in confusion for a long moment, then her eyebrows shot up, and her mouth made an ‘o’. She mouthed what he guessed was ‘Dumbledore’, so he nodded. “Here?”

“We could take a walk,” Harry said, looking around. “Get some fresh air.” Get somewhere no one was going to be lurking behind bookshelves.

For someone who treated them with such care and reverence, even Harry was surprised by how quickly Hermione cleared up her study table and put it into an impossibly small bag. It was already getting brisk, with the cold winds hitting as soon as October did. It helped that it was quiet out
“Do you remember the diary, back in second year?” Harry asked. “The one that had a formed memory of Tom Riddle.”

“I remember thinking you’d know better than to trust a book again when you don’t know who wrote it,” Hermione replied, waspishly.

Harry ignored her. “I think it’s how he’s avoiding dying. He has back-ups of himself stashed away.”

Hermione looked intrigued. “Interesting. Why do you think that?”

This would be where it would be harder to walk between the truth and keeping a secret. “We saw him in the forest that first year; he didn’t have a physical form so he took Quirrell’s. The memory was draining Ginny’s. He said so himself that he wasn’t dead, or alive, that he didn’t know what he was, but he could possess people.”

“What a cheery thought,” Hermione replied. “So they’re anchors, should he die in body but not in spirit? They would have to prevent not only him moving on, but prevent him from becoming a ghost of some kind. So each anchor would need to be destroyed, like you did with the diary, before it become another full body?”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Harry said, which it was nearly enough. He hadn’t thought of the ghost part. “Both times, even the last time he had a portkey here, so it’s always been Hogwarts. I think he was telling the truth about seeing it as a home.”

Hermione gasped. “You think there are others here?”

“I was thinking about how obsessed he was with Slytherin, which could be because he was related to him, but maybe the other founders were important too.” Harry wasn’t sure how to explain this part, so he danced about a little and hoped she didn’t notice. “Er, so would you help me look?”

“Of course, Harry, anything, but…” Hermione trailed off.

“But what?”

“We have no way of knowing what sort of thing he would use,” Hermione replied. “Yes, it could be something related to Salazar Slytherin or one of the other founders; it could be another diary, but it could also be another person. Or a rat. Or potentially a pot plant. The field is too wide.”

“It would be something significant,” Harry said, decidedly. “If the basilisk killed Moaning Myrtle, that’s significant. Quirrell was the Dark Arts teacher, so he’d have a hand in protecting the stone. He wanted my blood, specifically. I think it has to mean something, and that’s why Dumbledore is showing me some of his history.”

“To see if you can figure out what he might use!” Hermione cried. “Of course, you do have a unique insight into his mind.”

Harry tried not to sour at that, because it was true, and because Hermione smiled apologetically after saying it. “Can you help me look things up?”

Hermione nodded enthusiastically. “I’ll do some research into the spellwork too. What if there’s a way to search them out after you make them, in case you lose one? Of course, they can’t be easy to make or everyone would be doing it. I’ll see what’s in the restricted section.”
Truthfully, Harry hoped she did find it, because she’d then know, and he wouldn’t be wondering about keeping it a secret. On the other hand, she might realise he already knew, and there was a reason the second year ran from her. “The restricted section is out of bounds,” Harry said, instead. “That’s not very perfectly.”

Hermione’s cheeks coloured, though he thought it was more pride than embarrassment. “Shhh. You want my help, don’t you?”

If Bellatrix had possessed any more patience within her already limited reserves, the indication that Regulus had taken this idiotic traitor stint to the next level with pursuit of a pardon would have depleted it all in one fell swoop. As it was, her irritation merely escalated.

Though she was still stuck in her sister’s manor, Bellatrix had taken over the larger dining area for spell-slinging purposes. Cissy had objected, arguing that she was going to smash the china, but when Bellatrix swooped it all to the far end of the room (disorderly but ultimately undamaged), her little sister merely made an irritated noise and swept off, demanding that she mend anything she broke.

That was where Magnus Avery had found her, reporting that Yaxley had uncovered records within Law Enforcement that kept placing the most recent thorn in her side along with suspected Order activity, all kept confidential at his request. As a lawman himself, Avery went on about how he had reviewed the records from Diggle, containing notes that were very limited but nonetheless damning unless Regulus was planning some dramatic last-minute turn. Avery was looking staunch as ever and perhaps a bit smug, as she saw it, but Bellatrix refused to let it show on her face that she hadn’t already known.

“Oh, you’ve heard?” she said imperiously, holding his gaze with her mouth pulled to a taut line. Avery raised his eyebrows, some of the smugness shifting to something that looked more like curiosity. “I did not think the information had trickled this way yet, but I suppose you would be tracking such things. You are planning on dealing with his, ah, bad behavior? No one doubts your competence or your place at our Lord’s side, but it is dragging rather a lot for what seems a straightforward issue. He’s with us, or he is not. I imagine it troubled my son in the moments before Regulus let Sebastian be shipped off to Azkaban - they were friends, of course - but it’s evident that he has no intention of cooperating.”

Whether or not he was internally calling her bluff, she didn’t know, but the steel in her eyes sharpened further. “You dare accuse me of blind sentiment? You would do better to watch your tongue, assuming you don’t want to lose it.”

“I would do no such thing,” Avery said smoothly, though his tone was hard. “But has he given any indication that he is worth all of these delays? With as much as he has been flaunting his return, anyone could have killed him by now if they were actually trying.”

“Don’t presume to know better than I, how to deal with this issue,” Bellatrix said sharply. ‘How to deal with my own family’ rang silently in her head, but even now, the thought burned hot. Some days, she wanted to skip the family barrier of reasonable doubt that Cissy was so firmly requesting, drag Regulus out of that house, and knock his head against the wall in hopes that it would jar some sort of acceptable behavior back into place. (More accurately, she wanted to do that every day, but some days were more tempting than others.)

“But you are dealing with it?” Avery asked.
“Of course I am,” she snapped. “Regulus spooks easily. Anyone who has met him ought to know that. He won’t be spared punishment, but the rest of you came back groveling, and the Dark Lord showed you mercy.” Pointedly, she stared, watching him falter slightly.

“The difference being he has indicated no remorse,” Avery said, a little defensively.

“No, I think he will,” she said with an ominous edge to her tone. “But he will be sorry, when at last we settle in for a chat. The feeling of security here, a bit of plying there, and he cooperates well enough that I expect we can find some benefit to the Cause, regardless of how far gone he may or may not be. A swift death is simple enough, but a death can be swift without being immediate.”

At that, Avery’s mouth pulled into a little smirk, though there was no amusement in his eyes. “That is true. But remember, you may already be recognised as a public menace, but some of us have positions to maintain, and every moment he lives is another moment that could end in our names tossed in as bargaining chips for his own selfish ticket to freedom. This is about more than your dysfunctional family.”

“You are correct - it is about what will best serve the Dark Lord’s purposes,” Bellatrix said sharply. “You would do well to remember that the next time you think it your place to lecture me on a plan that the Dark Lord himself has no qualms with. I tire of repeating myself to you all like a gaggle of impatient children. If you get named, you will deal with it, just as we all have. It’s cowardly to fear it so.”

Bristling, Avery seemed to lose the momentum of what other criticisms he had been preparing, and she was glad for the solitude when he took his leave not long after. For a moment, she regretted that she had not challenged him to some duelling practice, if only to vent her frustration on an irritant who was actually present, but surely enough, Rabastan would oblige if she were to hunt him down.

Perhaps it had been some measure of bravado that had carried her through the argument, but the point stood: timing was everything, and everything with Regulus had always been slower than she preferred, back when she had taken responsibility for his guidance as a Death Eater. Incredibly bright, certainly, but agonising to train and more skittish than a woodland creature. At least annoying woodland creatures could be disposed of without distressing Cissy - and at least annoying woodland creatures weren’t the last hope of a dying pureblood name, the last chance that their legacy wouldn’t be raked through the mud completely.

Draco’s report from the ‘tour’ of Grimmauld Place had been unsettling, but even if the boy assumed that Regulus was too incompetent to be a threat to their Cause, Bellatrix knew that his existence was threat enough if he truly was continue to rub shoulders with the vigilante filth. It was not the names he possessed that concerned her, but rather the message it sent if he slipped fully through their fingers. As useless as he had been the vast majority of the time - his mind reeling fussily every time she so much as asked him to curse a rabbit - he was more soft than he was actually incompetent. The most likely end to this charade was that he would go the way of any other defector, wasting the nobility of his blood, but there was no way that he could be unaware of that fact. Parading about with traitors made no sense at all, if it was true that he was trying to reconnect with Cissy. (Her sister was no longer sharing such things so freely, but at least Draco was proving to be useful in that respect.)

The Dark Lord tolerated Snape cosying up to the filth due to the benefits it brought; he was expendable enough, but she did not trust him at all with his closed-off mind. If Regulus could prove a renewed loyalty, given the right motivation, perhaps there was a place for him too, in the end - some hope for their house.
If he could not, she supposed Cissy would be forced to mourn him a second time. If that could be avoided, she would rather it be so, for her sister's sake.

For all of his young life, Sirius had longed for a house that didn't feel as large or empty as Grimmauld Place always had. He'd found himself in the same position last year, even moreso, with the only permanent residents being his brother and himself, as batty house elves and mad portraits do not count. So imagine his surprise when he found that he was starting to feel a little cramped in his own – no, not his own home, which could be why he was chafing. Sirius liked his own space. He was a naturally messy person, and he could never find things when they were put away. Some of that was Kreacher, but most of it was just out of sight, out of mind. He loved being around people but preferred it on his own terms. He'd spent most of his life in enforced limited socialisation, either through being in that house or Azkaban or on the run, and somehow, he'd forgotten that now and then, he needed some time by himself.

Except – now he had no idea what to do with himself. Repeated attempts to talk to Dumbledore went unanswered, and when Harry was there, it was easy enough to make sure he was alright, but aside from that, he wasn't sure what to do.

Undoubtedly, this was why he'd ended up outside Andromeda's. It seemed to be his go-to when he couldn't go to James's. He found he was going to do that more lately – an idle thought that he should show him something, trying to remember if he'd written Lily back, even the occasional desire to go Godric's Hollow. All of these led to the sudden, inescapable memory that they'd been gone for a very long time. The baby he used make faces at to laugh was almost the same height as him. It made the reality of things feel elusive, but there was Andromeda, in the same house, in her same routine, and she didn't seem to mind letting him sit and watch her go about her cooking. This had to be the third randomly assigned baked good she'd made in the last two hours. She hadn't even commented on him taking a second slice of it, still warm to the touch.

"It's the stress," she revealed, with a wan smile. "I dread the Ministry showing up that either Nymphadora or Ted aren't coming back."

Even the thought made his stomach twist and tumble. Sirius had never known Ted well, but he clearly loved Andromeda enough to put up with all the shit their bloodline had put him through. He had gotten to know Tonks; she reminded him of himself a little, more the good parts, but she wasn't dragging around all of this history with her. He didn't want either to get hurt. They'd tried so hard not to get involved too much last time for fear of the same.

He put down the half eaten slice on the wooden kitchen island, his appetite misplaced. The house was a little more cluttered and decorated than he could remember. A lot more pictures, clutter everywhere, herbs and potion ingredients hanging to dry over the sink rack, and little plants hidden everywhere. It wasn't a big space. There were ceiling beams that, if he stood on tiptoe, he could touch with his head. Andromeda was a few inches smaller than he, though she still topped both Narcissa and Regulus. Anyone who tried to get close enough to measure Bellatrix was barmy. In any other situation, this house would feel cramped, it used to feel cramped, but it was amazing what hanging out in a cell for twelve years would do for your perspective.

There was a sudden whoosh, and a Union Jack coloured plate with 'GIRL POWER!' slid underneath the pie slice. Passive aggression made aggressive, it seemed.

"You should finish that," Andromeda told him without turning around from mucking about with pastry.

"I was planning to," Sirius replied. He leaned back from where he was crouching and winced as his
knees felt stiff. The last time he'd been here, watching this, had to have been sixteen, seventeen years ago now, and he kept forgetting again.

Andromeda turned, flour and butter ground into her apron. Or maybe it was icing sugar. That fucker had exploded when she'd opened it half an hour before. “I realise you have a tendency towards self-destruction when melancholia strikes you, but you look considerably better than you did. You should try to maintain it.”

“The first time you saw me, I was in the hospital.” Sirius argued. It shouldn't count. She simply looked at him, eyeliner steady. That usually meant he was missing something, and she was giving him a moment to figure it out for himself. Suddenly, it clicked. “The posters?”

“Not your most flattering visage,” she told him.

“That shouldn't count either,” Sirius grumbled. How he looked had been the last thing on his mind at the time. “Besides, I'm not melancholy.”

“I beg to differ,” Andromeda replied.

Sitting with his knees under him in her kitchen for a while to get his bearings did not mean he was melancholy. It made him worried, it meant he missed Harry, it meant that for the first time in a very long time, he could feel the absence of friends long gone. That made him a little sad, but it was hardly full blown melancholia. “I would know better than you,” Sirius replied.

A ghost of a smile came across her. “My dearest, you would be the very last person to know.”

“I'm not drunk,” Sirius listed the reasons off on his fingers. “I haven't smashed anything or yelled at anyone. I'm not moping. I'm – out of sorts, at most.”

“While I don't doubt your devotion to dipsomania, I didn't say angry. I said melancholy. You do know the difference, don't you?” Andromeda waved her wand, as the pie wrapped itself. “Being out of sorts can be part of that. You've had a very eventful year. However, I must remind you that the only times you show up merely to sit with me have always been because you're sad. I like to believe it's because you find my presence comforting.”

Sirius couldn't argue that. “You're alright.”

Andromeda smiled properly now, before taking a step to the kitchen bench. “I don't mind having you here, but if something is bothering you, I offer excellent advice that you can disregard to do whatever you want anyway, as you always do.”

Sirius snorted. “I don't know,” he said, as it was the truth. “State your case, then. Why am I melancholy?”

“There is a war on,” Andromeda replied. “It makes everyone a little blue.”

“There's always been a war on,” Sirius replied. There was a war on for as long as he could remember. While there may have been a brief peace interlude for some people, he hadn't had one. He'd had to listen to the lot of Death Eaters – and probably some people like him who weren't Death Eaters at all but got shoved in there anyway – for twelve years. “A swing and a miss. No points for Slytherin.”

Andromeda chuckled. “I imagine since your official release, you've been quite busy with Harry. I know you took him to Iago, which makes you awful, by the way.”
Sirius grinned. “They had fun!”

“A muggle-born, a Weasley, and Harry Potter in Iago,” Andromeda replied. “Oh, and a former Death Eater and a werewolf.”

“And me,” Sirius added.

“And you,” Andromeda replied. “You’ve not lost your nerve nor your cheek. I imagine many a fainting couch was required and much pearl-clutching.”

“That was Narcissa alone,” Sirius answered. Andromeda tossed her tea towel at him, but he ducked out of the way easily. “She came to the house. Her and her kid. Did you know?”

“I did not,” Andromeda replied. “To see Regulus?”

“To be nosy,” Sirius gave a bark of laughter. “Inviting another Death Eater into the house was worth it for him to get zapped for being a snoop.”

Andromeda stood to alarm. “She brought Bellatrix with her?”

“No,” Sirius said. Then he realised what it was he'd said. “She brought her son.”

There was a quiet moment between them, before Andromeda straightened her apron and cleared her throat. “Narcissa's only son is a Death Eater? She allowed this?”

“From what I got, Bellatrix moved in and bam,” Sirius made a lazy shot motion with his wand. “Her son is a Death Eater. I don't think she's thrilled about it.”

“I should say not,” Andromeda let out a huff. “Though it does explain Regulus's renewed enthusiasm for seeing her. He did not seem to want to at the hospital. He does know, doesn't he?”

“He knows,” Sirius said. “He knows too bloody much, if you ask me.”

“He enjoys knowing things. Problems arise when he chooses not to be social with it. He has always bottled things up,” Andromeda replied. “It's his nature.”

“He has no problem talking to people,” Sirius said, letting the just me hang unspoken. “Regulus goes by his own rules. He doesn't want my help.”

“Oh, is that it?” Andromeda asked. “You do so hate not to be needed.”

“I despise all responsibility,” Sirius scoffed. “What is being needed but a responsibility?”

“To repeat an often said phrase you enjoyed in your childhood,” Andromeda said. “Telling yourself something over and over will not make it true.”

“I said that after you left,” Sirius replied. It was usually in return to Regulus being a brat and parroting things over and over to the point where he had it memorised.

“You had a little animosity last year.” Andromeda waved off. “You do like to stick with the same insults, no matter how juvenile. It doesn't surprise me it continued.”

“There's no animosity,” Sirius argued. There wasn't; in fact, they kept missing each other. “He's too busy to be offensive. If he's not going camping with his girlfriend, he's hatching secret plans with Harry or having book club meetings with Remus.”
“Were you not concerned he would feel very isolated?” Andromeda asked. “Was this not your reasoning to remain in the house in the first place? It's doubtlessly contributing to your present difficulty.”

“I'm not having a difficulty,” Sirius replied, waspishly.

“Current lack of sorts, then.” Andromeda had the tone of someone humouring him, which he did not care for at all. “You wanted him to make friends, and it certainly makes things easier for you that he has an increased closeness with Harry. What is the problem?”

“There isn't one!” Sirius replied. “I do want him to have friends, better ones than he had. I wanted he and Harry to get along.”

“Is it losing the time with them?” Andromeda asked. “Sharing has never been your strong suit.”

“No, I'm not seventeen anymore, I don't have those problems,” Sirius replied. “I'm relieved Harry gets on alright with him; historically he hasn't got on great with Slytherins. But it's Regulus, everyone loves him.”

Andromeda huffed a little laugh. “Oh, I see.” Sirius glared at her until she continued on. “You're worried they'll like him better.”

“Bullshit,” Sirius replied, pushing away a little kernel of fear that she may have had a point. Regulus was well-mannered, funny, creative, talented, and when he tried to be, respectful. They were opposites, his brother and himself. Sirius always looked better from a distance. He'd always been a mess up close, but it was his mess, so he was pretty proud of that. Regulus looked like a mess until you got to know the person underneath the neuroses. “It's just that I keep forgetting, that's all.”

“Forgetting what?” Andromeda asked.

In for a knut. “About James, Lily, Marlene, all of it. I keep forgetting that I can't just – owl them. I don't know why now, it's been long enough.”

Andromeda pressed her hands onto the table, leaning upon it and saying nothing for a moment. “Were they not in hiding for considerable lengths of time after Harry was born?”

“Yes,” Sirius replied. “From about August in '80. What does that have to do with my brain being it's usual shitshow?”

“It's not a shitshow,” Andromeda replied, enunciating the word intensely enough that it practically ruined it being a curse word. “That was the last time this was your normal, wasn't it? That you had the freedom to go as you pleased, though you were still an Order member? Was it not the last time you came here and did this?”

That was true, but...”I didn't feel half as useless then,” Sirius admitted.

“You have always had trouble being idle,” Andromeda nodded. “I suppose now you're not playing bodyguard, nor protective older sibling, it’s snapping at your heels.”

“There's plenty to do.” Sirius argued. “It just seems like so much of it is waiting around. I don't remember that last time.”

Andromeda sighed deeply. “If you want to do more, you should. You're bright, and you're bored. This is a terrible combination, all things concerned. Add to it melancholia – add to it being out of
sorts - you're a disaster waiting to happen.”

“Thank you,” Sirius said, sarcastically. “I didn't come here to get dissected.”

“No, you came here because I'd know something was wrong, and you wanted to know it was okay to acknowledge that something was wrong,” Andromeda said. “You need to get out of that house. Both of you, ideally, but you especially – it seems to be having a reversion effect of some kind, and you're making yourself miserable with it because you don't like it.”

“It's important that I stay,” Sirius said, but he could barely muster himself up enough not to grimace as he said it.

“Most siblings move out when they get older,” Andromeda said. “It doesn't destroy things to not be under the same roof.”

“How would you know?” Sirius snapped. Andromeda pinned him with a thunderous look, enough to make him look down and take a bite out of the pie. It felt sticky on the roof of his mouth, but he swallowed regardless. “I'm not going to fuck everything up.”

“It won't,” Andromeda replied. “He's not on his own, you said so yourself - which I intend to come back to at some point - so you don’t need to worry so much. Though I’m not sure you’re supposed to be discussing bird business about me at all.”

“Semantic problems,” Sirius said.

“I'm sure,” Andromeda replied. “But between the fact you are not being up front with yourself, that you're wallowing, that you're wearing robes-”

“What's wrong with my clothes?” Sirius interrupted.

“They're magical,” Andromeda indicated to him. “I don't remember the last time, outside of you being twelve, you have voluntarily worn robes. You largely wore muggle clothing, or muggle style of clothing with a magical twist.”

Feeling the embarrassment rise and a burning in his cheeks, Sirius ducked away. He hadn't noticed. He'd seen his wardrobe at the flat, but he still hadn't noticed. It wasn't that he never did. He just had preferred muggle clothing as a whole. It just...hadn't occurred to him. Maybe she had a point. Being there sometimes made it harder, but it wasn't only Regulus tying him there. It was going to be harder to get any sort of traction with Dumbledore about Harry not going back to his muggle relatives without a safe place. Even if it was shit in all other respects, it was the safest place.

“I didn't mean to upset you,” Andromeda said, quietly.

“I'm not upset,” Sirius said. “Apparently, I'm melancholy and haven't noticed.”

Andromeda rolled her eyes theatrically. “I know it doesn't feel like it, but you will feel better in time. A little distance from a family tree you're no longer on would certainly help.”

The reminder of the subject sparked the memory of Regulus's obsession with it. “He's gotten obsessive about the burn marks,” Sirius said, haphazardly. “Regulus. He's started keeping notes about which person goes where, their names, anything he can find out about them. Even photographs.”

“Family has always been very important to him,” Andromeda replied. “I suppose reconciliation and lack of disciplinary actions over interaction with you has opened the possibility of a wider family
“Whoever looked at this family and went, ‘I want more of that?’” Sirius thought his brother needed his head examined. Maybe that ran in the family too.

“This family,” Andromeda replied, shaking her head. “You’re definitely picking up bad habits. It would be easier to teach a jarvey to dance than it usually is to get you to call them that.”

“You know what I mean,” Sirius waved her off.

“I do,” Andromeda replied. “But I also know letting go is very difficult, and it took you awhile to do it the first time. Try not to get hurt with this.”

Sirius shrugged, before resuming his spot watching her. He would never be stupid enough to let himself get hurt by the remaining spattering of blood he had. He wasn't a child anymore. He didn't care what they thought of him. He cared about what Harry thought, Remus, Tonks, Emmeline, and yes, Andromeda and yes, Regulus but they were special cases. There was an exception to every rule.

“As you wish,” Andromeda said. “Tell me more about going up to Iago. Perhaps it will take both our minds off things until Nymphadora comes home safely.”

Though Regulus knew his brother had been spending more time out of the house - at Andromeda’s, to his understanding - her subsequent owl invitation for them both to come along to tea felt even more out of place, considering she had invited Regulus to tea exactly zero times in his entire lifetime. Regulus supposed there was a first time for everything.

This would be the second time Regulus would visit the Tonks household, though he did not say as much to Sirius as they were welcomed inside. He did not say as much to Andromeda, either, considering that visit had occurred in a timeline that she had not experienced… Perhaps the strange look she gave him held some measure of curiosity, but more than likely, she was just searching for a reaction to a home he supposedly had never seen before.

Hopefully, the initial lack of reaction could be taken as a symptom of his reserved personality, but whatever the interpretation, she had made no remark of it when the three of them settled in with a pot of tea between them.

"You're actually making tea," Sirius said, blinking slowly. He had slouched downwards in an overstuffed couch, with his chin almost touching his chest.

"I did invite you for tea," Andromeda replied.

"I thought that was just something people said," Sirius replied. "Like fell off the back of a broom, put a cat amongst the pixies-"

"-That happened one Christmas." Andromeda chuckled, dropping a sugar cube into her tea as she turned to Regulus. "I don't know if you were old enough to remember the year my mother decided pixies would be a lovely addition to the solstice festivities. Then of course, Cassiopeia showed up with her cats in tow..."

Regulus’s mouth flicked up at the corner, the echo of a memory flickering in his mind, fuzzy but nonetheless fond. “That sounds both accurate and vaguely familiar, yes.”

"Absolute chaos," Andromeda said, with a grin. "And no Sirius involved!"
"Despite what my mother seemed to think, not everything that ever went wrong was down to me," Sirius said. He moved forward, deciding the tiny cakes were at least worth moving for.

"Some children are quiet, some are rambunctious. We did often wonder if Nymphadora would have gotten someone to team up with against us and take roof right off the house or if we might have gotten a voice of reason," Andromeda said, willfully. "The roads not taken, I suppose. Probably for the best, she didn't need the encouragement to be cheeky. I still don't know how anyone related to me ended up in the Auror office, of all places."

“It's quite baffling,” Regulus remarked with a little head tip. “She is a divergence from the norm in more ways than one.”

“Nymphadora has never known the meaning of doing anything any way but her own,” Andromeda said. She looked at both of them in turn, then laughed. “I suppose no one in this room can claim otherwise either, hmm?”

“Indeed not.” Glancing at Sirius, Regulus half expected a contradiction, though they were fewer and farther between, these days. Strangely enough, his brother had been particularly moody ever since Regulus and Emmeline had come back from their camping trip, though it was difficult to say why that would serve as a trigger… yet when he thought about it, October was starting up, so he supposed this could be another bout of nostalgic melancholy. Regulus would be better prepared this year.

When no contradictions came, Regulus looked back to Andromeda. “Expectations aren’t quite what they used to be.”

"My expectations haven't changed so exactly," Andromeda mused, as she took one of the tea cups delicately. "Mostly my in-laws. Although I don't know which would be Ted's more egregious crime, his blood, his house, or his class."

"The amount of times your sister has tried to kill him and his audacity to still be alive," Sirius deadpanned.

"He's not so obliging, no," Andromeda replied. "But St. Mungo's has less Supporters than the Ministry."

"Antonin Dolohov," Sirius replied.

"They don't generally hire people on the run," Andromeda replied. "Unless you're about to tell me you took on employment in the last few years."

"Not me," Sirius replied, cocking his finger at him instead.

"Really?" Andromeda sounded entirely too amused by the thought. "Books? No, you'd want to read them all and thus none would ever be sold. Quidditch?"

Regulus first shot Sirius a bristled look - so much for discretion - and when he turned his attention back to Andromeda, he shrugged, a little uncomfortably. “Artifacts, mostly, but some some books, as well.”

"I will admit to being surprised," Andromeda replied. "Did you like it?"

"Cringling his nose a little, Regulus replied, “The books and artifacts? Yes. Being reliant on it? Not particularly.”"
"It helps to enjoy it," Andromeda agreed, with a nod. "But no, being reliant is a bit of a pain. It certainly gives a little perspective on how to treat people in that position."

"Your lot doesn’t count," Sirius said. "You cultivate toxic plant life, your husband literally has people’s lives in his hands, and your daughter fights people for a living. If someone’s a prick, they have more to lose than their gold."

"Up until lately, it's been more paperwork than fights," Andromeda replied tightly. "Speaking of fights, how are you, Regulus? I heard you had a little commotion."

“I did, but I’m doing well.” Taking his own cup of tea, still lightly steaming, he added, “I suppose it was inevitable that they would remember how I technically met the criteria for murder seventeen years ago. An offensive attempt but not a particularly surprising one.”

"It's the downside of talking to Narcissa. They remember you exist," Andromeda replied. For a moment, she looked as if she would say something else, but she didn't. She merely sipped at her tea.

"Isn't this place charmed to the nines?" Sirius asked.

"It is," Andromeda replied. "But no ward is infallible. It slows people down, but it will not hold forever. It is our home, though. We don’t intend to leave it, even if Nymphadora is barely here."

"Work?" Sirius asked.

"Remus Lupin," Andromeda replied, with a snort. "My mother must be rolling in her grave. Not that I don't like him, but she does like to make things difficult for herself."

"You're not like that at all," Sirius said dryly. "You married Travers, right?"

"Don't even joke about it." Andromeda gave a full body shudder. "Some foxglove would have gotten some early use in that wedding cake. Windbag of a creature."

“His sister was in my year, but I only ever spoke to him in passing. ‘In passing’ was sufficient to gather how it might’ve gone sour rather quickly, yes,” Regulus said, mouth slanting down.

“Then Nymphadora wouldn’t be here, of course,” Andromeda replied, quietly. “Or not this version of her. I can’t imagine her in a society setting and happy about it. Compromise is the name of the game when it comes to parenting. You may find that out one day.”

“Perhaps,” Regulus said, though he had found the prospect of parenting to be increasingly unnerving, as of late, between the smattering of uncomfortable family history and the creeping realisation that it was, in fact, an actual possibility again. Thoughtfully, he lifted his teacup for a drink.

“It helps to have a good partner,” Andromeda added. “In Ted’s case, useless with any sort of authority, of course. But he understands her better than I do, so I’m grateful for that.”

“She’s not that hard to figure out,” Sirius replied.

“Not to you.” Andromeda smiled, indicating him with her little finger. “I know you don’t like the decorum, but however sourly we left things, I am still grateful for many of the experiences I had with my parents. I can still walk into any Witches Institute and know how to greet people properly. I loved Italy, and I can dance. Ted looks more like a clothesline in a hurricane. I'd have tried to do the same for Nymphadora if she'd shown even a mild in inclination, but she wanted adventure, to feel challenged and to do some good with her own wand, not raise funds for others to do it. The
subtle, behind the scenes approach has never suited her. Therefore, I don't understand her quite as much as her father does. Or you, I suppose, same spirit. It doesn't mean I wish she were different, just that part of it is not expecting them to be what you imagined. As long as she's happy.”

“Werewolves and all?” Sirius asked.

Andromeda sighed dramatically. “At least he's well mannered. Please tell me this girl of yours isn't wild.”

Lifting his brow, Regulus immediately turned a look to Sirius, then back to Andromeda again. Under their current circumstances, it was more likely that Sirius was chattering freely about his relationship with Emmeline, too, than it was for him to have acquired a secret girlfriend, yet Regulus still found himself saying, “Me?”

“She's being too literal again,” Sirius said, as he rolled his eyes. “It was a figure of speech, Andromeda.”

“I can never tell with you,” Andromeda replied, evenly. “Excuse me, then. Since it had just been the summer gathering, and you've been seeing a decent amount of Narcissa, who is quite a matchmaker if the reputation is true, then I've simply come to the wrong conclusion.”

However much sense the conclusion might make if one was considering a match amongst his previous social crowd, it sounded a bit absurd to consider Narcissa being involved in matchmaking himself and Emmeline. He could imagine the distress his cousin would inevitably express and was, to that point, trying not to think about it. “No, she is uninvolved in that particular development.”

"I don't think book flirting counts as a development," Sirius muttered.

“I am still not interested in your commentary,” Regulus said dryly, shooting a sideways look at his brother as he took another sip of his tea.

"You're not interested in my opinion at all, you've made that abundantly clear," Sirius replied.

Regulus was opening his mouth to respond, but behind them, there was a loud rattling sound. Then a screech and a scrape, and finally a bang when the door opened to reveal the telltale lime green robes of a Healer. "Drom, you have got to come out here, it's here again, see and it's got that look in it's eye." He then seemed to realise she was not alone. "Or we could have visitors! Hullo, sorry about the entrance, but the wife's been on the lookout for an evil duck that keeps digging up her Mandragoras and making off with them."

"Alright, Ted?" Sirius said, his tone lightening immediately.

“Right, now you act cheery,” Regulus muttered into his cup.

"He said hello, I greeted him back, which is more than you've done," Sirius replied. "Do you want manners or don't you?"

"Still think Nymphadora should've had a sibling?" Andromeda asked Ted, cutting in.

"I don't reckon it's the same thing," Ted said.

"So you think. Someone is quite obviously an only child." Andromeda put down her cup with a sigh, looking to Sirius. "Either tell him what the problem is or don't lash out at him. He kept a very diligent vigil when you'd gotten hurt and doesn't deserve to be snapped at." Then to Regulus. "He's having a bit of strop because he doesn't like asking for things when he's struggling, because
Merlin only forbid, someone who needs help asks for it. That would be entirely too emotionally healthy."

"Or passive aggressive," Ted said, pointedly.

Andromeda gave him a stern look, somewhat ruined by the ensuing smile. "It was fine when you were teenagers, but I suggest both you find your common sense. You had it a few months ago, it can't be too far away."

"Since when do you have secrets with my godson?" Sirius snapped, but his tone mellowed slightly as he went on. "I wanted you to get on, not create a conspiracy. It's just a shitty feeling that you don't think something involving him concerns me, even if you don't think something involving you does. It's bad enough when Dumbledore does it."

"Was that so hard?" Andromeda asked.

"Yes!" Sirius responded, shortly. He did however take a bourbon cream, and shove it half in his mouth.

As realisation clicked into place, Regulus rolled his eyes slightly. Even as he did it, he thought that it probably wasn't the best way to dispel the tension, but it was a bit late to pull it back. Still bristling a little, he responded, "I assumed that when I told him not to say anything yet that he would understand that meant 'don't say anything yet' and not 'make sure to tell Sirius so that he will get worked up over it before the facts are straight.' My mistake." With a shift, he added, "And it's not some grand conspiracy. I just asked him to keep an eye out for a few things, so there is no need to heighten the dramatics of the situation."

"It's not as if he said what it was, but is it really such a terrible assumption that he thinks you'd at least tell me you were asking something of him, if not actually trusting me?" Sirius added, indignant. "I can't protect him if I don't know this stuff! I don't ask a lot from you, but Harry is my responsibility. You don't have to tell me about your life if you don't want to, but you do have to tell me if you involve my godson so that when he inevitably runs into danger again, I know what he may have been doing!"

Andromeda looked towards Ted. "Kitchen?"

Ted nodded rapidly, already moving. "You bet."

Regulus had half a mind to be embarrassed about snipping in front of their hosts, but the momentum pushed him forward: "'Involve him'? He's already involved. He wants to be involved and clearly intends to jump into these situations when he feels left out, so I gave him something to do to reduce the likelihood that he will go looking for trouble," he snapped. "If he runs off into danger, it's not because of our conversation. Perhaps you would rather assume I'm out to endanger him, but if it involved anything he needed protecting from, I would have said something." Stiffly, he added, "If you must know, I simply asked if he can keep an eye out for information on the Founders that might be specific to the school - which I would have gladly done myself, but my access to Hogwarts is more limited."

"I understand why you asked him," Sirius huffed. "What I don't get is why you didn't just tell me that!"

"Because I didn't think it required reporting," Regulus clipped back with a frown. "It places him in no additional danger, so I don't understand why you are so worked up about this."
"Because it's not just about Harry, it's about you!" Sirius rolled his eyes in return. "I don't want a report, I want you to want to tell me what's going on with you. You have seen me in some of my shittest, most humiliating moments, but you can't even bring yourself to trust me enough to even tell me what happened to you then, let alone what's going on now. I don't know if I'm going wake up one morning and you're missing or dead again with no idea where to start because you can't tell me the most basic things that you feel fine telling other people."

Regulus fell quiet, his mouth pressing to a line as the agitation peeled away in heavy clumps. Truthfully, that was not the direction he had expected Sirius to steer in, given the foul mood and the way his brother’s foul moods often turned. Though it was not the first time the point had come up, it seemed to carry a different weight, each time, and he felt the stab of some emotion he couldn’t quite put his finger on.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you,” Regulus said after a silent beat, and he meant it, despite the related reservations. Several trains of thought were all tangled up in each other, and he tried to pull them apart enough to articulate what he meant in any sort of meaningful way. “And it’s not that I’m divulging information to everyone but you, either. It’s just… different… I would not have invited you along to France if I did not trust you - nor told you about the inferi.” Steeling himself against the familiar sinking feeling, he continued, “It’s just… contextual. I’m trying to be careful…”

“You're not meant to need to be careful with me,” Sirius said, quietly. “I have no idea what else I'm supposed to do to prove that.”

With a frown, Regulus shook his head, “It’s not a matter of what you are doing or not doing. I’m being careful because I want to minimise risk, both in relation to the people involved and the goals we’re all trying to accomplish.” Twisting his mouth a little uncomfortably, he added, “With the exception of you and Emmeline, I don’t really have particularly deep or meaningful conversations about these things with anyone else, certainly not on any sort of regular basis. It's not withholding from you specifically.”

"I want you to have meaningful interactions with people, that's not what I mean." Sirius gave a low, throaty noise of frustration, then sat forwards, with his elbows on his knees. "I want you to minimise risks, and there are some things worth sacrificing for. But one of the first things you accused me of last year is that I didn't know what was going on for you, and you were right. I knew something was wrong, and I was too caught up with myself until it was too late to do anything about it. So maybe I'm overreacting a bit, but I'm still figuring out proportional response, and you can say what you like about being the babysitter when we were kids, but you are still the first kid I ever had to protect, and I fucked it up. Then it was my stupid idea that cost Harry his parents, and we didn't tell anyone to minimise the risk, and so many people's lives got destroyed. That could have been avoided if I hadn't gotten the stupid idea in my head that Remus, or Emme, or even McGonagall weren't safe to tell. You're facing down the same wand I did, and I don't want to watch you make the same mistakes."

Regulus felt a little pang in his chest, and he tipped his head in a small nod. Sirius was right - the lack of involvement had been one of the first wounded accusations out of his own mouth. Surely, his brother's interest in his life would eventually feel natural, just as so many things now did, but the juxtaposition jarred him a little. Regulus felt that he and Emmeline had the situation relatively under control (and of course, the plans that Dumbledore was keeping to himself, even now). Slow, perhaps, but contained, for the most part… yet Sirius's point did stick, as much as Regulus did not like to grant aloud. There were risks to silence, too, and it was merely a matter of which risks would outweigh in the end.
It was not the first time he had felt tempted to explain the situation more thoroughly, but it was the guiltiest he had felt about not telling Sirius the suspicions about Harry in relation to the horcruxes. Keeping it all from Sirius was probably safer from a practical standpoint (for the secret and for Sirius alike), but that pang was relentless, and there was something to be said for motivation, and Sirius was motivated about Harry. Now was far from an appropriate time, given the setting, but he wondered again if it might be worth the risk to let Sirius in on it, or at least part of it...

Watching Sirius's face, he pressed his lips into a flattened smile, brushing off his thoughts to circle back with a reply: “Don’t worry, I’ve been finding a whole new set of mistakes to make, all for myself. I’ll try not to encroach too much on yours. But I appreciate the sentiment.”

“It feels different, I don't know.” Sirius shrugged using his hands. “I think you’re getting a taste of what it was like to be me when we were growing up, and it’s changed how you see things, but I wonder if I’m getting a taste of yours. I’m about ready to vibrate through the floor with this much worry and anticipation, which doesn’t happen to me. It’s just easier when I have some idea of what’s going on, or if I can see you right there so you’re not getting yourself into trouble.”

"It's just a little separation anxiety!” came Andromeda's voice from the kitchen.

"Thanks, peanut gallery!” Sirius huffed. "I don't have anxiety about separating. She thinks it's being in the house."

"No, I think getting into arguments with a portrait isn't good for your health” she called.

"I'll concede that point, but it's not that I don't want you to not live your own separate life, and I would never want to take Harry from school because being our parents is the nightmare." Sirius said quietly, then shrugged.

“How is that ‘being our parents’?” Regulus asked, lifting his eyebrow. “I would expect you to take a swing at them about the former, the freedom to live one’s own life, but they didn’t take us out of school.”

"Not you, but you know," Sirius waved him off. "That whole thing the night I left."

“That didn’t have anything to do with school,” Regulus said, a bit skeptical, though he was more confused as to how Sirius came to that conclusion than anything else. They rarely talked about that particular night, and it was one that still prickled a small sting if let himself think about it too much, but he remembered it clearly enough for that comparison to make no meaningful sense. “Some insults about Dumbledore, I suppose, but as I recall, the bulk of that interaction was you snapping at them about politics on the radio, then them snapping at you in disagreement, then you snapping at me for not snapping at them for snapping at you, then me snapping at you for snapping at me when I was trying to read - but I don’t remember anything about taking anyone from school.”

For a moment, Sirius frowned but said nothing at all. “That's right,” he said, after a beat. “I forgot you went upstairs. That's it, because I remember thinking when Dad said something nice about you whether to tell you because I knew you'd like it or whether you'd be really annoying about it. That's funny, I'd forgotten that part.”

Mirroring the frown, Regulus eyed him for a moment as realization prodded at the corner of his mind. “They were going to take you out of Hogwarts?”

"I told you that," Sirius said, before making a scrunched up face. “...No, I didn't send the owl, I thought you wouldn't read it, so I was going to grab you on the train where you were less likely to stick your fingers in your ears, but I didn't find you. Then I got into that stupid fight with Wilkes..."
about it. I’m sure I said something, if only if I yelled it at some point."

“No, you didn’t,” Regulus replied firmly, brow furrowed. No one did, apparently - not Sirius, not their parents, not even Wilkes, assuming that Wilkes was actually as aware of the subject matter as Sirius was suggesting. The memories were apparently a bit fuzzy. “I would remember something like that.”

"Really?” Sirius asked. "Nothing about their profoundly stupid idea that because I didn't hate spending time with you, I was just running my mouth? That it was just en vogue at Hogwarts to like muggleborns and it had nothing to do with what I truly thought?"

Regulus shook his head. “No. Your parting came across more like ‘good riddance, I hope you choke on your rhetoric.’”

“Really?” Sirius repeated himself. “I don’t know why I’m surprised, I don’t think I was supposed to know either, but I walked in on them talking about it and flipped.”

Frowning more deeply, Regulus let the comment settle. It was difficult to think of that night without the accompanying rush of hurt, but if it was true that their parents were going to stop Sirius from going to Hogwarts, that was certainly a factor that cast a slightly different light on it all... objectively, if not on the way Regulus had felt at the time. Sirius had still left him without a word, following a promise to fix it - but time and age and experience made it all too obvious that it had been a high expectation that his brother most likely could not have followed through with, even if he had stayed. And Sirius, stuck in the house with their parents, all day every day...

Regulus wanted to say that Sirius should have told him, but even as the remark tugged on his tongue, he thought that it probably would not have changed much in the moment. In the longer run, certainly, it would have eased some of his anger to realise Sirius had not just left out of spite and a lack of caring, but everything had been so tangled, at the time. It had been a little too easy to watch blame fall on his brother when it seemed like Sirius was always begging for it, given his choices in friendship - and to have Potter cut out of the picture... Regulus would not have wanted his brother to miss out on school, but he was a little ashamed to think he might have handled the news unkindly, as much as he wished he could think otherwise.

(By his own logic, Regulus was begging for blame too, and he knew it. Or perhaps it wasn't fair to either of them. Even now, it was hard to pick apart.)

“I don't imagine you would have handled the isolation well,” Regulus said at last.

"I do alright, managed it just fine for twelve years. A full year in that house?" Sirius gave a full body shiver, then reached for his drink. "It would have destroyed the place. Mum said it herself at the time, I have a knack for tearing down something centuries old in a single moment. It's what happens when you try to shove someone through a hole they're not the right shape for. We'd have killed each other, and you'd have had to spend your graduation at even more funerals. Given what you've dug up, I'm not sure that's a metaphor either. Tradition is more important than life, et cetera."

Though Regulus never thought he could possibly prefer it the way it happened when his brother's departure had been so devastating at the time, he almost wondered if it might have worked out better than it could have, after all. The point was uncomfortably accurate. “It was a very miserable few years, but I'm glad you didn't kill each other, at least, literally or otherwise. I suppose that is a silver lining of sorts.”

“Did you honestly think I'd have left for anything beyond dire circumstances?” Sirius shifted
uncomfortably. "I'm a very loyal person. You have to stab me in the back badly for me to break that. I am sorry I didn't try harder with you. I let it be a casualty, but we were younger than half of the kids are now. There's no denying they're strong and they're capable, but I wouldn't wish growing up in this war - either then or now - on any child. If I'd thought I could convince you to get out when I did, I would have tried, but I'd been trying to keep the worst shit away from you as much as I could, and it backfired on me, because you couldn't see any of it until it came down on you. Hell, some of it, I think you're only beginning to see now. You'd have chosen to stay, and I'd have hated you for it."

"I know," Regulus admitted with a soft huff, shaking his head. Better not to ask than to get rejected, of course - a sentiment that had felt especially true at the time. “And I’m sorry it took me so long to stop assuming the worst. I did not see anything nearly as clearly as I thought I did, as it turns out."

"You were fourteen," Sirius gave a bark of a laugh. "It's just harder for me to see the reverence and nostalgia you have and that it's not tainted. I don't really want you to lose it, it seems to make you happy, but even remembering whatever good there was for me, it doesn't make me happy. It's just confusing, and sad, and it makes me angry. This is as close as I get to being a parent, and I can't fathom the way ours got on. I can't imagine hating Harry, even when he's being reckless and infuriating - now there's two of you at it! I'm doomed."

Regulus wondered if maybe their parents did not hate Sirius as much as he assumed, but points like that only seemed to frustrate Sirius more… and in truth, Regulus half-feared it was some remnant of wishful thinking that he couldn’t quite shake. The image kept crumbling, the more he uncovered, but there had to be an anchor somewhere.

Even as his thoughts tumbled towards the back of his mind, Regulus pulled his mouth to a pressed smile for a beat, then responded, “Revenge for all the stress I have suffered at your hand.”

There was the sound of laughter from the kitchen, and Sirius made a rude gesture in their general direction. "I'm still figuring out where I stand. You're running headfirst into danger mostly without telling people, and I'm obsessively over thinking. Fuck it, maybe she's got a point. Maybe having no parent to hold you to impossible standards is freeing you up to explore your relationship with impulse, but I've never had to deal with this. If I'm a little paranoid - hell, it's not paranoia when they are actually trying to kill you. I'm just worried about you, and it's interacting like a bad potion with all this other junk in my head I haven't figured out yet. You keeping secrets, while your prerogative, isn't helping. Does that make sense?"

It was quite a lot - but in a strange way, the ramble had loosened some tension that Regulus hasn't even realised was still knotted up. Acknowledging it too directly felt like it might trigger some retraction, so he nodded instead.

"It did,” Regulus confirmed, thinking that it was a solid point. Regulus was admittedly far more accustomed to being the one to overthink his own worries, and Sirius’s tendency toward impulse had triggered it more than once. He wasn’t sure what what to do with the suggestion of this strange inversion, but Emmeline had recently called him out on similar points of impulse, so he supposed there was some additional weight to it. “Running headfirst into danger isn’t usually the intention, but I am making an attempt to reign it in, nonetheless. Emmeline made a similar point, recently, so I suppose it's possible I might have overcorrected a little bit.” He shook his head.

“She keeps beating me to the punch,” Sirius noted. “And her, you actually listen to more than me. You two need your heads knocking together.”

“Our heads are in a fine state,” Regulus responded, taking a drink.
“It's been almost four months,” Sirius said.

“I realise that. I've been present for all four of them,” Regulus replied dryly. “She and I discussed it when we went to see the northern lights last week, so you needn't fixate on that particular matter.”

“Thank Merlin,” Sirius sighed, obviously relieved. "That was painful to watch. As long as you’re still mates.”

“I'm glad I could relieve your secondhand relationship stress.” Regulus rolled his eyes. Although it was not exactly what he’d had in mind when he had been complaining about Sirius not paying attention to his life, he supposed there really were worse circumstances. “Though there isn't any reason we shouldn't remain friends. Relationships and friendships needn’t be mutually exclusive,” he added with a shrug.

"No shit? Really?" Sirius asked. "I wonder who got over it first, you or Remus. There's a bet on."

“Emmeline suspected as much,” Regulus said, shaking his head, still thinking it was a bit silly, if harmless. Whatever passed the war days, he supposed. “But I cannot speak for Lupin's present situation.”

"She's changing her hair, so I think she's getting-"

"NOT WHERE I CAN HEAR YOU!" Andromeda interrupted, loudly.

“No one's forcing you to eavesdrop,” Regulus quipped back, not bothering to raise his voice because it seemed she could hear them just fine, anyway. “Though Sirius probably deserved the interruption, regardless.”

"You're in my living room!" Andromeda said. There was the sound of low talking, but Ted was largely obscured by his wife, so it wasn't easy to hear what was being said. "I'm not snooping, they're right there. I'm happy they worked it out, but I draw the line at listening to speculations about my little usually-a-girl.”

"It's not the weirdest bet," Sirius said, ignoring them completely. "Dung'll bet on anything. I fully expect you to take advantage of that if you're annoyed by his sticky fingers. He's still got the best contacts to get anything off the books, so don't annoy him if you plan to take advantage of it. I've done my fair share of breaking and entering - mostly accidental - Dung got into Grimmauld Place.”

“That is an accomplishment that I am very uncomfortable with. I cannot say I'm particularly fond of him, but as long as he isn't stealing my things, I suppose there is a benefit to it.” Regulus said dryly. His own foray into thievery was mostly limited to the horcruxes (and successfully ducking out of England, he supposed), which were of course for a Good Reason, but it was true that there were more benefits to keeping a thief on your side than there were benefits to annoying that thief.

"Always handy to have an ear to the ground,” Sirius replied, taking a sandwich and placing it whole in his mouth. "You cam come 'ack 'f'you'ant."

"I'll agree with you if you don't spit crumbs everywhere," Andromeda replied, swerving around the table with her husband looking tentatively over the kitchen bar. Regulus eyed him for a brief moment, but when Andromeda started speaking again, he looked back to her. "It's the only reason I still go to the WI. Other than to irritate Narcissa and her sharp-clawed friends for a little while, but it's happily both. I doubt you get the same gossip."
“We did put Mad Eye in a dress for infiltrating purposes,” Sirius said, after a hard swallow.

“Mad Eye as in Alastor Moody? A man with chunks blasted out of him left, right, and centre not fitting in with the doilies and teacakes crowd?” Andromeda sighed. “This is the same group of people on which the fate of the wizarding world has often been laid, and the Death Eaters still can’t manage it. They ought to be ashamed.”

“It’s a veritable mystery,” Regulus admitted, shaking his head.

“He wore a veil,” Sirius said, though he sounded half-mocking in addition to the defensiveness.

“I’m sure he looked very bridal. Not at all conspicuous,” Andromeda replied. “So we came down on dating, but not at all related to Narcissa. Where did we stand on wild?”

Though there had been two parallel relationship discussions, it was evident that she was talking to him, and Regulus felt a twinge of embarrassment. Though he was not ashamed of Emmeline - certainly not in this household - the strange play of expectations felt awkward to navigate.

Narcissa would be worse, he reminded himself, assuming she was still talking to him at all when that time came. “No, I would not describe her as wild.”

“Excellent!” Andromeda brought her hands together. “Coming from Sirius, you never know what sort of person you’ll end up with.”

“Cheers,” Sirius deadpanned.

“Your taste in people is varied and eclectic,” Andromeda replied. “Present company notwithstanding, except perhaps Ted.”

“I’m not eclectic,” Ted said, still looking a mite awkward. “I’m Church of England.”

Regulus glanced over at him briefly - a muggle term, as he vaguely recalled. He didn't think it was related to being eclectic, though he wasn’t exactly sure what it entailed, so it was hard to say. Looking back to Andromeda, he said instead, “I am presently acquainted with enough wild individuals to last me a lifetime, I think.”

"Hear hear," Ted replied, raising a teacake in toast.

Sirius muttered under his breath something about being outnumbered, but didn't elaborate.

The vibe of the room had calmed considerably, and with the tension fully dispelled, Regulus took a moment to admit to himself that Ted Tonks was not what he had imagined. Granted, he had imagined little beyond the concept of shadowy and probably ill-mannered family-splitter, so in hindsight, it was probably destined to be an unreasonable assumption from the start. Andromeda was not exactly the sort to run off with a complete lout, however logical it might have sounded at the time.

Regulus did not much like apologies, but one felt due, so he wrangled the awkward feeling and looked back to Ted. “Apologies for the ill-mannered introduction earlier. It was poor timing, I’m afraid.”

“I’m used to disruption,” Ted said, with a shrug.

“You are a disruption,” Andromeda told him. “You’re getting crumbs everywhere.”
“Oh, no, if only we had magic to get rid of them.” Ted winked at her, but he took a saucer nonetheless. “It’s always nice to meet members of Andromeda’s family who aren’t keen on killing me where I stand.”

“That’s not fair, Ted,” Sirius argued. “They’d also happily kill you sitting down. Or even lying down.”

“I’ll issue my apologies if I ever see them in person,” Ted said, unfazed. “But forgive me if I hope that never happens again.”

The admittance brought forth an uncomfortable remark from Bella, back during the first war - a lesson on ‘the eventual fates of traitors and mudbloods’ and how it was their responsibility to strike at the problem, rather than just sit back and complain about it… After all, when it came to the closest betrayals, the punishment was not in spite of the closeness, but rather compelled by it. Truthfully, it was always difficult to determine if the lesson was more for him or for the traitors and mudbloods, but most likely, it had been for both. Theoretical for him, practical for the latter.

Regulus did not much like the sudden memory at all, made only worse by his present circumstances, but whatever Bella had done - if she had done anything at all - did not appear to have been permanent. They all seemed to be have pulled through it safely, but he wasn’t sure he wanted to even confirm the suspicions. Were it up to him, he would rather avoid talking about Bellatrix entirely when there was little to gain but depressing reminders.

“I would imagine as much,” he said instead.

"Let's not be maudlin," Andromeda said, in a decisive tone. "Things are in arguably better than even five years ago, so I choose to be thankful for what I have. A proof that the unexpected does not mean unwelcome."

Regulus dipped his chin in a little nod. “I can agree with that.”

"We can let our private lives remain as such," Andromeda allowed. "Unless you want to talk about it, which would be fine."

"You've met her," Sirius argued.

"I have not," Andromeda replied. "I've met a handful of your current and former friends, and the only one here I can describe as not wild and not at all someone Narcissa influenced is - against all expectation given the affliction - Remus Lupin."

“Well, I can confirm she is not Remus Lupin,” Regulus said dryly, and after a beat, decided that he did not mind her prying for the moment. Neither she nor Sirius were being particularly embarrassing about it, and he did like the subject matter, all things considered. “She was a Ravenclaw in Sirius’s year, though I did not know her at the time. Probably for the best, honestly. Emmeline Vance.”

"I know that name..." Andromeda pondered aloud. Sirius added "because you've met her" under his breath, but was completely ignored. "I know what I'm thinking of, I'm thinking of Charlotte at the annual pudding club dinners at Temperance Hall. We do their flowers."

"Aren't you cultivating poisonous plants?" Sirius asked.

"Recreationally," Andromeda replied. "Not professionally. The poison plant market veers into a type of person I prefer not to deal with these days and who definitely does not want to deal with me. Besides, I earn a living other than professional vigilantism."
"I bet those plants are about as legal as vigilantism," Sirius commented. "No one knows how to be legal around here."

"It's...law adjacent," Andromeda protested.

"Such things are all in the framing," Regulus supported with a nod.

"I have a bad experience with framing," Sirius replied. "I think I'll give that a miss."

Regulus shot a wry, flattened smile. "That's fair."

"Don't encourage him," Andromeda said, with an eye roll. "Can we please go back to having a civilised tea without any meltdowns?"

"I don't have meltdowns," Regulus replied pointedly.

"You have them more quietly than most, but I do beg to differ." Andromeda punctuated her statement with a smile. "You were both sniping, out of a reason of care but having a little fit at each other nonetheless. Just because you're thinking your irritation doesn't make it any less pronounced than someone-" she looked to Sirius - "who has never learned the meaning of 'inside voice'."

"I thought you gave up the legilimency business years ago," Ted asked. "I don't fancy all of that again."

"I did stop," Andromeda replied. "There was little choice after what seeing what was in a few people's nasty little minds. I'm just occasionally adept at reading the unspoken signals of internal grumblings. It's like how your dearly departed mother could speak using only her eyebrows."

"Aye, that's an impressive skill," Ted admitted.

Plucking one of the sandwiches and putting it on his saucer, Regulus shook his head. "I will keep my internal screaming to a minimum as long as the irritants are kept to a minimum in turn," he said primly, his mouth quirking up at the corner. "Thus far, the second portion is off to a good start, so it bodes well."

"Don't tempt me," Sirius said, still forgoing sandwiches for cakes. "What's left to talk about, the weather?"

Regulus shrugged and took a bite.

"This is why teas are boring," Sirius declared.

With another sideways at his brother, Regulus silently thought that thrills and excitement were not the intended function of an afternoon tea; yet there had already been more drama than he strictly preferred.

Ironic, perhaps, that the drama had connected in no way to his hosts; it wasn’t exactly surprising, given his and Sirius’s historic tendencies, but ironic, nonetheless. Eyeing Andromeda then, and her husband Ted after that, Regulus found that he was strangely comfortable with it all. He had spared little thought for Ted Tonks - had not even known his name, as a child and teenager - but he had always expected it to be an upsetting moment, facing the man who had triggered the first split in Regulus’s experience of family… the one who had dared to pull his cousin away, and who had done so without thinking about the mess it would leave. For so long, he had wanted to be angry at them, had grasped at the feeling like some sort of warped security blanket, but that feeling fell flat and pointless, now. Terribly anticlimactic, but surprisingly enough, it was not a negative feeling.
Jarring, perhaps, to feel so relaxed in the presence of three of the four people he had been so angry at throughout the majority of his adolescence, but - it wasn’t negative.

Family had a meaning, and it had always felt so clear in the past, but wading through the muddled definitions only seemed to get messier, the further he pushed. Around him, the image did not look quite right, but it felt right, which he supposed must count for something.
Regulus had spent the morning reinforcing wards at the house. After the mild disaster of Draco's tour, Regulus had prioritised an investigation of how to specifically block Bellatrix - and perhaps even Draco himself - from open entry through the family ward. Narcissa was harmless enough, and he could not quite bring himself to lock her out on principle; rather, 'Death Eater' was the present criteria, even if he suspected she still wouldn't like it, were she to realise as much. In all of his research, he had yet to find an option that did not involve blood from the individuals invited, but for now, he would just have to try to come up with a way to obtain Bella's blood without her realising…

That was all.

In the drawing room, Regulus had settled in with a text Emmeline had recently lifted from the Department of Mysteries - the brain division, this time, with an experimental text on the compartments of the mind and how to trigger them. Though Sirius's displeasure with his Harry-related secretiveness was certainly convicting, it nonetheless left him pondering additional possibilities that did not involve killing his brother's godson. Using legilimency to hunt for traces (or even sources) of dark magic beyond the surface could be an interesting start… Turning the idea over in his mind, he wondered if they could see it, perhaps they could interact with it, yet as far as standard legilimency went, the Dark Lord (Voldemort, he reminded himself uncomfortably) did not seem to be reacting to the presence of a horcrux when rooting around in Harry’s mind. Beyond that point, Regulus had barely scratched the surface of the text.

Thus far, no brilliant plan for telling Sirius had presented itself, but even if he had not found the right words for the horcruxes, Regulus was nonetheless trying. Sharing his breakfast menu and approximate reading schedule for the day had been interpreted as ‘bratty’ and ‘sarcastic,’ which it was, in part, but Regulus still was not quite sure how to tap into things that would confide without risk or oversentimentality. A work in progress, it seemed.

Tea at the Tonkses had been different - far from any family dynamic he could readily recall - but he had not disliked it. Upon returning to the house, he had returned to the tapestry, as ever, yet he still was not sure what to do with that feeling. Family belonged on the tree - he was empowered to decide who qualified as family… but that led down a complicated road.

One that he had smothered in legilimency research, though he remained perched by the tree. If he must agonise, at least he could do so productively.

“Sickle for your thoughts?”

Though he recognised Emmeline's voice easily, Regulus nonetheless turned slightly to see her moving to sit in a chair just next to his. “I was just thinking about my cousins,” he responded. “From reinforcing the wards this morning, and from tea at Andromeda's.”

“There are many of them,” Emmeline noted. She waved lazily at the tapestry from the door. “More still, from your additions.”

“I was specifically considering the ones who are still alive, but that is nonetheless true,” Regulus responded with a nod, “in both respects. The missing spots continue to be on my mind, I must admit.”

"Aren't the only living spots Sirius and Tonks's mother?" Emmeline asked.
He nodded. “I suppose it isn't exactly on display at this point, but it has been bothering me.”

"Your family tree is very important to you. I don't think it matters if it's on display or not, so much as if it's upsetting you. For as long as I've known you, you've made that abundantly clear." Emmeline pulled her legs together tightly, then took a few slow steps forward. "What about it is bothering you?"

“The question of adding people back,” he said, propping an elbow on the arm of his chair and tucking his hand under his chin. “It's supposed to be permanent, and changing it would make many people very cross, but I don't much like it.”

"So once someone's removed, they are removed, regardless of the reason or if the next person down finds the reasoning a little stupid. I'm thinking of Arthur's mother, because she seemed to tick the minimum boxes, but she was still treated the same way as a runaway teenage mother and the boy who put 'blood traitor' on his luggage for seventh year." Emmeline looked in the direction of several burnt spots. "I can see why you have so many absences. Though if I may ask a question - if it was never meant to be changed, why is it possible to do so? You did it up there, and surely, it'd be possible to curse an object to prevent adding but not adjusting the burns. Yet you don't look as if you've been cursed, and the adjustment remains."

“To be quite honest, I'm not sure about the specifics.” Regulus turned his eyes to the tapestry again. “Many have had authority over the tree's make up, over the generations, so I suppose it could vary along with them. Or perhaps none of them felt it necessary because it was simply understood to be final.”

"Or the finality is a more recent addition," Emmeline suggested. "Though I have to say, it's baffling there's something about your family even you don't know."

“It was most unwise to ask about the burn marks. They indicated it was final, so final, it was,” Regulus said, pressing a flat smile.

"It's always wise to ask questions about things you don't understand. Otherwise, you won't learn anything. Discouraging curiosity is 'most unwise'." Emmeline flashed him a grin. "Not that it often stops you. Is it the inaccuracy bothering you, given that I'm not sure how disownment sits with you, or the sentiment?"

“Both,” he answered. More sentiment, as of late, but it had been a curiosity from the start.

"As a historical document, the inaccuracies would be annoying." Emmeline bent down to trace some seemingly random lines. "But as far as sentiment goes, it would be understandable. This is your family tapestry, and it doesn't show people you consider to be family. It isn't reflective of reality or even legal matters. To leave it would respect it as a relic of a previous age, but if you choose to change it, it will carry on as a living document. You probably just need to decide which you want it to be - current or historical?"

Regulus lowered his chin in a small nod. “At first, it felt like a historical relic that I had no place modifying - frozen as my mother had left it - but I don't like the idea of them being lost to time. Family is family.”

“You have already adjusted your own dates,” Emmeline noted.

“I have.” Wryly, he smiled. “I'm not dead yet.”

“Then if you want to adjust it, what's stopping you?” Emmeline asked. “You've set a precedent.”
“I know it's illogical,” he granted, still eyeing the two bottommost burn marks. In his mind, he could still hear their mother’s sharp words whenever they would inquire about the disowned branches of the tree, could still see the fury of her blast when Sirius was scorched away. Even if she could rise from the dead to shout at him, it would not change his desire to fill in each hole he could, nor to symbolically reconnect the lines that had been burned away - but the echo in his head was loud, nonetheless. There were tiers of offense, however uniform the marks might look, and his brother and Andromeda had been the top offenders in his home.

With a soft huff, Regulus added, “My resolution is set, but the accompanying thoughts remain a bit chaotic. I am allowing them to settle.”

“Nothing about family is logical. I have a house viewing tomorrow, and though I have long lived away from my parents, somehow it feels disrespectful to move forwards.” Emmeline gave him a weak smile. “But the tapestry has not always been here; it has changed and moved as generations have gone on. Is it not more disrespectful to leave it a relic, than to breathe life into it with some newer branches? A little more toujours famille, of course, but adapting to survive seems very much in the spirit.”

_Toujours famille_. If adding people back to the tree after disownment was a crime, then even joking about the thousand-year-old family motto was certainly another offense. That motto represented a millennium-long chain of pureblood Blacks that he was threatening to upset, were he to keep moving forward - and with the thought came another twinge of guilt. _Selfish_, it said, though he heard it in Narcissa's voice.

Even so, Emmeline's version resonated through the guilt, and it was an arguably more accurate sentiment, as far as he was concerned. When he met Emmeline’s eyes again, he flicked a little smile.

“Indeed. Adaptation has been a common theme, as of late. I would really like to salvage the remainder of the family, stubborn as they are.”

"As you are. You’re all ridiculously stubborn," Emmeline corrected, lightly. "Have you talked to Tonks about it? If it's her branch, she ought to have a say in whether it's there or not."

Regulus lifted an eyebrow. “I have not.”

"I suppose she was never on it and is unlikely to have strong feelings on the matter,” Emmeline mused. “I seem to recall you weren’t close with her mother. What has Sirius said on all of this?”

“He gets rather ruffled about the tapestry in a general sense but has not said much in respect to modifications - just surprise when I adjusted my death date and distaste for the circumstances of Marius,” Regulus said, looking to the tree again.

“Perhaps he thought you wouldn't touch it,” Emmeline suggested. “You do have a reverence for it.”

Regulus nodded. “At first, I was not certain I wanted to… but my death was a factual inaccuracy. As for the others… I did not like the idea that so many would be lost to time,” he responded with a little frown.

“Because you're not sure you would have chosen differently to them, and don't believe it should come at a fiery cost?” Emmeline inquired. “Or completionism.”

“Both,” he said again. “Perhaps the first one, more so - but elements of both, I suppose.”
“The former is a better reason,” Emmeline noted. “If it's important to you, I suggest you ask them what they think. Ruffled or otherwise.”

“I suppose.”

“Are you feeling put out because the tapestry is yours and you either want to not touch it or claim entire ownership and do as you like with it with no inbetween?” Emmeline asked, a smile threatening on her lips.

Twisting his mouth down at the corner, Regulus flicked over a sideways glance. It sounded petty, stated like that. “They never cared before,” he said instead, pointedly.

"If you don't mind me pointing it out, but weren't you eleven when Tonks's mother left and therefore perhaps not privy to the complex issues involving leaving and being removed from the tapestry, let alone being what, a pregnant teenager at the time? It may have had quite an effect on her emotional state or what she may have thought of something like this.” Emmeline looked back down to the mark between Bellatrix and Narcissa as if it would answer her question.

Stiffening, he eyed the tapestry again. “I understand the complexities of leaving rather well, actually.”

"Not everyone has the same experience," Emmeline said, pointedly. "Unless you're equating your experience with being a pregnant woman or being well, Sirius."

The words connected like a sting. Sirius and Andromeda had been dismissive about the tapestry for as long as he could remember, but naturally, their opinions about what it did or didn’t look like were the most important thing. Their complex feelings about the family took precedence. Nevermind the fact that Sirius had practically shoved the house and the tapestry in his lap and told him to do what he wanted. Nevermind that Andromeda did not even visit the house, or that he was merely trying to navigate the prospect of them as family, when everything in the past screamed that he shouldn’t. It was a bitter thought, and one that hurt rather a lot, though he tried to hold it off of his face.

“I'm done talking about this,” Regulus said quietly, lifting his book again.

“We don't have to.” Emmeline nodded. “But you could also tell me what I just said to upset you so I don't do it again.”

Eyes locked on the page with a chiseled frown, it took an uncomfortably silent beat before he responded. “It is evident that my experience is the least important factor in this conversation - but to expound, frustration strikes when, despite my brother telling me to do with all of this as I please, it is still 'do what I please as long as it is what he would do' - what Andromeda would do - perhaps I should ask Bellatrix and Narcissa too. They can all take a vote. Draco and Tonks, as well. Aunt Callidora can be the tie-breaker.”

"Oh, I see. Yes, I suppose it did sound like I was dismissing your experience. You really could have just said that instead of becoming brooding and taciturn about it all.” Emmeline sighed deeply. "I don't have a say in old family things for you, so I was attempting to show that despite that, you weren't alone in making decisions that involve carrying a lot of weight. I don't truly believe you're the only person who cares about your tapestry, but I also can't imagine removing someone from their lineage, so it's possible it's a line of thought beyond my own. I just didn't want you to bear their weight when they're fully capable of it. They have their own complex relationships, as do you, but you're already carrying a lot on your shoulders, and they can sort themselves out."
In Regulus’s mind, the sharp edges smoothed out again, and that swift, wounded tangle began to unknot, just as quickly. Tugging his gaze up from the page, he met her eyes again. “I’m not entirely convinced that either my brother or cousin really want to carry any of our family’s weight, but I suppose that is a thoughtful sentiment.”

Emmeline tapped lightly on the tapestry. "They may not know if they're allowed to."

His expression went a little bit puzzled. “You don't think so? Sirius couldn't shake off responsibility for this house quickly enough.”

"While I'll bow to your knowledge in siblinghood, I think you've perhaps overlooked something, perhaps because you do it too. Sirius lies," Emmeline replied, bluntly. "Rarely outright, and I've never seen it done maliciously, but he's secretive, and he gets annoyed if you press him on things he doesn't want to discuss. Family has always been a complex subject everyone was warned off of. It depends who you are, I suppose, some people get away with it. Well, lying is perhaps overstating it too, but if he can justify it from his own perspective, he tells whopping fibs to one person and will happily tell the truth to another. You have noticed, I'm sure?"

Watching her for a moment, Regulus made a soft hmming sound. “Well, yes,” he began, slanting his mouth downward. “Though I know well that I cannot always take his word for accurate, he certainly is consistent.”

"It took me a little while, but I did manage to figure out that it's simply that neither of you like to just confront things head on out of the blue. In big, dramatic and sweeping moments, yes, but in the day to day?" Emmeline scrunched up her nose, then shook her head. "No. You leave breadcrumbs, comments here and there to help create enough of a picture to make an educated guess if you're paying attention, and he's more...he'll give you one lie and one truth mixed together. You both require attention to know and understand, but that is also true of many people here. You are, of course, exceptionally worth that time and effort, but your clues and Sirius's are different, and I have been wondering if you noticed it or you're simply too close to get an objective viewpoint. I'm not fully convinced he listens to himself when he speaks, because one minute you're one of the smartest people, and the next you're an idiot, and I suppose both of those might be true in some way to him, but if you stop listening to what he says and look at what he does, it becomes easier to spot when he's - if you'll pardon my language - full of shit. When it comes to family, I think he's usually full of quite a lot of shit."

He nodded, flicking his mouth back up a little. “That seems like a fair assumption.”

"I understand why. This is very much a survival of the strongest - and purest - sort of house, but we have a very dramatic day coming up, and if one of my things got caught in the firing line, I would have to destroy him, and I think that would cause some strain on our relationship," Emmeline said, solemnly. "Speaking of, I know even mentioning Harry's father tends to be a point of upset for you, so we're going to go to - speaking of complicated people - Abe's after the vigil. I'll do my best not to disturb you upon returning."

Regulus nodded. “Last year was a disaster. I may not have liked Potter, but I do not begrudge the mourning. A bit of space is probably beneficial.”

"That is not how I want you to meet Drunk Emmeline," Emmeline said, in a theatrical voice.  
His mouth tugged up into a little smile. “No, I imagine those circumstances are not ideal.”

"I'll introduce you to her one day, but it's not an appropriate time. It will be sad and will not involve any attempts to imitate Eliza Doolittle." Emmeline suddenly snapped to attention. "That's what I
keep meaning to do! I'll ask Mad Eye to clear some time in the next few weeks from my rota with the Order. I did promise to take you to a play, and I don't believe we've managed the date part of dating yet. No one has tried to kill Harry since September, so perhaps we'll cut it in before it happens again."

"The war has a habit of getting in the way." Regulus quirked a smile. "But that sounds lovely. Hopefully everyone can stay out of trouble for a night."

Emmeline looked thoughtful. "I'll start the betting pool on something happening to interrupt it. I can add another library to the new place when I win."

"Are we specifying whether the interruption happens to us or someone else?" he asked.

"Are you planning on having an interruption?" Emmeline asked. "You could just say no if you don't want to go."

"I want to go," he clarified as he shook his head. "I was merely thinking that there is precedence for both varieties of interruption, and for the sake of the betting pool, such a factor could be important in the set up."

"That was my mistake. I was just going off what I thought you meant without specifically asking you and going ahead as if you'd told me that explicitly," Emmeline said, with an exaggerated nod and wide eyed look. "Was that too subtle, or did you pick up what I did there?"

Regulus rolled his eyes. "You are positively hilarious," he said wryly.

"I play no small part in your current tapestry predicament because my great great aunt or someone's second cousin caught sight of a muggle's library and thought yes, this is the one, this is the person I'm going to marry, and then this will all be mine. It was an ingenious plan, but did doom me to the title of half-blood and unsuitability for your family motto." Emmeline looked down for a moment, seeming to stop but then she gave a huff of breath. "I don't know how strictly you apply this thing to your life. I have no idea if disownments still count or not. Sirius is still here; I do think you acknowledge Tonks as your cousin; but I'm...just trying to understand what you're thinking. Piecing together what I know. Perhaps I should take my own advice and just ask."

"I have not been holding to it very strictly, no," he said, eyeing the crested motto at the top. Toujours pur. It was peering down accusingly, but he continued with an assured tone. "Purposefully so, in respect to yourself and to the disownments. Truthfully, I did not care for the disownment process, back when it happened," Regulus admitted, shaking his head. However much he might have steeled himself to support it vocally, the event had been more cutting than satisfying. "I expect the Malfoy and Lestrange branches will heartily disagree, but I feel no need to carry forth the exclusions when I never wanted the family splintered in the first place. I consider them family, and because I am now in a position to make such a determination, I suppose that means it is so."

"It does sound traumatic. It punishes everyone, not just the person leaving." Emmeline looked back at the tapestry. "What legacies would you want to keep?"

"For the most part, academics have always been regarded as important, and I rather like those, if you haven't noticed," he said with a small smile. "I also favour the sense of openness towards all manners of magic and a respect for history and tradition - even if there is a bit more flexibility with the details of the latter, as of late."

"Inclusive traditionalism is still a wonderful thing. Without it, no sorting ceremony, no house cup, no understanding of the context in which magic was created." Emmeline smiled back. "Those are
things I can appreciate. Being swots is a fine tradition, and much nicer than pushing people away for loving someone.”

He nodded, the movement slow and pensive. “Indeed. There have been too many fractures for my liking.”

“Then I simply suggest you tell them,” Emmeline said. “Or Christmas dinner arrangements will be hell.”

Privately, Regulus still thought it was rather obvious that he had accepted them as family, given the changes in their interpersonal dynamics. Initiating a dedicated conversation seemed terribly uncomfortable, but perhaps it wasn't completely impossible that they may not realise…

“That is a bit direct, but I suppose I can make an effort to do so,” he granted.

"I promise no one will yell at you for being direct," Emmeline said, softly. "It certainly worked for us, didn't it? We were very upfront. We only stopped short of deciding on courtship periods and where holidays should be."

Regulus didn't bother to hide the subtle skepticism in his expression. “You underestimate my brother’s capacity for yelling about family matters, but I appreciate your intent, even if the comparison is not direct.”

"I'm not underestimating anything. I've been here for months, it's been quite the spectator sport." Emmeline tapped her pocket. "I almost have dramatics bingo. I just need a dramatic storm out to complete it."

“I believe that one happened before your stay with us. Perhaps it will come up again,” he said wryly.

"I missed it?" Emmeline groaned. "I'm usually so good at having my nose in other people's business. Remus is going to beat me."

“He was not in the room at the time, so perhaps he missed it, too,” Regulus quipped back. “You may still have a chance.”

"I can only hope," Emmeline said. "I know it's silly, but the little games, bets, they help. You get to focus on something silly for a while. You never know what moment ends up being the last time you see someone."

With a brush of solemnity, he nodded. “Might as well embrace the levity, if it helps.”

"Seize the moment," Emmeline commented, then reached over to kiss him on the cheek. "Like that. You know. Spontaneity and such such."

A smile tugged at his mouth. “Just like that. Step aside, Gryffindors,” he remarked, taking her hand and letting their fingers thread loosely. “Any other spontaneous plans for today?”

“I thought I would obsessively watch you obsessively watch a family heirloom,” Emmeline smiled. “That sounds like a healthy way to spend an afternoon.”

“Perhaps I will mix things up with a bit of reading,” he said lightly, tapping his book. “Haven't found anything solid to act on, but it is fascinating, as anticipated.”

“I’m going to have to smuggle you more material, aren’t I?” Emmeline said, with a highly dramatic
“Of course, but it's for an excellent cause,” he said with a punctuating nod.

“Alleviating your boredom?” Emmeline asked. “Or keeping you out of trouble?”

“Both,” he responded. “And a wealth of theoretical considerations to turn over, as well.”

"At least you admit you're troublesome now," Emmeline allowed.

“I would argue that it is generally other people causing the trouble. I'm merely present for it,” he pointed out.

"That's because you cause your trouble in secret," Emmeline said. "Then look innocent when it comes out."

“Which, of course, has always served me better than causing trouble in the open,” he responded with a subtle shrug and a little smile. “Secret trouble is often easier to navigate.”

“Only because no one knows,” Emmeline huffed. “I know to watch out for you now.”

“In respect to the trouble I'm causing on purpose, you are directly involved in both infractions, so you should not have to watch very closely.”

“That doesn’t mean I won’t,” Emmeline said. “I’m very thorough.”

“I suppose I must give up on my life of trouble-making and trickery.” Regulus nodded. “Only candidness and safety, from now on.”

"You're a vigilante," Emmeline replied, flatly.

“Hmmmm, I suppose that could make things difficult,” Regulus responded, though the thoughtful expression in his face was not quite sincere.

“You don’t know how to not be trouble,” Emmeline decided aloud. “You were born into it and got away with it with a prefect’s badge or because Sirius is louder about it. I think you’d be bored without it.”

“I did experience a life of relative safety and anonymity, but does not seem to have stuck.”

"But were you bored?" Emmeline pressed.

“Perhaps, a little bit,” he admitted wryly.

At that, Emmeline smiled widely. "I knew it! You enjoy the melodrama too much not to miss it a little."

“But just a little,” he emphasised. “The reading conditions were top notch.”

"You can read and be dramatic," Emmeline said, a faux solemn look coming about her. "You don't have to choose. You have enough choices as it is."

“That is entirely too accurate,” he said, shaking his head.

"Don't worry," Emmeline said. "It's only the fate of the magical world, your family, and your life in the balance."
“Ah, yes, that’s all. I am glad I can rely on you to help keep it all in perspective,” he said dryly.

Emmeline shrugged. "Happy to help."

Running a thumb over her knuckles, he smiled, and in a strange but familiar way, flippancy cut away some of the bite to the reality of the situation - and the tension of those choices, major and minor alike. There was a sense of comfort, here, and though he knew ramifications were certain to come, it felt like a choice well worth making.

Leaning back in his chair, Regulus opened the book again - with perhaps less passive aggression, this time - and found the spot he had left off in the question of legilimency and horcruxes. “I'm finishing this section, but you are welcome to stay, if you'd like.”

“I had better get back to boxing things back up. Another time,” Emmeline replied. “I may have to ask your house-elf where a few things have gone when I’m quite sure where I left them, and he really does avoid me like I have the lurgy, so it could prove an interesting endeavour. I suppose I should ask Sirius the same thing; there is every chance he’s just put something somewhere and not thought it may not belong in this particular house. Moving is somehow even worse than I remember. Find me a good book to come back to when I’m done being in a tizzy, will you, please?”

"Gladly," he said with a little nod. "You aren't hand-packing, are you? Just searching for missing belongings?"

"I won't say missing, per se," Emmeline said. "Just...momentarily unsure what happened to a few of my books and my new slippers. The books might be hiding from me. They might have decided they want to stay here with their ancient brethren."

If Regulus had to guess, chances were high that the books had been shoved onto random bookshelves without much notice as to who they might have belonged to. From an honest - albeit selfish - perspective, Regulus still did not particularly want Emmeline to move out when he had grown rather accustomed to her presence, but he supposed he had seen her prior to house attack, too.

"Should you require assistance from someone who actually pays attention to what does or does not belong here, simply let me know, and I will see if I can fit it into my very, very busy schedule," he began, lightly. "Regardless, if I spot anything out of place, I will set it aside for you. Unless, of course, your books ask politely to stay, in which case, that may be out of my hands."

Emmeline merely harrumphed. "I knew you'd take their side."

There was an art to magic. Not its performance necessarily, that was much more point and wave, but it could be done with flare, with the casual elegance to separate the femme from the ingénue and the women from wallflowers.

In her youth, Andromeda had little problem with being a wallflower. She liked the discretion. However, as ill-believed as her mother had been, she had been a force of nature. As annoying as these little flairs that had no practical use had been to learn as a teenager, Andromeda had to admit that she found a use for them now. There were entirely too many people who looked at her either as a dead woman walking – a ridiculous notion – or someone to be pitied. She had little time for either notion.

So it was perhaps nothing more than showing off to be able to whip out of apparition mid-stride
with one of her better cloaks whipping inline behind her, but it got people's attention, and a harried-looking young woman came to her almost immediately. It was a busy time for the plant nursery: many of these floral boutiques wanted signature bouquets and centrepieces no one else would have, and Andromeda had always been good at arranging the rare and unusual. It was usually a time of year that she looked forward to, but there were too many people here who ran in the purest of circles or those who simply saw her former elder sister's picture plastered about and had to do a double-take when they looked at her. It grated on her, but there was something to whipping people into a frenzy to get what you need done. She understood why her mother loved to do it. Andromeda was not immune to power plays when they suited her needs.

She ought not wander about it - it tended to shatter the illusion - but some of the designs were already being put together, and stilling her curiosity was not her strong point. It took barely a moment to register the pearls and white flowers and who they likely were for before she spotted Narcissa. If Andromeda (and begrudgingly, she admitted Bellatrix to the list) could show an influence and power by commanding a room when she chose to, then she truly believed Narcissa could have done it blindfolded with her hands behind her back.

This was her arena, so to speak. It wasn't the first time Andromeda had seen her in one of these places. They dutifully ignored each other, as they had for the last two decades, but Andromeda hadn't been sure she wouldn't send someone else do it this year. The war was very much back on, with her chosen suitor (husband) behind bars. He wasn't the only one, but he was arguably the most high profile, due to slipping out of the net last time. Upon longer inspection, she did think Narcissa was looking a little puffy around the eyes. That could be dramatics - certainly, she was prone to them - but it could also be that she'd allowed her son to be hoodwinked into the same nonsense as her husband.

Andromeda bit down a huff with annoyance. They had a routine for these things. They pointedly ignored each other and didn't speak of it, and the staff surely knew that by now. Still, something unexpected tugged at her. Damn Sirius, she grumbled to herself. It was hardly unusual for him to see something that had gone on perfectly fine for decades, and then with a few words or pointed commentary, muck it up. Often entertaining to watch, or necessary, but this was neither of those things. She knew where Bellatrix's loyalties lay; even if she seemed to have trouble pulling her wand out, it wasn't unlikely she'd make some sort of attempt on Andromeda. She already had with Ted and Nymphadora. Sirius too, though she was unsure where Regulus stood in it all. Narcissa had not done the expected thing, the severe cut, but perhaps it was simply her weakened standing which drove it, and not some unexpected common sense.

This was the problem with her bloodline – they were all quite bright, talented people, and yet, they still got embroiled in messes such as these for reasons she couldn't quite grasp. Blind loyalty had never been her specialty, nor seemingly was it Regulus's (though he more prone than she, as perhaps it was all a callback to childhood for him), but Sirius and Bellatrix had both taken a Dantesque view of loyalties. In all truth, Andromeda had no idea where Narcissa stood on it these days. Even if this purity of the blood nonsense was known to be nonsense by most of the Masked and Unmasked these days, there was lip service paid, and Narcissa was good at that.

Regulus's death and Lucius's (then near) imprisonment had shaken her at the time. Even from afar, Andromeda knew that much. Perhaps Bellatrix's did too, or perhaps Bellatrix's behaviour had made capture a foregone conclusion in her mind, or perhaps, she simply hid that under the other things. She had lost standing then, and it was all torn down again mere months ago. It was an interesting situation. To be dark was now considered – well, unfashionable seemed too light a term, but it was out of vogue – yet there was still the overhanging possibility of being killed by Death Eaters, so loyalties were precarious at the moment.
None of this concerned her. They had drawn their lines and walked dutifully behind them a long time ago. Why did that seem suddenly as if she were bound to the same rules she had left to get away from? To upset the balance was to tempt fate. It was idiotic, and to do so simply because she'd let Sirius *get to her* would be profoundly ridiculous.

Still, she had come close to losing a child because of Bellatrix, and that had been emotional acrobatics alone. If Narcissa was in a similar situation, it was going to be a now or never moment, was it not? Lucius imprisoned, her son in school, Bellatrix currently unable to be seen in public. This couldn't be public either. Oh, there was a this now. This was a *thing* that she was thinking about, a moment she was entertaining. She was going to get hexed for her trouble. She had enough trouble without going and looking for it by breaking a two decades old routine which was working just fine.

But perhaps there was something about watching her younger cousins snipe but ultimately work themselves out on her couch that had brought a certain rebellious thought of 'well, she talked to Regulus' mixed with 'if they can manage it, we're grown women, why can't we'... the answer being a million reasons, but her mind wasn't in the mood to be listening to reason so much as it was for listening to the alluring nostalgia.

She'd been staring about too long, she knew, and either she had to shy away from the moment or she had to grasp it. Perhaps idiotic leaps of faith were a new family trait, because she found her treacherous feet had already began to walk, and it took only the surprise of the moment to put her hand on her arm and apparate into the manager's office and out of view.

Narcissa visibility startled as they cracked into place. When she twisted to face Andromeda, her wand was already drawn, but despite the hard line of her mouth, her eyes looked almost uncertain.

“Have you completely lost your mind?” she snipped, lifting her chin as she took a step back. As her eyes fell on the stacks of paper and clutter, one could be forgiven for assuming she smelled something terrible, but most likely, the distaste had another source.

“A question better directed at yourself!” Andromeda hissed back at her. It wasn’t the most well-mannered approach, but she supposed she had a limited time frame.”What are you playing at, stringing your youngest cousin along that way? He left. You know what happens as well as I when you leave. To continue with this charade is only going to lead to more pain for you both. Unless you believe he had just cause to do so, which makes your son’s involvement ever the more utterly mad.”

“You have *no right* to talk to me about my son,” Narcissa began, her expression first stricken, then stony. “As for Regulus, his confusion is evident, but it is not as though he has gone off and married a mudblood. There is still time for him to come to his senses.”

“There most definitely is not,” Andromeda said, firmly. “He's already been attacked twice, and he's barely done anything beyond decide murder is not his forte. You've spoken to him; you know his feelings on Death Eaters.”

Narcissa furrowed her brow, stiffening sightly before responding: “He was involved in the… ordeal at the Ministry, but I would not qualify that as being ‘attacked’. “

*Three, then.* There had been that business in Covent Garden with the younger Mulciber getting arrested, hadn't there? Though still unsure of the details, Andromeda knew that something had happened that caused Regulus to be involved, but she could hardly raise it. There was an excellent chance, given Nymphadora’s vague commentary, it was vigilante-related, and it didn't seem as if Narcissa had quite gathered that Regulus had done a complete switch. If he had. Instead,
Andromeda looked at her quizzically about her lack of knowledge over the Iago incident. It wasn't likely she would be lie about not knowing something. Narcissa hated to left out of the loop. "At Iago. It was serious enough he was put on rest by a Healer. When I heard you'd visited, I thought you were attempting to keep him company during his convalescence."

Tension pulled Narcissa's mouth into a frown. "He appeared to be in good health and did not mention anything of the sort," she said tightly. "Perhaps your source was being overdramatic."

"Possible," Andromeda admitted, but very unlikely. There was little need to dramatise the already drama-prone. "But I don't think so. You know as well as I that Regulus could be quite literally bleeding to death, and he would still maintain decorum. He would not allow a healer unless it was something he couldn't fix, which rules out anything minor. He may not be shouting it from any rooftops, but he's no fan of the Dark Lord's, and he says so when asked, so I think you should check your own sources on whether he’s confused or not. ”

"And you are the expert on him now, are you?" Narcissa said, tensely.

"I am no more an expert on the international man of mystery than I was of the eleven-year-old, but I don't think you would be such a cause for distress if your beliefs weren't currently at odds." While Andromeda could relate, attempting to hold on to two worlds at odds seemed an impossibility. Of anyone, she would know this. "But he is adamant about not being a Death Eater, and between Iago, the hospital, and the Ministry, people have taken notice of that and don't seem to like it. The next move is yours."

Her sister’s expression sharpened. "What, exactly, am I supposed to do about that?"

"Don't cling on to someone you don't want anymore," Andromeda replied bluntly. "It's cruel."

"I want him to stay alive," Narcissa countered as emotion knotted in her throat, shaking her voice just slightly before she swallowed it down. "To think things through and consider how his actions affect other people. In light of the erratic and contradictory behaviour, I would settle for him thinking through how his actions affect himself."

"Think of himself?" Andromeda made a scoffing noise at such ridiculousness. "That boy thought he was better to be thought dead than to admit he would rather be home with a good book than hurt someone and face the death penalty of that choice. More likely still, have the entire bloodline have to cope with the last heir be seen as a traitor. Do you want him to leave?"

"I would have preferred that he came home, where he belongs." Narcissa pursed her lips. "The life of a traitor does not suit him, whatever ideas he might have in his head. He’s going to get himself killed."

"I wholeheartedly agree," Andromeda replied. On the one hand, he had always been quite happy where he was then, but with the exception of the situation with Narcissa, he also seemed quite happy where he is now. Perhaps he just didn’t like to seem a bother. But he and Sirius sitting on her couch had seemed - if a little moody with each other - quite happy enough in each other’s company, not particularly stilted or frustrated with it. "The problem with that line of thought is he doesn’t have ‘whatever’ ideas. He has well-structured ideas and reasonable ideas, which, although not what I would have expected, seem to be entirely his own. While I haven't grilled him extensively on the subject, I have heard enough to know they don't match my own, nor Sirius's, nor anyone else I can think of whose belief system you don't approve of. They don't match yours either. The reasonable conclusion is these are his own views, which means there must be some logic behind them, and he's unlikely to waver from them. He may be in danger, on this we can agree, but it's more dangerous to have one finger in each pie, so to speak."
Stonily, Narcissa lifted her chin. “Why are you telling me all of this? If the two of you are so chatty now, you would be better served warning him.”

"Do you really think he'll let go simply because I tell him he's supposed to?" It was possible it was too much time around Sirius, but Andromeda had a long held suspicion that he'd always been inclined not to listen to other people and had suppressed the urge. "He hangs on, you know this. I don't think he and Sirius even managed six months without running into each other. You've done it before, quite successfully."

“I must say that I prefer it when you are minding your own business,” Narcissa said, her tone chilly.

"So do I, but upon my couch, your business is fretting over your child's possible demise if he's found wanting, so it's gotten hard to ignore." Andromeda folded her arms, as she was in no way about to show any intimidation at all.

The look in her sister's eyes was caught somewhere between distressed and thunderous. “If Regulus is fretting so much, perhaps he should reconsider his present company. As it is, I will worry about my child.”

"Given that he appears to have gotten the Malfoy gene for discretion, yes, I think you should,” Andromeda replied, rolling her eyes. "If you truly want to know why Regulus shouldn't change his company, you ought to ask him what he thinks of Lucius's imprisonment for torturing children. I don't think you'll enjoy the answer."

For a fleeting second, she saw a subtle tremor in Narcissa’s expression - one that seemed to ripple down to her hands before she clenched them to balled fists. With a twist, Narcissa reached to grasp the handle of the office door as she added, “I’m not going to stand here and listen to you slander them.”

“I'm not stopping you,” Andromeda replied. She had said what she needed to. “You enjoy dramatic exits, so do feel free to make one.”

“Just keep your commentary about my family to yourself.” The tone of the words sounded like a warning, but a tinge of fear and uncertainty flashed behind Narcissa’s eyes as she said them. Hardening her expression again, she strode out - out of the room and out of the building without further attention to the flowers she had come to buy.

It was not until she had passed the threshold of the manor that Narcissa allowed her face to start crumbling, blinking away the salty blur that had started to build up, even as she strode out of the plant nursery. Coming around the corner, Rabastan paused, made the sort of ‘not again’ expression that made her want to scream at him, then turned back around the way he had come.

However cathartic if might have been to scream in that moment, the need was neutralised within seconds as her sister came around the corner, saw Narcissa’s face, and turned back towards where Rabastan was most likely still standing to bark, “Why didn’t you ask her if she is okay?” Narcissa could hear him start to respond, but Bella cut him off before he got more than a few words in. “I don’t care. Go.”

Bella was still muttering about his present level of uselessness as she strode over, looking Narcissa up and down with an appraising look. “You are unharmed?”

Narcissa could feel her chin start a humiliating wobble, so she covered her mouth with a steadying
fist and nodded.

Pressing her lips to a line, Bella looked mildly uncomfortable, but before she said anything further, Narcissa choked out, “Pardon…”

That was all the permission Bellatrix needed to step aside and allow Narcissa the opportunity to continue her journey towards a private space to collect herself. She knew Bellatrix hated it when she was like this - everyone residing in the manor hated it, and for a fleeting second, it made her miss Lucius terribly. Whatever small comfort the thought had brought was immediately soured by the echo of Andromeda’s accusation - that Lucius had been torturing children. He had been at the Ministry that night, certainly, and so had Potter and his miscreant friends, but that did not mean he had been torturing them…

(Perhaps he had not, but perhaps he had.)

From the beginning, they had drawn a clear line between them, an understanding that Death Eater business would not touch her, that it would affect her life as little as possible, with the exception of the protections and benefits it would someday bring when the Dark Lord ascended in power. That promise was empty, in the end, because there was now scarcely a space in her life that was not flooded with the presence of the Cause.

She had started towards the bedroom she shared with Lucius, but before she even reached the door, her insides treacherously recoiled, just slightly, so she turned instead towards Draco’s room, empty while he was off at school.

It was neat, as ever, with books and select artifacts shelved sparsely around the room. She moved immediately to lay on the bed, blanketed in a deep emerald green. As she stared intently at the material she imagined Draco, just a little toddler, lying beside her with his tiny grasping hands that still wanted to hug her and bright grey eyes that lit up when she so much as looked at him. Back then, her son had loved her more than anyone - would scream at the top of his lungs if she left him with anyone else, even his father, who had not wanted the responsibility of being alone with a toddler, even if it hadn't been so. It had been wonderful and exhausting and far too short.

Draco was out of reach now, keeping secrets and risking his life when all she wanted was for him to keep himself safe. She did not need for him to make up for Lucius’s arrest; she did not need him to prove anything to her; she did not need anything except the reassurance that he would be okay. But she dreaded that fearful pit in her stomach that suspected he still wasn't safe at all. For every part of her that had not wanted to be privy to Lucius’s dealings, she wished tenfold to know what Draco was steeped in, but he would not breathe a word, nor would Bella.

If he failed, they would kill him, surely, to prove their point upon Lucius’s release. If they did not kill him, the vigilantes eventually would, or he would be caught…

Draco was the last heir of the pureblood Malfoys, but Regulus was the last heir to Black, and his safety was clearly in question if what Andromeda had said was true. Bellatrix had promised that Regulus would be safe, but she had not been clear as to when that protection would lift. Draco and Regulus had not meshed well during their visit - she had been so frustrated with her cousin’s unnecessarily bold commentary - but to try to kill him? She had held him as a baby, too, with a head of darker head of hair but a similar shade of grey in their eyes. Regulus could not carry on, speaking like some tentative blood traitor, but he did not deserve death for it...

Her son would always come first, but however frustrating Regulus was being, he was the only example she had ever seen of escaping the Death Eaters. On some horrible, treacherous level, she
almost wanted to see him get away with it, but under the current conditions, it only made things harder for her son. Regulus was uniquely positioned... and she couldn't understand why he would not help Draco - would not ease the burden, if only long enough to get Draco out of the firing line. He said he wanted to help, but cavorting with traitors was only making it worse. If he could come back, Bella would protect him; he could show Draco he could be trusted, pave for Draco a path out... They could both be safe. She had tried hinting, had thought he would understand, but he either missed the mark completely or did not care. After all they had been through, she hoped it was the former.

Narcissa knew that she oughtn't even be thinking something like that in the same house as Bellatrix. Scheming escape or colluding with traitors could individually qualify as a serious offense, and to do both at once was more so. Draco would be in even more danger, if Narcissa herself was suspect - perhaps even Bellatrix would be, though she expected her sister was among the most secure within the ranks. Bella certainly seemed to think so.

Draco would not listen to her, as things were. She was his mother, but she was not a voice that could counter Draco's view of what his father might want - perhaps what his father would want, but she could not be sure, when Lucius had been locked away in Azkaban since Draco had started this whole mess. Bella was certainly in favour of feeding into Draco's sense of responsibility, just like she had with Regulus almost two decades before. How could she force him when he was away at school? How could she force him when Bella was living here in the manor? How could she force him, knowing death was even more certain if they left haphazardly?

In his mind, Draco was on the verge of adulthood, eager to make adult decisions, but he was a child, and she simply couldn't bear the thought that he might be the casualty of a Cause that was supposed to be protecting him.

*We must trust in the Dark Lord's plan,* Bella would say. She would insist that to successfully martyr oneself was an honour - and that death for failure was an expected punishment, for it was the best who survived, and the best who deserved to survive. It was a terrible thing to say about one's nephew, but doubt - Narcissa knew well that she could not project doubt.

Some time had passed before she heard the footsteps outside Draco's open door, and she had cleared her thoughts with sufficient time to put up any necessary shields. Bella did like to poke about.

“Do you need more time in the adolescent room, or are you ready to be an adult again?”

Narcissa sat up to scowl, but despite the condescending remark, the fact that Bella had come to find her at all was a small comfort. Rabastan had been her friend in school, one of the boys in her year, but he was hardly a reassuring presence. Rodolphus was highly allergic to emotion, so although he was happy enough to treat her like a porcelain doll to protect when she was calm, he did not care much to interact with either sister when they were having a 'fit,' and his definition of 'fit' was looser than she particularly liked in moments like this.

“Don't talk to me like that,” Narcissa objected primly, to which Bellatrix made a face but did not counter. For a fleeting second, she thought about pointing out that Bella was the one staying in Narcissa's home, but implying Bella was the child in this situation would escalate in a direction Narcissa did not want to go, so she said instead, “How are things progressing with Regulus?”

Bellatrix strode into the room, then. “I have prepared an owl to arrange for a meeting. He will have the opportunity to atone, and should he take it, all will be well once again.”

“And if he doesn't,” Narcissa began, though it was more the start of a statement than it was a
“Then he will have sealed his own fate.” Sitting next to her on the bed, Bella's confidence in her own words was almost reassuring, but Narcissa felt no comfort from them at all. “He is choosing to shirk his commitments and his responsibilities, and if he continues to do so, he forces our hand. We all know this family will not suffer any sick branches poisoning the tree. If he wants the privileges of his position, he must cooperate with the stipulations.”

Narcissa nodded, though she did not like the sound of ‘shirking commitments and responsibilities’ at all. “Of course. I hope he responds reasonably to your offer.”

“As do I. But should he not… We do not mourn traitors to the Dark Lord, no matter how fond we might be. I trust you know that, Cissy,” Bellatrix added, a little more firmly.

Narcissa nodded, neutrality carved into her face like marble, though it took a steadying beat before she trusted herself to speak. “I know.”

For a mad moment, Narcissa was tempted to ask what her sister had done for the Dark Lord's Cause - whether it was true that Lucius had tortured Draco’s meddling classmates, that night at the Ministry - but that sinking feeling in her chest told her that she probably already knew well enough what the response would be.

“Did something happen today?” Bella's expression was keen, perhaps guessing at the link between her distress and her question, but Narcissa carefully closed her mind as securely and subtly as she could. Today had not been the first time Narcissa had exchanged words with their estranged sister since Andromeda had left, but of those sparse exchanges, this was the one she least wanted Bellatrix to be privy to.

“Nothing you should worry yourself with,” Narcissa lied smoothly. “Just an upset with the flowers for the winter gala.”

Immediately, the interest melted from Bellatrix's face. “I will leave you to it.”

Narcissa nodded, but it was not until her sister disappeared out the bedroom door that Narcissa let the tension in her shoulders relax, if only a little.

Regulus was not surprised to have found the potential solution to his blood-blocking problem in a blood magic text, but it was nonetheless a relief to make some measure of headway. It read like a spell that could isolate particular individuals and seemed to be powerful enough to hopefully counteract the familial wards already in place, though one could not be certain without testing. He had been so thoroughly absorbed in pulling apart the complex process that he gave a small startle when a voice cut into his attention:

"Can you not hear that owl going mental?" came Tonks's voice from the doorway.

Looking over at the window, Regulus saw that there was, in fact, an owl tapping at the glass and flapping its wings with vigour. The commotion was not actually very loud in itself, but in the quiet drawing room, he supposed it really ought to have been more noticeable than that vague background noise that he had been blocking out.

“I was focusing,” he explained, even as he stood to accept the letter. The owl looked like Narcissa’s, which would be an an uncomfortable letter to skim in the current company, even if that last meeting had not been terribly awkward. Immediately, he tucked the envelope in a pocket to read later and sent the owl off with a treat before returning to his seat.
"I was going to ask you if there was any headquarters news, but I dunno if you'd have noticed."
Tonks grinned. Idly, she looked to the books he was reading. "You're muckling about with blood rites?"

"The house recognises close relations within the Black bloodline and prioritises giving the family passage through protective wards, even as they are piled on." Regulus situated the book on his lap again. "I've been looking for ways to counteract that broad acceptance to address very specifically problematic members of the family. I think I might have found something, so I am assessing whether it is feasible."

Tonks stiffened. "Bellatrix Lestrange?"

He nodded, thinking that it sounded strangely distant to hear her whole name stated like that. Not surprising, coming from Tonks, but strange, nonetheless. "The rest of you should be safe with the Fidelius Charm in place, but it has been a bit unreliable in respect to Sirius and myself. I would like to identify the extra security, if it exists."

"Wasn't it your dad that set up the wards here?" Tonks asked, gesturing vaguely about the room. "Would he have written down what he did?"

"He did set them up, yes, but I have yet to find any extensive details in his study. It was not the sort of ward that would typically need changing, and I do not think he anticipated this particular situation," Regulus responded, shaking his head. "Familial make up is a bit more complicated than it used to be. I've admittedly been feeling less inclined to honour the disownments, all things considered - which I suppose makes this a little bit ironic, with it being Bellatrix who is being targeted for exclusion."

"There's definitely some consequences to it," Tonks gave a whole-shouldered shrug. "Mum went up the wall she found out it was me fighting her, but what was I meant to do?"

"She is not usually avoidable," Regulus agreed, shaking his head.

"But if it's blood-related, aren't you related to almost every pureblood?" Tonks asked. "Anybody, then, could just waltz in?"

He shook his head. "It requires more than a trace. As I understand it, the ward is more applicable to the direct bloodline, within the living generations. I expect it would apply to you or Draco, but it ought not apply beyond that distance."

"It’s not like house-elves then." Tonks’s eyes flickered to the sprawling tapestry. "I didn’t think I’d ever have my name and the Malfoy kid grouped in together in anything. Except maybe an arrest report, if it was him that sent that spell at Harry on the platform."

"It is my hope that it will not come to that," Regulus said, pursing his lips. "But yes, by the ward's standards, there is equal relation there, strange as it is to think about."

"It's not that strange. I look pretty decent as a blonde," Tonks commented. She indicated several parts of the tapestry with her finger. "But given the rate you lot blast people off, you'd think they'd have put in some kind of disowned clause. What is that, like a minimum of one person a generation?"

"I expect the disowned parties did not make a point of coming back, in the past," Regulus speculated, eyeing the tapestry. "Whether or not any of the previous generations made adjustments to account for disownment, I cannot say, but none seem to have been made recently - and if I'm
stopping anyone from coming in uninvited, it won't be you, your mother, or Sirius, so I suppose it is a different matter, altogether."

"I think I need Dedalus in, next time we go over family definitions," Tonks said. "It all sounds like it has more loopholes and subsections than a Ministry contract."

"Think of it this way," Regulus began. "If the person is trying to kill us, they are not permitted entry, regardless of definitions."

"A lot more people want to kill me than you," Tonks said. "You want to keep to that 'we'?"

"Not including occupational hazards," he amended.

"I'm not either," Tonks replied, with some pride colouring her tone. "Unless you're cheekier than you look, you've never had a row with Ernie the bus driver and told him where he could stick his wand on a cold morning."

"That must have been some row if he wants to kill you for it," Regulus said wryly. "I am not going to put in the effort to ward any bus drivers out of my house, so I suppose I will narrow the criteria to those who want to kill the people living here. The Fidelius ought to cover you, regardless, so I suppose that point is moot."

Tonks only laughed at him. "It was a joke! Look, when half the people you're related to want to do a little pruning of the family tree, best to keep a sense of humour about it. Does Harry actually live here, then?"

"Sometimes, though I am unclear on how permanent it is meant to be," Regulus admitted. "He has stayed here for at least part of each holiday I've witnessed, but I get the impression it is a point of contention."

"Maybe because it's unplottable," Tonks suggested. "Harry's still a kid, and when he's here, the Ministry can't check the area for what he might be up to the way they can if he lives with the muggles. Horrible people, those ones. Never trust anyone who's that neat; they're hiding something."

Regulus had only met Harry's muggle uncle - but although he agreed that the man had been detestable, it had nothing to do with the degree of neatness. "Harry seems to get into more trouble under the watchful eye of Hogwarts than he ever does here, but I suppose that is not the point."

"He has more opportunity there." Tonks replied. "I got in loads of trouble, and all I've done is become a vigilante. You weren't trouble, and so are you."

Regulus privately amended that he had done things he would have gotten in trouble for, had he ever been caught, but instead of saying as much, he simply nodded. Without a doubt, the volume of trouble was not comparable at all. "Life can be unpredictable like that."

"I'll leave you to your books," Tonks said. "Give us an owl if there's trouble. I'm on watch tonight up at Hogsmeade."

He nodded. "I wish you an uneventful night."

"A boring night," Tonks groaned, but disappeared quickly around the door without another word.

When she was out of ear and eye shot, Regulus pulled the letter out of his pocket, but as he unfolded the parchment to scan the words, he folded it again and jammed it back in his pocket,
almost as quickly.

The letter had been from Bellatrix, not Narcissa - and it seemed the time for waiting was up.

Several hours had passed since he had received his eldest cousin’s call, and he could think of several reasons why ignoring Bellatrix’s ‘alone’ condition would have been the most logical option, the first being that she was a Death Eater who might very well want to murder him, the second being the level of suspicion that could be attributed to speaking with her alone, and the third being the relative proximity of his conversation with Sirius about ‘not telling him anything.’ After the third reason, Regulus decided to stop thinking about them. Sirius would probably be cross about it, once everything had cooled enough to mention it, but they were just days away from Halloween, and his brother hardly needed another thing to worry about. However much Regulus might have disliked the Potters, he could respect that it was Sirius’s time to mourn them in a directed way - and that he would probably overreact, even if the subject was broached. Emmeline, too, had mentioned her own level of anticipated distress, and while she was less volatile, she had enough to deal with, as well. Waking her up just to tell her she ought to be worrying about something that might come to nothing seemed borderline inconsiderate… Assuming that Bella had not taken up politely inviting people to their own murders, breaking the news that he had spoken to her could wait just a few days for Halloween to pass.

On the positive side of things, if it turned to a bloodbath, perhaps he could procure a sample of her blood to keep her out of the house. If it did not, the worry was for nothing.

That would be something, at least.

She had called for him to meet her in Porth Iago that night, and he thought privately that it was a more unpleasant destination in the late autumn, with coastal winds that cut straight to the bones. It was a more neutral location than either of their residences - she must know he was at Grimmauld Place, and he expected she was hiding with Narcissa, as she certainly wasn’t in her own home - but anything too public was certain to draw attention, and he doubted his cousin was keen to return to her cell in Azkaban.

Given that the last time he visited the Welsh beachside, he’d been put on rest for broken legs, there was some degree of discomfort twisting in his stomach, but as he drew near to their meeting place in the cove, he found his mind was tempted to focus on blocking out the sight and smell of the dark stretches of water, more so than worrying about Death Eaters creeping about in the rocks. Even so, when he came to spot in question, a swift *Homenum Revelio* confirmed that only one human was in the vicinity. If she was planning to ambush him, no accomplices were even in the area, much less in place to hide effectively, so that, at least, was a small comfort.

Granted, she was unlikely to require an ambush to win a duel between them if she was putting her concentrated effort into it, but that was perhaps not the thing to focus too hard on, at the moment.

When he rounded the stony edge of the cove, he saw his cousin, less crazed than she had appeared at the Ministry back in June but equally nerve-wracking to approach - though he stayed on the rock side of the cove’s circular wall. His heart had started to patter with the sort of speed that made his stomach lurch, but it was hard to tell if it was Bellatrix or the surroundings that felt worse. Immediately, he took a steadying breath, calmed his mind, and pulled up the mental shields around him. It had been some time since he had truly tested his Occlumency, but now was as good a time as ever.

“I see you can still honour a direct instruction,” she said imperiously as she glanced behind him. Her wand was in hand, but her arms were crossed across her chest, and he suspected she, too, had
been monitoring for additional visitors.

“It seems you can, as well,” he responded, mirroring a glance behind her.

“You would do well to avoid testing my patience with the first words out of your mouth, Regulus.”

“I was stating a fact, just as you were. Or did you intend it as an insult?” he responded, but when he was met with a darkening scowl, he shut his mouth more firmly.

“Impertinence does not suit you,” Bellatrix said more sharply. “Out of respect for my sister and for the reasonable child you once were, I will pardon it once, but only once.”

The feeling of being scolded was not a feeling Regulus had missed at all, and perhaps it showed a little bit on his face because some satisfaction flickered in her eyes. On the other hand, perhaps she would have felt accomplished, regardless of his own expression. He had not liked it back then, either, and she must have known it well. It was a small comfort to think that Narcissa had spoken on his behalf, but he did not have much time to dwell on the thought before Bellatrix continued:

“I have come to you with a proposal - one that I think is more than fair.”

Some sinking feeling in his stomach told him that, more likely than not, such a proposal would not feel particularly fair from his own perspective. Even so, his mouth was clamped shut, and he watched her with a neutral expression, steeling himself for the ultimatum he had been trying very hard to avoid for the past year and a half… or perhaps more accurately, the past seventeen years. Narcissa had said her piece, had not liked what he’d said, but Narcissa also was not the sort to murder him for the difference in opinion. Bella had always been stressful in a rather different way.

Annoyance started to flicker on his cousin’s face, and he wondered if she was expecting him to say something. Two out of the two things he had said had been met with poor reception, so he assumed she would prefer for him to be quiet. In the end, he supposed that whatever she had been expecting did not seem to be terribly important because she continued on before he could muster any response.

“Am I to understand that you have been avoiding us due to some newfound aversion to your committed responsibilities?”

The question sounded like a trap because it was both true and not the correct answer in any scenario that he could realistically imagine, so for a moment, Regulus watched her with subtly narrowing eyes until she let out an aggravated sound.

“I forgot how infuriating it could be to pull anything out of you,” Bellatrix said flatly. “Respond.”

“I thought you might be speaking rhetorically,” Regulus said carefully, hating the internal cringe he felt in his chest. “I do not wish to be irresponsible, but my attempts at compromise have been largely unappreciated.”

For a moment, it looked like Bellatrix might snap at him again, but something shifted in her expression, calming the tension around her mouth but sharpening her dark eyes. “Which brings us here today. Your reticence in returning is a problem that many would like to solve more… traditionally.” There was a threat in her tone, and he wasn’t completely convinced she wasn’t at least partially in that group of people, given her enthusiastic attempts to kill Sirius and Tonks a few months prior - but he did not say anything as she strode closer. “But you, Regulus - you are different from the riffraff who would lie with muggles, who would beg for death with their misguided convictions. You recognise the benefits of a compromise.”
Regulus fought the reeling in his mind, keeping his thoughts as blank as possible, but even as he forcibly maintained that calm, he felt his chest thud with some horrible hope. “What do you suggest?” he said, far more evenly than he felt.

“An exchange of information,” she responded. “You needn’t even lift a finger.”

He recognised it immediately for the betrayal it was meant to be, but he held her gaze and found himself asking, “What sort of information?”

The smile that pulled onto her lips was more unsettling than it was comforting. “Justice, long due. Justice for Evan.”

Evan. Mad-Eye Moody was her target. Like an echo, he felt the little pulse of anger for a friend he could not properly mourn when everyone around him was probably relieved that another Death Eater had died in the fray of the early war. Evan had been just a year older - the same age as Sirius - dead by the time he was twenty.

“Mad-Eye Moody?” he clarified.

“Yes, very good,” she granted, and there was some element of the praise to her tone, though it did not make him feel any better at all. “And for your trouble, valuable information of your own, if punishing Evan's killer is not reward enough.” Her eyes were still locked with his, and in place of the praise, there was now a subtle air of accusation, but she continued without missing a beat, “I expect the identity of the idiot who got your father killed is of interest to you?”

Her words hit like a heavy thud to the chest. “You know who is responsible? Can’t you just tell me that? He was family to you too.”

“It is an information exchange, Regulus, not a one-sided giveaway,” she responded curtly. “An Order member for a Death Eater. Neutralise Moody however you wish, be it death or Azkaban - set him up to be caught in his own law-breaking, frame him, divulge personal information, I don’t care, so long as it accomplishes the goal. Even with your squeamishness, you should be able to manage that much. You have a week.”

Regulus pressed his mouth to a thin line. He did not remember agreeing to the compromise, but Bellatrix’s exacting stare was throwing him off his footing - a feeling he had thought was past by now - and he found himself tipping his chin in a small nod, if only to end the conversation sooner. He had not meant to nod; rather, he had intended to say he would think about it, but saying as much felt too late now that she was donning a self-satisfied smirk and tilting a nod in return. Even if it hadn’t felt too late, he did not think his mouth was functioning properly because it refused to open.

Guilt was already turning in his stomach as he thought how badly he wanted to know the identity of the person who had been careless with his father’s life - a Death Eater who had been getting away with that invisible blemish for over a decade and a half. The trade off was, in fact, more objectively fair than he would have expected from his cousin, but it nonetheless clamped at his insides, heavy and cold. Regulus did not like Moody in the least, and truthfully, he was at least half-certain that the grisly old Auror was still waiting for an opportunity to throw him in prison simply for the Mark on his arm, regardless of anything Regulus did the contrary. Even so, Moody was part of the Order, and Regulus had committed a measure of loyalty to that group - a loyalty that they had not betrayed… as of yet, at least…

Tension knotted thickly in his throat and stomach and shoulders, with half a mind arguing that it was the closest to a reasonable exchange that would ever come, and the other arguing back that it would, without a doubt, tear everything around him apart if he even thought too seriously about
approaching the slippery slope of cooperation, ‘one time’ or not. Implications suggested that the compromise may be honoured within the broader context, extending some acceptance in place of which had been an alternation between ignoring him and attacking him. A deal like that would not be truly honoured, he knew. Even with moral concerns and betrayals aside, if the Dark Lord decided to kill him anyway, it didn’t matter what Bellatrix had promised... yet it was supposed to sound simple and tempting.

It did sound simple and tempting, and Bella knew that.

If his cousin had said goodbye, he hadn’t noticed, instead registering her disappearance as she cracked out of view. His eyes flicked only briefly to the water within the circular cove, feeling an unpleasant jolt at noticing this one had a rock jutting up in the middle like a tiny island. In that moment, it might have struck as a guilty reminder of just how much was at stake, if not for the overpowering urge to leave behind this interaction as quickly as possible. Regulus wasted no further time before apparating to his own home, and only then did he let the tight mental walls tumble down. He felt drained, though he had done little more than stand.

The dilemma had been presented, just as he knew it would be, and he knew the right decision - now, he had one week to either find a loophole or make it.
A pervasive gloom seemed to descend over Number Twelve during the week of Halloween.

Of all people entitled to feel emotionally unsteady during this week, Sirius felt he had the right, but it didn't seem to be just him, nor just Remus. He hadn't noticed it last year, but it was possibly because he'd been too wrapped up in feeling sorry for himself to notice it. Remus had stayed in the house, though he made periodic trips back to his own for supplies or in case anyone should come knocking. He'd barely seen Emmeline at all during October last year; being an Unspeakable meant she had taken every possible shift she could so that there would always be someone there if something went wrong. The irony of her being at work - but stuck doing Unspeakable things - during the battle had not been lost on any of them. In fact, he'd spent most of the time avoiding everyone as much as possible before Arthur had gotten hurt.

He wasn't sure what would happen this year. Regulus had ducked him for a day or two already; one screaming match a decade had been enough for him. Despite the increased number of people around, the place was beginning to empty. Dedalus had taken to staying with a friend, just in case he was asked for his address during Wizengamot proceedings. Either Remus and Tonks were trying to avoid each other, or acting like a bunch of fifth years with a crush, so they weren't the most attentive. Emmeline had found a place last week, and when you weren't tripping over her boxes, she was in and out muttering about books with minds of their own. Sirius himself had been no slouch. He had no excuse for lethargy this year. He instead had been working on his reflexes; he was still slower than he'd like. Fighting at thirty-six (almost thirty-seven) felt very different to being twenty-one. Not to mention Remus harping on at him to work on his patronus, but that wasn't happening this week.

The week was pleasantly broken up by Hedwig. Harry seemed in good spirits. Sirius scribbled him a quick letter back, explaining that no, England had no magical royalty, despite multiple rumours over the years (though promised to take it up with the walking lineage record when he wasn't avoiding him) and no, he hadn't seen Dumbledore. The last point was more pressing. If he wasn't at the school, where was he off to? The problem with being a legend is you don't exactly have to run your itinerary past anyone. Still, while his mind was on it, he scribbled something to McGonagall, then thought better of it, scrunched it up, and wrote something a bit more neatly. There were many magical matrons he enjoyed angering, but she was not one of them.

Hedwig stuck around this time, though the one time he'd seen his brother’s owl, he was chattering at her while she exacted what experience had taught him was a withering glare for running his mouth. Sirius had stepped outside into the already bitter cold to let Hedwig be on her way before Deimos got a nip for his trouble when he almost bumped into Tonks, identifiable more by the string of (very impressive) swearing when she stumbled backwards than how she looked. Or was it he, when she looked like that?

"Does it feel weird when you do that?" Sirius asked, giving her a hand up.

"Nah, it's all me, just a different shape," Tonks replied, taking it and heading into the hallway. "How'd you know it was me?"

"The falling over," Sirius replied.

She promptly flipped him off. "Usually I'm all right unless I cross my legs when I'm sitting down. I get right funny looks on the Knight Bus when I do that."
"Probably something to do with changing your weight rapidly," Sirius thought aloud, thinking of his own temporary transfiguration experiences. "There was an adjustment to having four legs. I tripped myself up a lot."

"I trip up enough on two legs," Tonks replied, and wasn't that the truth. "Maybe we should move before your mother gets wise to us."

Sirius looked longingly at the portrait. He badly wanted to just remove the wall. It'd probably make the hallway less narrow, and it was not as if anyone used the downstairs, except for the dining room. He doubted Regulus would go for it. Small, incremental change was one thing. Taking down the remains of their mother was another. "I'm trying to get Reg to take her down, but he's still a Mummy's boy at heart when it comes to changing her things."

"Mummy's boy?" Tonks asked, taking the door to the basement kitchen from him.

That might be a little harsh, but the longer he clinged onto the idea of her instead of the reality, the more hurt he'd get. If anyone was uniquely qualified to say so, Sirius was. "He was a clingy kid," Sirius replied, then thought better of it. "Actually, he's a clingy adult, usually, so let's all wish Emmeline good luck with that."

"So there is something going on there? Isn't Emmeline impure?" Tonks illustrated this by wiggling her fingers around.

"Supposedly," Sirius replied. "But I don't think he's ever really cared about the purity side of it. He just wanted to be liked, and this is why I used to call him the little parrot. He'd still trying to appease some ancient ancestry that can fuck off, and the sooner he realises that, the better."

"He's probably got an inkling," Tonks replied, lightly. "Even Mum came over green at the idea of Remus."

"He's just thinking about potential grandkids. You're twenty-two. By now, at least by the standards around here, you should be halfway to giving her great-grandkids," Sirius smiled as Tonks snickered. "It's not that weird that she's having kittens about the idea of you having puppies."

"They aren't literal puppies," Tonks replied.

"That's what our Defence teacher taught us," Sirius replied. "But since we could never keep one a full year, it's all taken with a grain of salt."

Tonks frowned at him. "I don't think we had one that lasted a year either. You'd think they'd be taught differently now, anyways."

"Lily often complained over the lack of the magical world's progression. If something works one way, we just do it over and over without considering another angle," Sirius replied, as he tried to ignore the stab at talking about them.

"Some people can't handle change," Tonks said, changing her hair from black to pink with a giant grin.

"I'd have said Regulus was among them, but he's been enjoying proving me wrong. He did touch the tapestry, which is supposed to be sacred and virgin sacrifices made to it on the blood moon," Sirius supposed he could ask about the portrait, if not for the fact he was keeping a low profile. "I think he's just avoiding me in case I yell at him again."
"I'll give you a right dig in the gob if you yell at me," Tonks warned, playfully.

"I wish he'd solve things like that," Sirius replied, with a wistful sigh. "A quick squabble, a chat, and a drink. That's how I sort things, but he doesn't like lifting a hand to anyone, and he doesn't drink."

One of the many ways it had been easy with James. They understood each other. Even Remus had gotten it, but he didn't like the idea of fighting with Remus these days. It made him get melancholy.

"How's he changed the tree?" Tonks asked.

"He keeps adding back some old burn marks," Sirius replied. "An uncle here, a great aunt there. Mum was wand-happy; she took her own brother off posthumously because of his will. Make of that what you will about the old trout."

"Are you on there?" Tonks asked, again.

"No!" Sirius said, quickly. A sudden feeling of blind panic arose in his throat for a moment at the idea, but no, he'd seen it only a day or two ago, he wasn't.

"Don't fancy the idea?" Tonks the inquisitor asked.

"No, but I wasn't a petty grudge or someone who married the 'wrong' pureblood, was I?" Sirius replied. "I asked for it, I got it, it's done."

"Seems like a lot of it's being undone," Tonks pointed out, reaching for a plate. Somewhere, Sirius imagined Kreacher watching through his wrinkled paws in horror, awaiting the crash and smash that seemed inevitable.

"It's different with me," Sirius shrugged. No smash came, shockingly.

"How come?"

"Because it's supposed to be permanent," Sirius responded.

Tonks turned to look at him quizzically, and Sirius frowned even at himself. "Didn't you just say Regulus was changing it?"

"I did," Sirius said, trying to figure out exactly where the statement had come from. Yes, it was supposed to be permanent. The ultimate decision, something you can't go back from, not to be taken lightly and something he took a long time to do. The idea of it being changed by nothing more than a wave of his brother's wand made all of that fretting and the importance of the decision seem almost...trivial. It was a permanent break; this was not his family.

Even if in ways, it was. Andromeda was, but she existed in the ether outside of the tree. Regulus was, he had a death date, but he'd long since 'fixed' it. He'd been tampering with the tree for a long time. Now he was disregarding the motto. What if he put Andromeda on there? Things were changing rapidly, in retrospect, but he hadn't noticed. It was a good thing, so Sirius had no idea why the idea of it made him feel vaguely queasy.

"Just some old junk rattling around my head," Sirius replied, as Tonks continued to study him. "Don't worry about it."

"If you say so," Tonks said, in a tone that was pure Andromeda. Remus was fucked. "Mum wants
to know what you’re doing for your birthday.”

That broke Sirius out of his thoughts. "What?"

"Your birthday," Tonks replied. "It's next week, right?"

Sirius told her the truth. "I forgot about it. It's not a big deal."

"You made a big deal out of Harry's," Tonks pointed out.

"Harry's a kid," Sirius reasoned.

"And Regulus," Tonks followed up.

"He's the baby," Sirius replied, automatically.

"He's thirty-five," Tonks scoffed.

"So he's a very tall baby," Sirius replied. "I should tell him so; it's the only time in his life he'll ever be called tall."

"Who's tall?" The door opened, revealing Remus.

"It all slots into place," Sirius said as he realised Tonks was mucking about with Remus's favourite brew. Of course she'd come to see him. "I'll leave you two to it."

"You don't have to run out because I'm here," Remus frowned.

"I'm at my teenage crush shenanigans limit," Sirius said, lifting his hands up in defeat.

"N-no one is a teenager..." Remus said, as he turned a furious shade of pink which matched Tonks's hair quite nicely.

"Blushing and stammering and avoiding eye contact." Sirius made a noise of distaste. "It looks teenage to me. Now let me out before I start remembering lots of embarrassing stories about your actual teens that Tonks needs to hear."

Tonks immediately perked up. "What stories?"

Remus stepped aside, opening the doorway. "If you really must go."

"Next time," Sirius promised Tonks with a wink, as he fled out of the doorway. He could only stomach so many reminders of young love at the minute, and neither Remus nor Tonks deserved the inevitable snappiness that would overcome him when it got painful.

Just three more days to go.

By Tuesday morning, Sirius had a fun new thing to obsess over.

In addition to his impending birthday, the memory of what happened to James and Lily, the guilt for Harry, and a dollop of self-pity, he now had an anxiety he wasn't able to properly source. It wasn't Tonks's fault. He was in the frame of mind to obsess, and she just managed to find the thing that could almost be mistaken for a nice break from the self-loathing type if the anxiety wasn't forming a ball of sheer bloody panic without warning in his stomach. After spending half the night going between that and vivid nightmares that made no sense but still felt menacing, Sirius decided
he'd had enough. He got up, put on real person clothes, and went down to the drawing room to look at the tapestry.

No, there was nothing he hadn't seen before. This did little to ease the anxiety. He was not an anxious person; he usually enjoyed the rush of new ideas and experiences, but he wasn't at his best. He hadn't been at his best in twenty years, but that just made him feel old, which circled around to birthdays. He'd managed to forget his own for more than a decade, not particularly able to keep a calendar when running about and being mired in the aftermath of the argument last year.

Nothing doing, he'd have to go face the issue head on. Regulus had only a few places he'd set up, and Sirius managed it on the first try with their father’s study. "Change of scenery?" Sirius asked as a greeting.

Regulus looked up from what looked to be a handwritten book of sorts - maybe a journal - pausing for a beat before he nodded. “Something like that.”

Sirius stopped short of telling him he didn't need to avoid him. It'd probably offend him from the outset. “Do you still have the entirety of magical family history memorised?” he asked instead.

“To an extent,” Regulus replied, lowering his materials to his lap. “Why?”

“There’s no magical royalty in this part of the world, is there?” Sirius said. He took the lowered book as an invitation to sit down. “I imagine someone along the tree would have attempted to marry in if there was, and we’d have never heard the end of it.”

“Not in this part of the world, no,” Regulus confirmed, shaking his head. “Elsewhere, yes, usually in tandem with their ministries, but not in the greater European region. Within our context, there were magical monarchies far in the past, such as Morgan le Fay's rule over Avalon, but for the most part, historical texts shroud many of the details in suggestion and rumour. Societal dynamics often set themselves up as such, and at the risk of being pedantic, there was a pureblood family of 'Princes,' until recently... but for the purposes of a yes or no question - no, not in a literal sense.”

"Any idea why Harry would ask that, of all things?” Sirius asked, because this may be one of those areas that his godson and brother discussed without including him.

Regulus looked thoughtful for a moment then shook his head again. “Harry and his friends have asked about lineages before, but it was in respect to the Dark Lord descending from Salazar Slytherin, and more recently, the now extinct Gaunts. I cannot immediately think of any connection between the two lines of questioning, beyond the fact that they are both related to lineages.”

"So it could be some new trouble he's about to delve right into,” Sirius said. He was right on schedule for it. "I guess I'll find out if he owls again, or if I get a message from McGonagall that someone else has tried to kill him. People are touchy about their lineages."

“Yes, people often are,” Regulus replied, a bit dryly. “Considering Harry and Draco’s dislike of each other, it could be something as simple as taking a ‘society royalty’ comment too literally. Even so, it is better to be prepared for trouble, especially in a climate like this.”

"Subtlety isn't Harry's strong suit. That's why he needs the cloak, or I think he'd get into worse trouble." Sirius did doubt Harry would care enough to write about it to him if it was just fact-checking whether or not he could call shit on any of Draco Malfoy's claims, but it was possible he was developing a pedantic side. "You know you don't have to hide away up here. I'm not in the mood to pick fights."


For a moment, Regulus eyed him with a strange look and waited a slightly uncomfortable length of time before responding, “I suppose you could say I'm experiencing a bout of nostalgia.”

"You're still too young to be Dad." No, he wasn't, Sirius mentally corrected as soon as he said it. At Regulus's age, their father had a child and a toddler. It was a startling thought to realise he could remember his father at Regulus's age, though he always seemed much older than that. Regulus likely did not, he'd have only been about three years old at the time. "Can you remember Dad at your age?"

“I have a few vague memories from around that time, but not very many,” Regulus said with a small nod. “With that being said, my memories of him are relatively consistent in nature, so it's difficult to attribute a specific age to the earliest.”

"The first time at Iago," Sirius pointed out. Their parents had explained many times to his younger self that he could go when he was four, because four was old enough to know how to behave. These were the people who knew Dumbledore, Sirius thought with a smirk, who - a century in - still didn't know how to behave. There had been that rivalrous moment of knowing he'd get to go and Regulus would not because he was still a toddler, but when the time came, Regulus was deemed such a good toddler that they had decided an exception could be made.

“I admittedly remember you more than I remember our parents from that summer,” Regulus said, thoughtfully. “But that was the right time, yes… Strange to think about. It doesn't feel like the ages ought to match up like that.”

“I can’t help being memorable,” Sirius commented. He was right, it shouldn’t match up the way it did. “Besides that, it was my first beach, and I’ve always liked them. Something about stretching out into the unknown always sounded exciting. I think you spent more time sitting on blankets while Narcissa gave you imaginary tea than the beach,”

Regulus nodded, but for a beat, he didn’t say anything.

Sirius pressed him. "Still having trouble drawing familial lines?"

“Something of that nature,” he responded.

There was that feeling again. "Let me know if there's any new tapestry edits."

Regulus looked over at him with a searching expression, mouthing pressing to thin line for an uncomfortable moment. “Any particular reason for the sudden interest? You’ve never cared about it before.”

“I was joking,” Sirius said. That was not a no. That was defensive if anything. What was he up to? “You’d never actually remove anyone, and if you decided to add someone back - as you did with Cass’s brother - you did tell me.”

Furrowing his brow slightly, Regulus paused for another beat, then nodded again.

Sirius pinned him with a look because he was shutting down. Regulus shutting down usually meant something hit a nerve. "Would you like do charades for the rest of this conversation?"

“No,” Regulus said, shifting slightly. “It is just something I have been thinking about.”

"Bit early for that,” Sirius replied. Going out once and then deciding to get married wasn't the smartest of moves.
"What do you mean?" Regulus quirked an eyebrow. "I have had the tapestry for awhile now."

"Because 'how are your weaving skills because I'd like to add you to the family tree' is only a pick up line in pureblood circles," Sirius replied, bluntly. Though 'how about we get the family trees together, and if we're not related in a significantly close way, go for a drink some time' was probably a lot more accurate.

Realization dawned on Regulus's face, and he shook his head. "I did not mean in respect to Emmeline - or rather, I have thought about it in respect to Emmeline because it would irresponsible not to think about it at all, but I meant in relation to you and Andromeda, more so."

"Why?" Sirius scoffed at the idea. It was a ridiculous thought. "The only way Andromeda wants to be next to Bellatrix is...there's no situation where Andromeda wants to be next to Bellatrix, especially not after what she did to Tonks."

Regulus bristled. "Because I wanted to put my family on the family tree."

But there was something more to that tapestry than showing off who was related to who. Sirius would never have the reverence for it that his brother did, would happily torch it if it wouldn't result in the sulk to end all sulks, but if he was going to have to put up with it in his life, then Regulus had to acknowledge that the idea of being on it made him uncomfortable right down to his bones. Sirius - Andromeda too - was different from a child, or Arthur's mother who just picked the wrong pureblood. Even his uncle who'd just been trying to help him wasn't removed for something decent. He'd made a choice, a difficult choice for someone who prided themselves on their loyalty, and the idea of that choice being erased as if it was never there sat wrong. It sat as living proof of it.

"Can't you wait till I'm dead first?" Sirius asked. Everyone else he'd added on was. They didn't have to deal with this shit.

Frowning, Regulus cast a sideways look. "Why does it matter? You didn't care before."

"You've tried to add me to it before?"

"No," Regulus said in a corrective tone, "about the tapestry."

"That's not true," Sirius replied. "I hate it. You can't properly hate something and not care about it."

Regulus tensed slightly as he looked forward, going quiet again.

He was going to do this all wrong, wasn't he? Sirius ran his hand over his face, and exhaled loudly. "I don't hate you," Sirius could not believe this was something he had to specify. Any time he felt like he was insecure, he was trotting his brother out as Exhibit A of the case that he was not that bad. "But I don't want my name on a tapestry preaching blood purity. I spent half my teenage years trying to convince people I wasn't some pureblood maniacal git, but thanks to Peter," - he couldn't help that he all but spit the name - "I had most of that thrown out the window because they think I pulled a Malfoy. That tapestry is about being remembered, and I do not want to be remembered for being a purist."

"I know you don't hate me," Regulus said, still staring hard at the floor. "But - it's not just about blood purity."

"It's also about history," Sirius replied, sitting forward onto the edge of his seat as he cut him off. "And I don't like idea of erasing that I chose to leave. It was a hard decision, but it's my history. A choice of that weight shouldn't be taken out like it never happened."
Another beat of silence.

“Some people were removed without a say. I think putting them back is different.” There was no easy way to explain it. Sirius pushed himself to try and be blunt about it, despite knowing Regulus wouldn't like it. He'd like being treated like a kid even less. “I don't belong on there. This isn't some distant, dead relative that removed me from it: it was our mother. I put up with that screeching mess in the hall because I know you love her, but I don't forgive her. I don't forgive them, for me or you.”

Regulus’s mouth was pressed to a frown as he nodded, but he still wouldn’t look up, instead staring at the book in his hand and thumbing at the binding.

Sirius stood up. He'd hit too much of a nerve. It'd be a while before they could talk about it, and he definitely wasn't complaining about waiting. “Good talk,” he said, as he was leaving. When you get more response from mad paintings, it's best to cut and run.

The day before Halloween, Sirius awoke from troubled sleep with jitters right down his bones. Instead of attempting to go back to sleep, he managed to briefly greet the morning people that showed up at Number Twelve before he was often awake. As with their usual trade off, he found Remus in the kitchen instead of Tonks. He looked better today. It was Wednesday, with the full moon the previous weekend, along with what was either the beginnings of a cold that needed dealing with or he wasn't having the best of nights either. Remus silently handed Sirius a cup that sent a pleasant warmth through his hands, and Sirius just gave him a smile. If nothing else, they understood each other.

The quiet moment was broken by Hestia bustling in, apple-cheeked from the cold and carrying a comically large bag.

“Healer supplies,” she wheezed, as Remus poured her a cup of whatever this was (he hadn't been paying attention beyond it being warm), and she took it gratefully. “We really need a better surveillance system. Dung almost got caught in Hogsmeade, ducked into a door and ended up with the woman inside denting her cauldron on his head.”

Sirius couldn't help but huff a laugh at that, if only to take away the biting truth of it. The issue of surveillance was contributing to his own feelings of uselessness as well, as he was no longer anonymous as he used to be. Sturgis was struck off for obvious reasons. People like Moody couldn't do it, for similar reasons to his own. A fair number still had jobs they needed to be at.

However, he was broken out of his reverie by the door opening again to reveal a windswept Emmeline carrying a snowy owl. “She was outside, and I now moonlight as magical transportation,” Emmeline said as Hedwig hopped onto the table. Sirius took the letter from her while she relieved Remus's plate of some toast.

“Any news?” Remus asked.

Sirius scanned the letter. There was mention of detention with Snape, which immediately made his mood turn from melancholy to irritated, talk of managing his first few wandless spells, including wiping off the map (though Ron doesn't appreciate being levitated). A brief mention of further lessons with Dumbledore, an offer to discuss it when he saw him next. Sirius wasn't sure when that would be. “He wants to talk about it in person – is he going back to school tomorrow or leaving it till Friday?”

The question was met with silence and quizzical looks. Not the first time, nor the last time, that this
happened with him, but this should be a fairly straightforward question, unlike a lot of the others he seemed to have simply missed by not being here. “The memorial. I know he didn't go last year with the Ministry breathing down his neck, but is there any reason not to go tomorrow? Have you heard something I haven't?”

“No,” Remus said, glancing to Emmeline. She silently shrugged. “But he doesn't go.”

“He doesn't want to?” Sirius could respect that. If he didn't feel like being a spectacle, if he wanted to acknowledge it in a more private way, he could understand that.

“You don't go,” Emmeline blurted out, from the look on her face.

“Being convicted of mass murder and dark magic really did a number on my ability to attend social occasions,” Sirius replied, in deadpan.

She at least had the decency to look embarrassed. “I meant this year,”

“Considering it was my stupid idea that got them killed,” Sirius watched Remus flinch, and tried to soften his tone. “It seemed a bit rude to go. You go. Remus goes. I thought he'd go with McGonagall.”

“I'm not sure,” Remus replied.

“Well, what did he say?” Then all of a sudden Sirius realised why the room had become even more uncomfortable. He realised it was because no one had given the option. He swore half the time, the Order couldn’t decide between Harry as a child and Harry as an Order member, so he got stuck somewhere uncomfortably in between. “No one asked?”

A hint of defensiveness slipped into Remus's voice. “I've spoken to Harry barely more than you have. Dumbledore was very clear that he would have no magical contact in case the remaining Death Eaters found him.”

“I met him only as advance guard. I hadn't seen him before that since before he was a year old.” Emmeline cringed. “It wasn't lack of desire, but his protection had to come first.”

It was the same argument Dumbledore had for sending Harry back to relatives he didn't want to live with, who actively treated him with disdain, but even if he wasn't happy, he was alive and safe, and that seemed to still be what mattered. “Safe,” Sirius echoed aloud.

“Yes,” Emmeline said, firmly.

“That can fuck right off,” Sirius said. “Being safe from the Death Eaters, yes, but that's not safe. Young wizards often do magic they can't help, and since I'm assuming they didn't keep him locked in the house for a decade, that could easily have been seen.”

“He didn't know,” Remus said, firmly. “Hagrid told me, they never told him.”

The numbness that had been threatening over him disappeared at once, replaced by white-hot anger. “You mean not the specifics,” Sirius gritted out.

“Er, no,” Remus replied. “I think it was a motor vehicle accident, from his understanding.”

Sirius ran his hands over his face to try and calm himself down. “I said I wasn't going to lose my temper this year. You're not making it easy.”
“Obviously, I wanted to see him,” Remus said, strangled.

*But they wouldn't listen to a werewolf, let alone let him near the 'saviour' of the magical world?* “I know,” Sirius said, enunciating the words. “But don't tell me it was to keep him safe, alone. I can't believe I have to tell this to you lot when Regulus was the last person I had to give this point to, but alive is not the same as safe.”

“Harry's fine,” Hestia said, quietly. “It's all right.”

“Like hell it is,” Sirius said, standing as his voice tightened. “As the resident expert who has an idea of what it's like when your own family lies to you, hates you, and would rather not have to deal with you, I'm going to say it again: that's not being safe. I'm living proof of how much it fucks you up. In the moment, understandable, but after?”

Emmeline softened, but the last thing he wanted was pity from her. He wanted someone who held even Albus Dumbledore accountable for his actions. The man had been surprised he wasn't a Death Eater; he was not infallible, and this was not a blind dictatorship. Someone should have said something. Had everyone taken leave of their minds completely?

“Sirius-” she started, but he held up a hand.

“Lily would have *hated* it,” Sirius said, unable to keep the venom out of his voice. She would have hated the secrecy; she would have hated him not knowing about magic; and she would have hated Harry ever doubting he was cared for. “You both knew that more than any of the others, save for McGonagall. I understand grieving, but given time, did no one think to question any of it? “

“That's enough for today,” Remus said, with a sense of finality to it.

Sirius, as usual, didn't listen. “Harry should have a bloody say in what happens in his life, since nearly every fucking person who should have taken care of him has let him down abysmally. I'm as much to blame, but I'm going to ask McGonagall to ask him, and if he wants to go, he's going if I have to go get him myself. He's almost seventeen, stop treating him like he's seven.”

“Don't mistake him for James,” Emmeline said, more sadly than an accusation. “He's still a child.”

“I gathered that from being the person to sit with his corpse.” In the corner of his eye, Sirius saw Remus full on flinch. He needed to walk it off before he even tried talking to McGonagall if he was causing that. He was getting a pounding headache, and none of this was going to help. “When did everyone stop seeing James and Lily in him, and start seeing only the baby that took down Voldemort? If I'd realised everyone else had lost their mind and decided not to tell a child about magic, or to leave him with people like that, or just not consider asking him if he wants to see his parents' graves as he has little else of them, I would have broken out a lot sooner.”

Silence reigned for a moment with the sounds of Remus's nails on his cup being the only sound. Then Hestia asked, “You could have broken out before?”

It took Sirius a moment to regroup. “What?”

“From prison,” Hestia specified. “You could have done it before you did?”

A difficult question because it relied on him having enough focus. But if he'd known that Harry was struggling through his own shit upbringing, that Voldemort was still stalking his footsteps? It would have given him the same anger, not as strongly, but he supposed it could have been. “If I'd known Harry was in trouble,” Sirius amended. “I didn't know he was until then.”
“Where did you think Harry would go, without you?” Remus asked. “I'm not a fit guardian.”

“McGonagall,” Sirius said, out of instinct more than knowledge. “It wouldn’t have been family, because the Ministry are pricks about you, but it has to be better than his aunt and uncle’s, if I’m a preferable option. McGonagall may not have been a protection of blood, but if any random magic had been detected, at least she could have protected him from Death Eaters.”

“You didn’t say anything,” Remus said.

“I’m sorry, losing my mind interrupted my ability to communicate,” Sirius said, sourly.

“Afterwards,” Remus specified, loudly.

“What was I meant to do? Pop round for a cup of tea and say, actually, I'm not a Death Eater but there might be a rat among all the rats at Hogwarts that you might be familiar with?” Sirius asked. “Even I know it sounds barmy. If you hadn't seen Wormtail that night, I don't think you'd have believed me. Dumbledore wouldn't have, or he'd have at least tried to figure out what really happened in the first place.”

Remus opened his mouth to speak, but Sirius cut him off. “I'm not angry with you with about it. Can't be, everyone believed it, and I thought as badly of you. We weren’t in a good place.” No, not everyone. Even on bad terms, not everyone. “No, Regulus always looks at people like they've grown an extra head when they say it. Even if he's being a sullen git this week, I appreciate him for that if nothing else.”

“Why?” Emmeline asked.

“Because it's nice to know the former Death Eater thinks the idea is ridiculous,” Sirius explained.

“No, why is he in a bad mood?” Emmeline replied.

“He's your boyfriend,” Sirius said, abruptly. Between the stony talk of tapestries and complexity of family, the date, and people's lack of common sense, he was on frayed edges and needed a break badly. “You ask him. I need to get out of here.”

A little air helped the stuffiness of the house, but the restless bones remained. Last year, Sirius would have welcomed the company. This year, it was harder to balance it – yes, he wanted their company, and no, he didn't, because it felt private. He managed to get an owl off to McGonagall all right, even if it was short notice, but he was sure she'd get back to him. McGonagall was a stubborn, ruthlessly fair woman who ran her affairs meticulously. He respected her more than most, so he wasn't gobby with her even if he felt in the mood to be.

The smell of burning caught his attention in the currently oft-empty drawing room, not candles but something else. Sirius popped his head around the corner to find Emmeline doing what surely had to be considered a vulgar act of burning the page of a book. It didn't seem to be engulfing, so it was a controlled burn, but he did have to ask if she wanted to burn the house down, he was extremely insulted that she not ask him to join in.

“What're you playing at?” he asked.

Emmeline startled and almost dropped the book. She looked at it with dismay, then waved her hand so the flame (having left a small mark on the floor) extinguished. “Resorting to desperate measures.”
“I thought you were against book burning,” Sirius said, eyeing the spot and then her.

“I am,” Emmeline said before turning back towards the multitude of books lining the wall. “But they're still hiding, and I cannot unpack properly until I have my full set back. I know they're hiding.”

Sirius felt as if he'd missed a step. “What's hiding?”

“Three of my books. I think they've gotten attached to the house.” Emmeline looked scornfully towards the bookcase. “I have tried calling; I have tried reasoning; I have tried incentivising, but nothing has worked. It was time to show what happens when the literature will not behave itself.”

“How is threatening to burn them going to make them decide to come out more?” Sirius asked.

“Because I will find them – “ She turned back to the books. “Do you hear that, because I will – and there is an excellent chance that if they don't come willingly, I am going to lose my temper, and someone is losing an acknowledgements page!”

A strangled laugh erupted out of him before he could help it. “Unspeakables,” he said, with a shrug. It was the first truly funny thing he'd seen all week.

Emmeline gave him a slight smile in return. “Are you feeling any less-”

“Belligerent?” Sirius offered. “Wankerish?”

“You're allowed a moment,” Emmeline replied. “There is nothing more Order-related you can do that you're not already doing. You can hardly be expected to do patronus practice at the moment. Even I would struggle, and I am by your own word, a swot.”

“I don't handle idleness well,” Sirius said, the understatement of the century. “I'm trying to get my reflexes back, but I don't exactly move like I'm twenty.”

“There's time. Aside from the big, swift hits, there's nothing we can do but help when we react,” Emmeline replied.

“I hate that,” Sirius said.

Emmeline nodded in agreement. “If Harry wants to go tomorrow, I can do it. I know it's very difficult for Remus, and I gather you want to avoid it. Have you even seen the house?”

“In pictures,” Sirius said. It had become preserved as it was, which he'd hated, but he appreciated people keeping the candles burning. They had a decade of peace, but some people understood what had been sacrificed and lost for it. “I haven't been to Godric's Hollow since then.”

“No, frankly, if it's anything like attempting to go to the second floor of my old house, I understand why.” Emmeline gave a light shudder. “But there's always someone there for the things you're not okay with doing, if we're only asked. Of course we missed seeing him, and with Neville at Augusta Longbottom's, we barely saw him because we could not without outing our involvements. I think Dumbledore was just trying to give him some normalcy; growing up with the entire magical world breathing down his neck and watching his every move was not ideal either,”

“No,” Sirius admitted, “It's not.”

Emmeline suddenly smiled, bright and clear. “Look!” she said, excitedly. Sirius looked over towards her line of sight and found a book had dislodged itself from the group. “One down, two to
Knowing well that sleep would be useless as yet, Sirius spent most of the night frittering about attempting one distraction after another. Undoubtedly still worn from the recent full moon, Remus had fallen asleep by the fire in the kitchen. Sirius stoked the fire when he found him, only to be pushed back a moment later when Professor McGonagall stepped through the flame. She took a look at the lit fire with an arched brow, clearly about to ask why he was trying to set her on fire, but the sight of Remus seemed to calm her commentary.

When she spoke, her voice was low. “Evening, Sirius.”

Sirius was unsure if he liked being called by his first name by his old head of house. There was something unsettling about it, even if they were closer to peer than student and teacher these days. There was a nostalgia to how she said his name, as if she was waiting for another shoe to drop. (James usually had said shoe, but there had been others on occasion, and she was a vigilant woman.)

“Evening,” he said, in turn. “I didn't mean for you to come all the way out here. A letter would have done.”

“Letters can be intercepted,” McGonagall replied, looking him over. “You look fitter than I expected for tonight.”

“Thanks,” Sirius said, in deadpan. He was sure she meant sober, but he was not about to shut himself away to become a melancholy drunk when there were still distractions aplenty. It would probably come later.

McGonagall gave him a weary look. “I think we should continue this where we're not interrupting anyone's much needed rest.”

Sirius agreed, though privately he thought he'd seen Remus twitch, and he was now faking it. He had an uncanny ability to do so. Still, he followed McGonagall upstairs to the formal dining room across from the stairs. It was only then that he considered there may be an alternate reason for her showing up, but it didn't seem particularly urgent if she had time to faff about.

“So you've got a bee in your bonnet about no one asking Harry if he'd like to visit the memorial,” McGonagall said, nothing if not direct, as always.

“I mentioned it, and he had no clue it was happening,” Sirius said. “He deserves that much.”

Surprisingly, McGonagall nodded. “Perhaps it was time to talk to him about it, but I still don't think it's best for him to go.”

Sirius clenched his jaw. “Why?”

“Now,” McGonagall said. “You know how I cared for James-”

“-Of course I do-” Sirius interrupted.

“-Then you know that I say with love that I think James enjoyed the attention he got, but Harry does not,” McGonagall said. “Is going somewhere where there's going to be press, a lot of people who'll want to talk to him, and where it would be easy for a Death Eater to try something a wise idea?”
If one more person implied he couldn't tell the difference, Sirius was going to scream bloody murder. Again. “It may not be wise,” Sirius said, because in those terms, of course it wasn't. “But that doesn't mean it's not important. You didn't see him when he saw just a piece of paper Lily had written on. There are so few traces of them left. He's old enough to decide if he wants to see the house.”

McGonagall looked at him for a long moment. “It's too dangerous. However, if he, Miss Granger, and Mr. Weasley wish to go later in the afternoon when it's cleared out, I'll excuse them from their classes. They'll need to do the make up work, though.”

Sirius saw it for the compromise it was and nodded. “Don't be surprised if he wants to.”

“I've been his head of house for six years, and I was yours seven,” McGonagall said, severely. “Nothing surprises me anymore.”

The witching hour came and went with no fanfare, and here it was: Halloween. Ostensibly no different than it had been the hour before, a day before, but as it ticked over from fourteen to fifteen years since James and Lily had died needlessly, it felt important. From the year before, he knew ignoring it wasn't an option, but this wasn't an enemy he could face straight on. He had promised Harry not to go after Peter for the purposes of putting the rodent down; he didn't know where the Lestranges were, and if they were with Narcissa, that raised a whole different Regulus-shaped problem that he wasn't capable of solving yet.

Sirius had no desire to haunt this house, of any house, but he felt as if he were walking up and down it. He settled in the drawing room, looking out the window as he often had as a child. Regulus was mired in nostalgia; if Sirius tried to think of Lily and James under the hue of nostalgia, he was sure he'd end up in tears, and even today, he didn't want that. He wanted desperately what he couldn't have: five more minutes, to apologise, for them to see Harry, to ask the advice of the person who'd known him better than anyone else. It all felt soul-crushingly like a step backwards. In part, his own reasoning for his refusal to let his name anywhere near that forsaken tapestry was that the last twenty years had happened. They were a part of him, even if he didn't like parts of it, and it felt as if he was giving up the good with the bad if he tried to erase them.

His eyes were drawn to the darkening doorway, where Remus appeared tentatively. He was still sleep rumpled and bleary eyed, but he met his eyes nonetheless.

“You should have woken me,” Remus said, voice too quiet. “I'm going to ruin my neck if I keep falling asleep down there.”

“You were tired,” Sirius said, keeping his own voice low. “Did you see McGonagall leave?”

“Er-” Remus began. “Minerva was here?”

“You're a rubbish liar,” Sirius told him. How many of Remus’s grandmothers had died their first year before James had cottoned onto something being up? How had he truly believed Remus could handle the double life of a Death Eater when he couldn't even lie about that? What had he been thinking, fifteen years ago? Other than that he wasn't. “I saw you were awake when she came in.”

“Did you really?” Remus said.

“You can't pull that trick with me,” Sirius said, tapping the wood of the table. “I know you too well.”

“And I you,” Remus replied, taking soft and uncomfortable steps into the room to sit down. “It
fooled Harry.”

“What?” Sirius asked.

“On the train,” Remus elaborated, smiling almost shyly. “He, Ron, and Hermione situated themselves in the same compartment with me.”

Sirius could picture it, from that night a couple of years before. They'd all grown a lot since then, but he could still imagine Remus trying to sneak a peek without being seen. Watch out for those quiet ones. “You didn't want to tell him in front of his friends,” Sirius said.

“Truthfully, I didn't know if I had the right to tell him at all. No matter how much I wanted to be part of his life, I wasn't.” Remus said, “It was for the best.”

He hated how Remus sounded, as if he had no right to claim that at all when he did. If there truly was an afterlife (and the resident Unspeakable and several ghosts have implied there is), he hoped James was walloping himself up the head hard in response to the idea of Remus ever being anything but family. If he hadn't been bitten, maybe he could have contested it, but as hard as it was to accept, Remus was right – not that he had no right, but that the Ministry would have claimed he had no right.

“Besides which,” Remus added. “Ron did suggest I looked like a good hex would finish me off.”

Sirius gave an unexpected bark of laughter. “He didn't know better yet. He should know now you like to eavesdrop.”

“It was nice to hear him, even if he sounded nothing like James or Lily,” Remus said.

“I noticed that too,” Sirius said. Lily had a thick, almost Brummie accent, and James thought Hagrid didn't have an accent. Harry just sounded like Harry. “So you saved Ron the embarrassment of waking up then.”

“You know full well you'd have said the same if you'd seen me then,” Remus told him, giving a light shrug. “Besides that, I just wanted to listen to them talk.”

“About what?” Sirius asked. Remus's eyes flickered down, whatever small smile had happened before gone just as quickly. In a moment, Sirius realised why. “They were talking about me. Or this stark, raving mad lunatic version of me that wanted Harry dead.”

“Arthur had told him not to go looking for you,” Remus said, quietly.

“He didn't listen,” Sirius said, unable to keep the pride from his voice. Harry was, if nothing else, very brave. “He came right into the tunnel.”

“It was his friend’s life,” Remus said, mildly. “Would James and Lily not have done the same?”

“Without hesitation,” Sirius said.

“I really hope you apologised for that bite,” Remus said, suddenly. “You did a number on Ron's leg.”

“I apologised to him,” Sirius said, indignant.

“Did you tell Molly that was you?” Remus asked.

“Am I still breathing?” Sirius scoffed. He knew better than to tell someone's mother that he'd
broken their child’s leg in a fit of – something. Madness, fear, anger, take one and then take another
for good luck. “I’m not trying to get myself killed.”

There was a moment’s silence, but it wasn’t altogether unpleasant. “I scared him,” Sirius said,
breaking the moment.

“Ron? Or Harry?”

“Harry,” Sirius nodded. “I didn't come straight to Hogwarts. I went to see him, did I not tell you
that?” Remus shook his head. “I had to see him. I didn't know if I ever would again, not really, but
a giant dog shows up, you're going to leg it, aren't you?”

“Did he?” Remus asked.

“No,” Sirius huffed a laugh. “He tripped up, lost his wand.”

“Well, we know he's James's,” Remus replied. “He went through so many wands.”

Sirius managed to laugh, really laugh, at that. It was true. As much as he sang his praises, James
had the memory of a goldfish and acted without thinking almost as much as he himself did.

He was pleased to see Remus was smiling too. “Is Harry going, then?” Remus asked.

“Afterwards, in private.” McGonagall would ask him in person when she got back to Hogwarts, but
Sirius was sure after the letter that Harry would say yes. They'd have to go back to school after that,
but he'd agreed to meet them at Hogsmeade station. Hagrid could take Ron and Hermione up; he'd
leave him up after, but it felt important to make sure that, no matter if Sirius couldn't pull himself
together enough to go, that Harry understood he wasn't alone. “What happens at it?”

“Nothing unusual,” Remus said, a little tightly. “Flowers, people speak.”

“Do you?”

“Not since the first year.” Remus shook his head. How horrendous had that been, to be the last
person there expected to speak for them? He could guess from the look Remus's face. “Is that what
you’re worried about?”

“No,” Sirius said. Not that it wasn't a concern to have to deal with people who watched him have
the worst day of his life, but more than that, he didn't know if he'd ever be ready to go anywhere
near there ever again. The idea made his knees feel about to buckle. “Anyone important speak?”

There was a beat of silence, before Remus confirmed, “Not really. They talk about being thankful
for their sacrifice.”

“Their sacrifice,” Sirius couldn't keep the sneer from his voice. “As if they chose this. As if they
weren't murdered in cold blood, because of a spineless git and my own arrogance. As if I wouldn't
give my last breath ten times over for theirs.”

“You take too much of the blame,” Remus said, softly.

“I owe it,” Sirius said, harshly. “They were going to use Dumbledore. If they had, they'd still be
here.”

“But not if they'd used you?” Remus asked.

“What do you mean?” Sirius demanded.
“You said it yourself, you would have given up your life for them,” Remus said, “As would I. But that's not what happened.”

“No,” Sirius said. “I didn't care if I died, I cared if I – I cared if I told.”

“The Fidelius must be given willingly,” Remus said.

“No one can survive the Killing Curse,” Sirius said, hoarsely. “No werewolf could ever be allowed into Hogwarts. No Death Eater has ever escaped the ranks. No one has ever mapped Hogwarts. No one has ever escaped Azkaban.”

“I get it,” Remus said.

Sirius shook his head, “Something is only impossible until someone comes along and makes it possible. I wasn't willing to leave any room for me to error. Then I walked right into it anyway. Maybe Dumbledore is right. I shouldn't take Harry from where he's been at least safe enough to survive and become this incredible person. Every time I try to protect someone, it ends in disaster.”

“Weren’t you advocating Harry being old enough to make that decision?” Remus asked.

“Yes,” Sirius said. “But I talk a load of shit, and you know that.”

“You are one of the most loyal people I know,” Remus said. “I know you were a little spooked about me at first, but you're my oldest friend. No matter what I mistakenly believed or what you did, you've never been a traitor.”

Unbidden, Sirius found himself glancing towards that bloody tapestry because Remus was wrong. He'd been labeled as a traitor since he was sixteen, in whispers long before that. If he shut out the sounds of Remus's breath, he could hear the house, smell it, even hear his mother screaming the word at him and how ungrateful and disloyal he was towards his own house.

“I'm too sober for this shit,” Sirius said, suddenly. “Ogden’s?”

Remus nodded, “Two glasses.”

It wasn't the first time Sirius had been startled awake by his mother, but you'd think her being dead for over a decade would have brought that to an end. Remus was right; sleeping in the chairs was an easy way to end up feeling old and creaky. He didn't sound old and creaky when he jumped up, swore, and practically bolted from the room. Sirius guessed that meant it was later than he meant it to be. In a fuzzy sort of way, Sirius wondered if his mother’s theatrics meant trouble, but anyone she'd scream at was probably someone Sirius would consider a friend.

It was Kingsley; definitely a friend.

“I thought you were off getting involved in politics,” Sirius said, once silence had descended on the room again.

“I have to make an appearance now and then,” Kingsley said. “Always try to today.”

“Are you here to whisk Remus away, then?” Sirius asked.

“You're welcome to join us,” Kingsley replied.

“Run off with a tall, handsome stranger in the middle of the morning? I’m not that kind of boy,” Sirius said.
Kingsley raised his eyebrows. “And Remus is?”

Sirius shrugged. “He’ll be down in a minute, you can ask him yourself.”

“I was surprised you were still here,” Kingsley said, taking the stairs up to the first floor landing. “I’d imagined the moment your name was cleared, you’d never step foot in here again.”

“So did I,” Sirius admitted. It hadn't shaken out like that. He’d done enough walking away when there were things he could've faced, hadn't he? “But I think you've met my brother. About yea high-” Sirius put his hand to about half-way up himself - “-always has a book, looks like butter wouldn't melt? Well, it melts. I turn my back on him for five minutes, and he gets into trouble.”

“I think you're exaggerating a bit,” Kingsley said.

“I'm not!” Sirius said. This was the trouble with quiet ones. No one believed you when you said they were trouble. “Look, I don't think anyone in their right mind should be left in this house for long because they won't stay in their right mind. That includes him. Last time, I left him at Iago, and he smashed his legs up. He joined the Death Eaters. He faked his own death. I should never have introduced him and Harry; they're trouble magnets, and Harry's still young, and Regulus is still too polite.”

“Has anyone considered checking any of the old safe houses?” Kingsley asked, then made a head shake gesture. “No, because Pettigrew knows about them. Then setting up new ones?”

“I've left word,” Sirius said, but leaving word for Dumbledore these days was like expecting a puff of smoke to listen to you and respond. “We shouldn't be in one place, in case it gets hit.”

“I agree,” Kingsley replied. “This place was compromised the moment Narcissa Malfoy walked into it. We should prioritise it.”

He didn't seem happy about it. Truthfully, Sirius was unhappy about it. He understood that the two youngest and clingiest people had trouble letting go, but this prolonged indecision was just going to hurt them. Regulus had changed on a fundamental level, but he had yet to fully understand that or understand why that change meant they wouldn't want him anymore. Sirius didn't envy the realisation.

“Sorry I'm late,” Remus said, practically speeding past him. “We should leave. It'll look terrible if we're tardy.”

“You're sure you don't want to come?” Kingsley asked again.

Sirius gave him a thin smile and shook his head - then winced, because he hadn't drank enough to feel hungover, but that didn't mean he didn't feel any of it.

“Harry'll be at Hogsmeade station at two,” Kingsley said. “You should meet with Hagrid before that.”

“I'll be there,” Sirius said. “I won't smell like a brewery either.”

Remus stopped, smelling his breath against his hand. “It's not that bad, is it?”

“Just sit near Arabella,” Kingsley said. “You can't smell anything but that lurid perfume she uses.”

“You're thirty-six, Remus,” Sirius told him. “You're not going to get detention for drinking. I'd even say it's encouraged.”
Remus didn't look convinced. “It's easy to forget that when you're there.”

Nostalgia and reversion to the past was an ongoing problem for everyone, from still feeling as if they were the children of the Order to Sirius's own tendency towards teenage dramatics. Still, Sirius hadn't been a funeral that he fully remembered until he was well into his teens, and rarely many, not for lack of death but because he wasn't suited to the solemn occasion.

“Alright, time to go or we really will be late,” Remus said, after a beat of silence. “You'll say hello to Harry for me, won't you?”

Sirius nodded, “I will.” Just like that, he (and his currently reclusive brother) were once again left in an empty house.

The cold of Hogsmeade station whipped at Sirius as he stood on the platform. He could feel the sting of ice in the air, November settling in. It felt peculiar to stand here as an adult; it was smaller than he remembered, even at eighteen, but he hadn't been paying much attention on that last ride home. They'd only just learned of the Order's existence; people were hugging and crying and promising to see each other, and he remembered nine or ten of them trying to squeeze into a single carriage.

“SIRIUS!” came a booming voice, all too familiar. Sirius barely had a moment to register Hagrid before he was pulled into a hug so intense that he felt the balls of his feet leave the ground. He hadn't had the chance to see him since....now he thought about it, he hadn't seen him in over a year. McGonagall had taken Buckbeak to Hogwarts, even though she didn't seem happy to the task, but Sirius knew why. It was one thing to have one or two people straggling through to Number Twelve. The muggles wouldn't notice, nor would anyone idly watching the area for magical activity. Hagrid was about as subtle as a punch in the face, so it would ring alarm bells. He hadn't realised he'd still been so house-bound. No wonder he'd been feeling like shit.

“Nice to see you too,” Sirius said, and he meant it. He'd been there that night; he'd made sure Harry was safe – safe from him, even. Sirius tried not to think about that. “Here to make sure they don't get into trouble going up to school?”

“Aye, they've a habit of it,” Hagrid said, pride shining through his tone. “I'd'a gone to the memorial meself, but we've had a right time of it lately.”

“Really?” Sirius asked. He wondered if this was what Harry wanted to talk about.

“I 'ad my keys go missin', someone cursed the 'eadmaster’s door, spillages on the seventh floor, the girl's bathroom's been floodin' again~” Hagrid shook his head. “And it's not Peeves! 'e loves to tell yeh if he's done summat, he's sayin' he's not. Maybe a new poltergeist, but Peeves'd soon give 'em the ol' heave...”

Sirius didn't imagine it was a ghost. With a sudden rush of worry, he thought it might be testing the castle's defenses. It could be someone was casing the joint – could be Snape, but why would he bother? He's got run of the place, thanks to Dumbledore's say so. “Did your keys show up?”

“As if I'd never lost 'em!” Hagrid threw up his arms, in disbelief.

There was a crack of apparition, and there stood Tonks. She must have arranged a special portkey, or some kind of specialised side-along, because there was Harry, Ron and Hermione. There was an awkwardness hanging in the air, which wasn't unexpected. He was sure it had been a strange thing to see, for both Harry and his friends. It was hard to console someone for grieving something
“ard to believe he was that little nipper, now,” Hagrid said, almost sadly. Sirius could relate. It felt like so much lost time every time he saw him after being apart.

“Trouble?” Sirius asked, as they trotted up.

“Are you addressing me, or asking if there was any?” Tonks asked, turning her head to the side.

“Always addressing you,” Sirius said, with a nod.

Tonks gave him a grin at that. “No problems. I dunno what they're playing at, but it is spooky quiet.”

That did not sound good.

The three of them didn't look particularly worse for wear. He noticed finger marks on Harry's glasses, an old telltale of James taking them off because he was upset or needed to do something with his hands, and Hermione's face was blotchy. He guessed it had been an emotional experience. There was a painful pang, because he'd missed it, but he didn't know if there'd ever be a time he could walk anywhere near that house ever again without vomiting.

They exchanged quick pleasantries, but the solemn occasion obviously held over for them. Harry was lucky to have such friends.

“Come on, you lot,” Hagrid said, ushering Ron and Hermione forwards. “They'll be safe wit' me, don't yeh worry.”

“What about Harry?” Hermione asked.

“Getting in and out of the castle quietly has really never been a problem for me,” Sirius said, glancing at Harry.

“Or the tower,” Ron added. Sirius grimaced, in memory of a few years before, when he'd almost stabbed the lad over it.

“Stay away from Aragog,” Hagrid said sternly.

It was only when Ron and Hermione had begrudgingly left that Sirius asked. “Aragog?”

“The giant spider in the forest,” Harry said, adjusting his robes. “Hagrid thinks he's sick. You didn't see it?”

“We saw it when we were there, we just didn't know he'd named it,” Sirius said. They'd spent half the time at Hogwarts in that forest, and he'd hid out there for the better part of a year. Knowing Hagrid, he wasn't that surprised the giant spider colony had a name.

As he took a few steps, Harry fell into rhythm with him. It may have been freezing, but the night was clear enough they could probably walk towards the shack and go that way. It was probably best to avoid the forest if there was an acromantula in a bad mood there, let alone the centaurs. He'd always wondered why there was a Forbidden Forest at Hogwarts. It was like the restricted section. Why put something there that kids will definitely disregard? It was tempting fate.

“I'm sorry I didn't go with you,” Sirius said, having to push the words out beyond the feeling of it being some kind of failure.
“S’okay,” Harry said. “I’m glad I went.”

“I thought you would be,” Sirius said, nodding against it. “Was it all right?”

At his silence, Sirius looked back to see Harry nodding, then hesitating. “A little weird. There's a statue of the three of us, did you know that?”

“No, I didn’t,” Sirius said, shaking his head. He hated the idea of their murders being remembered as a heroic sacrifice, but he didn't know what he thought of martyrdom either. It was the preferred method of remembering people.

“We went to the graveyard,” Harry said, idly. “It was strange to see all these names I almost know, like the Abbotts. Even Dumbledore's. I didn't know he had family there.”

“I think they had some farmland out there,” Sirius said, trying to remember the vague whispers of Aberforth in his memory. “A lot of families cluster together in similar areas.”

“Yours didn't,” Harry said.

“They did when I was your age,” Sirius said, correcting himself. “London has always been a magical hub. Andromeda and her parents lived in Mayfair, about an hour away but closer to the Rosiers, her mother's family. My uncle Alphard had a flat up in Harringay, because there used to be a good broker up there. Regardless of where they lived, everyone ended up in Highgate. I really should tell Regulus to remove his own grave before someone does something nasty to it.” *Like bury him in it, for example.* “Did you see-”

“Yes,” Harry said, a little shortly.

Sirius chose to leave it there. If it was hard for him, it had to be even harder for Harry. “What did you want to talk about in person?”

There was a beat of silence. “Are pensieve memories always accurate? Could you explore them even if the person didn’t?”

Not the question he'd been expecting, but Harry hadn't seen the best side of his parents in one, so maybe they were still on that. “It can be subjective in that it’s their memory alone,” Sirius said. “It's like veritaserum – you don't get the full story, only the specific moment. Why?”

“I've been going over some with Professor Dumbledore,” Harry said, much to Sirius's surprise. “About Voldemort, when he was young.”

Sirius felt a beat of pride at Harry's lack of hesitation in using the name. “Looking for hidden clues in his past on what he's thinking?”

“Something like that,” Harry nodded. “We went to the house, near the graveyard, where he came back. Then to the orphanage. The professor pointed out something Regulus told me, and Hermione is looking into it. He liked to keep souvenirs from people he hurt. Moody said that some of the other Order members were killed that way.”

Something slotted into place. “You want to know if he kept souvenirs for people?”

“Important ones,” Harry said.

“I'm not sure,” Sirius said, truthfully. “Off the top of my head, Dorcas Meadowes, Edgar Bones, or Amelia, maybe others. What, is it important?”
Harry, much like his father, had a big tell of being shifty. “It could be important. He doesn’t seem sentimental – maybe he needs them for something, or there’s a link between those specific people. All I know is that Dumbledore said it was important that he collected trophies.”

Now wasn’t that a weird and worrying thought. “If he kept them with followers, the Ministry impound might have them.” Or they were in the bowels of the Lestrange manor, where no man enjoyed treading. “Arthur has access. Do you want me to ask?”

Harry nodded. “I didn't want to put it in an owl. Weird things are happening at school.”

“So Hagrid was telling me,” Sirius said, as they approached the fence. “Why did you ask me about royalty? I don't think Voldemort ever offed any of those.”

“Oh, that,” Harry said. “That's nothing.”

“Are you sure?” Sirius asked, pulling the fence back and ignoring the biting cold in his hands when he did.

“There's some notes in one of the school books I borrowed, and it's signed Prince,” Harry said, with a shrug. He ducked under the fencing, with Sirius following and rubbing his hands together. “Hermione just didn't want it to turn into another situation like Riddle's diary.”

“People leave notes on the school books all the time,” Sirius said, dismissively. “I've probably done it, when Remus borrowed them. Has it ever written to you specifically?”

“No,” Harry said. “It’s just class notes.”

“Then I think Hermione’s probably just being cautious,” Sirius decided. Not without cause, but sometimes a book was just a book. “Are you alright from here?”

Harry looked at the shack and nodded. He even smiled, perhaps some kind of perversely pleasant memory of meeting inside it again after so long.

On a whim, Sirius give him a quick, one-armed hug. “Be vigilant, and be safe.”

“You too,” Harry said.

It was only once he was out of sight that Sirius admitted to himself that the wrenching in his chest wasn't a lack of air due to the cold. He'd missed Harry, and felt all out of sorts immediately. That's what had been bothering him all month. He missed him, and he missed James and Lily and the life they deserved to be living. It was so easy to look at Harry and see his parents, to see that a part of them lived on in this world impossibly because Lily refused to let her child die. It highlighted how badly he missed them, and if he had to wipe his eyes a few times on the way back, he could always blame it on the weather.

The day after Halloween brought on the melancholy Sirius had been so keen to avoid. Not as pronounced or nauseating as the bitter anger and feelings of betrayal, but no less frustrating that everything took twice as long. He slept through most of the first, feeling wrung out and expecting to feel more together when he woke up. He didn't. Standing again, talking to people, doing anything at all felt like such a ridiculous thought and seemed utterly impossible. He was desperately tired, then struck by insomnia, then tiredness again.

Early in the morning of what must have been his birthday, Remus interrupted his self-imposed isolation with a cup of coffee which Sirius had downed gratefully. It helped, but he still didn't feel
like doing anything remotely celebratory, and engaging seemed like a hassle. Remus understood this more than most, so he simply read aloud until it became background noise. They did the crossword puzzle, and after a while, he told him there a few presents downstairs when he felt in the mood for it.

No one had told the muggles he wasn't feeling up to celebrating, though. That night, there were whooshes, bangs and popopopopops so loud that Sirius swore he could feel them. He slipped out the back, catching sight of a bright wheel of colour. The muggles must have been having their bonfire night, which meant the sky would be lit up all over with huge, dazzling displays. Invigorated by his own own success in getting dressed and coming outside, Sirius climbed one of the side ladders and plopped himself on the back of the roof. Even facing the estates, the sky was beautiful tonight.

No more than a couple of minutes later, there was a creak behind him, followed by a voice: “Would you care for company?”

Perhaps he was done with his nostalgia, or whatever had been eating him all week because Regulus seeking him out wasn't a frequent occurrence. Sirius shifted over in way of invitation. “You're going to want a cleaning charm,” he said. “I don't know the last time anyone was up here.”

Regulus took the suggestion seriously and cast what must have been a silent Scourgify before sitting down next to him. “How has today been?”

“Nothing is broken or on fire, and no one has stormed off anywhere.” One of the bright pinwheels caught Sirius's attention, looking back to the sky. “So better than it was. Are you still mired in nostalgia? I'd argue you've been more antisocial than I, this week.”

“Something like that,” Regulus said with a pensive tone as he watched another sputter of light flash in the sky. “I suppose I just have a lot on my mind at the moment.”

While it was nowhere near the right time for him to be considering their father, Sirius supposed Regulus didn't really need a reason. Grief always hit like a punch, and Regulus was entitled to his as much as anyone. He'd had family on his mind lately, probably more likely to be that of Narcissa than their parents or grandparents, but it was possible the fact he'd missed all their deaths and funerals in one fell swoop was making him feel guilty. As if they wouldn't have wiped even him out of that family and off of that tree faster than he could say 'blood traitor' if they were still around.

Speaking of family. "Harry's got a few scribbles for you. I left them downstairs, since no one else is here. I'd have bought them up, but..." Getting on each other's last nerve wasn’t going to solve anything. “Could be your mysterious thing you’re not talking about, could be advice over his Quidditch captaincy having had all hell break loose. I didn’t look - managing other people has never been my specialty.”

“Thank you. I will look when I go back down,” Regulus responded with a little nod.

Hesitantly, Sirius made the probably rash decision to bring up the last thing he shut down on: family tree talk. It'd been almost a week, and a rough week at that, but it was possible he'd gone over it in his head if he came up here.

"About what I said before," Sirius started, giving him a glance before. "I didn't mean to get bent out of shape with you. I understand why you want a united family on the tapestry, but it's important to me to leave that mark there. You hit a nerve I didn't know was still there, an echo of something you used to say a long time ago. They did a lot of shitty things as parents, but any time I brought
that up, it was my fault or I was being overly dramatic or I was just imagining it. You were so convinced they had to be right because they were your parents, of course they wanted only what was best for you. You were a child, and you never got the full stories, so I don't blame you for it. I just need that evidence. I need tangible proof of at least one awful thing, so I don't think there's something wrong with me or that I'm bonkers, alright? Otherwise, I spiral and end up getting people hurt. I can't afford to keep doing that. My family's pretty small these days. Can you just give me that, even if it's just for now?"

Regulus looked at him for a beat, back to the sky, then nodded.

One less thing to worry over. "Thank you."

Regulus nodded again, and for a moment, it seemed like he was going to say something - but the shift was subtle, and he kept his eyes on the flashing fireworks.

"I'd forgotten the muggles do this. They build these huge bonfires and let off fireworks because someone tried to destroy their government." Sirius glanced at him, shrugging his shoulders. "I know I'm usually their biggest fan, but sometimes, muggles are just downright weird."

"How odd," Regulus said, craning sightly, possibly to look at a glow further out to the south. He seemed to relax, just a little bit, most likely from the subject change. "I suppose setting fire to things is one way to accomplish that."

"I've had the urge a few times, but I've never done it." Sirius grinned, because he did remember doing it accidentally, once. He'd had the salamander flu as a teenager and coughed fire for a few days. His mother had banished him from the drawing room for fear of that bloody tapestry. "The burn mark in the drawing room was from Emmeline threatening the books. I'm mildly offended she managed it before I did."

"So I noticed. On that subject, I think it's evident that the books prefer it here,"

Regulus remarked, settling again. "I told her she could visit them any time she liked, but she was not deterred."

"I'm sure it has nothing to do with wanting an in-built excuse to come over at any time so you can make googoo eyes together," Sirius huffed, laughter barely contained. "I'm not complaining much. I'm happy knowing you have someone watching your back that I trust. Someone who knows you're not nearly as respectable as you act."

"I do not 'make googoo eyes,','', Regulus objected with a slight eye roll. "Are you calling my respectability into question?"

"Most of your respectability is smoke and mirrors, and you know it." Sirius had been around him long enough now to know that Regulus may seem like he's doing the right thing, rule-abiding and polite, but the moment someone was none of those things back or he could justify it, it all went out of the window. "You do things in a rule-abiding way only when you agree with the rule. You flagrantly disregarded any Hogwarts rule involving restricted sections and curfews. You've joined two illegal organisations in two decades, and once fled the country and assumed a name. You lived with a girl without being married. You've stolen things, gotten into very ungentlemanly duels, and infiltrated the Department of Mysteries. I think you left your respectability in a drawer somewhere and forgot about it."

"I have at least passable explanations for all of those things," Regulus responded pointedly, shooting a sideways glance.

"Respectable people don't do things that require explanations," Sirius said. "They're also boring
and don't challenge Dark Lords, so you might as well embrace your inner rake."

“I thought I was securely in the ‘boring’ category,” Regulus quipped dryly.

“You became boring for a while,” Sirius said. Regulus had possessed a sense of adventure when they were kids, which had dried up once Sirius had gone to school. At the time, Sirius had thought his brother had just changed, but his twelve-year-old self didn't have it completely right. Regulus was more soft the boring; he bent into whatever he needed to be to make people happy with him. Looking back, it couldn't be easy to see how Sirius was being treated and think he didn't want to be treated that way while still maintaining nothing was different. Older and, at a guess, more comfortable with expressing what he thinks instead of what everyone wants to hear, he had some of the old spark back. "You're just a swot now."

Regulus mouth quirked a little as he shook his head. “I can accept that.”

"You can't be that boring anyway," Sirius said. "You're my brother, and I've never been boring."

“Is that how it works?”

"Yes," Sirius said, decidedly. "Respect your elders."

“There is a certain irony to that, coming from you,” Regulus said, wryly.

"I respect people if they've done something I respect them for," Sirius said. "Regardless of age."

“I suppose that would be the limiting factor, yes,” Regulus said, tipping his head. “No respectability necessary in your ability to respect.”

"My criteria is different. I have more respect for people who break pointless rules than those who keep to them simply because they're rules. The ability to make hard choices." In his less than humble opinion, Sirius thought his version made a lot more sense. It was a running theme, that he saw things differently and by different standards. "Bravery, character, brains, they're all more important than rules or etiquette."

“I would argue that there is a time and place for all of those things,” Regulus said, “but I can agree that adherence benefits from some subjectivity.”

Sirius shot him a look of disbelief. "How did I get the reputation for being the contrary one? Is it because you're soft spoken? They can't hear that you're argumentative so they make assumptions because you look put together, or have you really bitten your tongue for almost eighteen years?"

Regulus shrugged. “It is likely related to the ratio of rules that we are validating versus invalidating at any given time. You have a history of invalidating more rules over a longer period of time, so you are more contrary.”

"So it's quantity over quality?" That made a certain amount of sense. Sirius had broken many small rules, gotten caught for those, and promptly bollocked for them. He'd never been caught for anything he'd done that was big, from underage magic to being an animagus. Then he realised that Regulus only had two real modes. He didn't have the small rebellions: he had either rule-abiding or breaking it spectacularly. As such, no one ever suspected him of the big things, so he just never had to take responsibility for them. "Oh, no. It's much worse. You just don't get caught."

“That is the goal,” Regulus granted.

"I never have for anything important that I truly did," Sirius said, unable to keep the defensiveness
out. "Something Remus said the other day, it reminded me that anything is possible even if it doesn't always seem like it. One rule I enjoy breaking - and I think you do too - is the one that says something can't be done and then doing it. I need to get back to it. Moping doesn't stop Death Eaters, and I think taking down one in particular would help immensely."

Regulus nodded pensively. "There are still plenty of impossible things to do. You have not missed too much."

"Tomorrow," Sirius decided, quietly. "I can be self-indulgent on a birthday."

"Speaking of your birthday," Regulus said with a shift, "I have not given you your present yet. Would you like it now or later?"

"I really thought you'd hold the whole saving my life part over me for every birthday I had left," Sirius said. Truthfully, coming back from the dead could also qualify, but that was much too emotional to bring up. "But now, I don't like waiting."

"It is not a tangible gift, but I think you might find it useful."

Shifting, Regulus pulled out his wand and scanned their immediate roof surroundings. It was difficult tell if he found (or did not find) what he was looking for, because he settled his attention on a spot just behind them.

"Occulta murum," he said with an accompanying swish and flick in a square sort of motion - which seemed to conjure a sealed box. With the tip of his wand, he nudged it towards Sirius. "It creates a magically sealed surface that you must cast a compatible spell on yourself to pass through." Lifting his left hand, he said parietem and tapped the hand with his wand - which seemed to allow it to swipe right through. "There is an alternate wand movement that makes it a wall, rather than a box, but it would be harder to demonstrate on a roof."

Sirius couldn't help but smile at that. He remembered briefly that there was precedent for this, a Christmas if he remembered right, where they'd played with inventing a snow globe activated by touch. How old had they been then, nine, ten? At the time, it'd elicited a 'not bad' response, but their father had kept the gift. Sirius had found it again when they went through the study, which had given him much more mixed feelings at the time. Was that why Regulus had done it? Had he also seen it in the grips of nostalgia and returned to something they'd done as children?

"You're comfortable giving me the means to hide something from you?" Sirius asked. "Do I need to check for polyjuice?"

"I do know the spell to get through it," Regulus said, lifting his brow, "but it ought to serve its purpose for everyone else."

Sirius didn't think he went about checking all the surfaces, but he understood the gesture nonetheless. "Thanks," he said, instead. He liked to have unknown spells up his sleeve. "Did nostalgia bring that on?"

"Nostalgia reminded me about it, yes… I have been spending a lot of time in the study and found the snow globe again - our first foray into experimental magic, as I recall - and thought it would perhaps be more interesting than something you could simply buy yourself," Regulus began, tipping his head into a slight nod. "The inspiration for its function came from that painting we found as children, with its hidden space stashed with seemingly random objects... but that spark was at least a decade ago, and more out of boredom than necessity." With another swish, he stated what must have been the counterspell - evanescere murum - and the box disappeared. "I imagine it
will be more useful now, all things considered."

"It will," Sirius said. As far as gifts go, it was unique. "You've upped the ante. I now have seven weeks to top this."

Regulus's mouth flicked up a little. “The escalation has begun.”

Somehow, the realisation that it would soon be the winter holidays wiped out whatever fuzzy melancholy he was feeling after the gift. Even if it had been terrible last year because Arthur was in the hospital, it was still a family Christmas. However unconventional they might be, he did have a family to share the holidays with. He'd never planned one of his own before. It had always been James's, then Molly's. Harry would be back by then. Remus never stayed with his father for long, and there was no terrible Christmas party in sight.

It did depend on the Death Eaters, who had been flitting in and out, leaving destruction in their wake, but the Order had to be careful with the Ministry breathing down their necks. They needed a way to strike back that didn't put everyone in danger of being arrested. An idea began to formulate in the back of his mind, that assuming Narcissa had taken over her mother's Christmas party duties, everyone who was anyone in the pureblood elite would be there. That would give the most opportune time to go and snoop, wouldn't it? They'd need an alarm (he wondered about Regulus's door alarm, but even if it was being used on Narcissa, Sirius was doubtless that Regulus would share the technicalities if the plan was solid) and potentially some ability to track. He could remember there being some noise about that back in the eighties, so he'd have to talk to their resident mad inventors for that.

If all went well, they might have an idea of where to hit to gut the Death Eaters a devastating blow, and then enjoy Christmas afterwards.
In one hand, Regulus held a letter addressed to Bellatrix, neatly folded but not yet confined to an
envelope; in the other, a written detail of the points Dedalus had instructed him to cover prior to
their case at the Ministry - in its second draft, based on Dedalus’s suggestions a few days prior, but
not yet approved for submission. (More directness here, less detail there…) Regulus did not like
the prospect of airing out the worst of the things he had done as a teenager, but he supposed it was
better to do so in a controlled environment than it was to let them come out with some chaotic
accusation - from either side, the way things were looking. Their appointment was schedule for
mid-afternoon, so that controlled environment was nearly upon him, whether he liked it or not.

Fingers gripping the letter to Bellatrix a little more tightly, he thought back to when he’d seen her,
a week before. Regulus had not liked it, the way she made him feel like a tongue-tied child, nor
had he liked the way she suggested that making her point of reciprocity was more important than
what had happened to his father - her own uncle. For a fleeting moment, he had considered asking
Narcissa if she was aware of the details, but that thought had been stamped out rather swiftly. Even
if she did know - which he doubted, given her tangential connection to the Death Eaters - she was
unlikely to tell him if Bellatrix did not want him to know.

Telling the Order had crossed his mind, but everyone was so wrapped up in the Potter memorial
that no moment felt like the right moment. His brother’s birthday had followed just after, but even
now it was difficult to drum up the words when the ultimatum had sat for so long. If Moody
remained untouched, Bellatrix was not going to tell him anything - but he had a sneaking feeling
that she would require grand, definitive proof, and Moody was unlikely to feel motivated to help
him, just for old information about a dead purist. Moody didn’t even like him.

All week, Regulus had felt particularly attached to his father’s study, whether it was turning over
memories or looking through his father’s journals and documentation in search of the most
effective way to ward out individual family members. Though he had found a number of useful
wards to consider, the blood magic he had come across the week before still appeared to be the
best option. Granted, Bellatrix had not attempted to attack him that night in Iago, so he was no
closer to actually using that blood magic… but present practicality aside, it looked to be the most
effective.

Regulus was sitting in one of the overstuffed chairs in his father’s study when Dedalus arrived,
light on his feet and perhaps a little bit scattered, but Regulus would say that the man always
looked a little bit scattered.

"Good morning!" Dedalus looked suddenly extremely startled. "Is it still morning?"

Regulus nodded. “Yes, by a little bit.”

"Good." He looked rather relieved at that. "I'm so sorry this has taken so long! Everyone is in such
a tiswas, and with the fires, trying to find anything among the mayhem has been very, very
unpleasant."
“I understand,” Regulus said, shaking his head. “There is a lot going on. I made the requested changes.” He held out the written details of his Death Eater experience, though he hesitated just a beat before adding: “With that being said, I… do have something of an additional confession, but I was not certain if I ought to include it.”

Dedalus looked intrigued by the idea. “Oh?”

“My cousin - Bellatrix - contacted me recently,” Regulus forced himself to say. “I met her alone, as she requested… I know well that if she sensed duplicity, it was likely to turn violent in an instant.” The point felt like an excuse - and it was, a little bit - but he kept on. “She offered a proposal, but I did not follow through with it; rather, I’ve written a letter to establish that more clearly, and I intend to send it today. With that being said, I was uncertain whether I ought to mention as much, though it is not strictly a Death Eater crime… and if I do, whether I ought to have it to show them as proof-” he held up the letter “-or whether sending it prior is sufficient.”

Dedalus seemed utterly flabbergasted. “Well, I, well, I wouldn't bring it up with the Ministry unless they ask. Are you quite sure sending her a message is a wise idea?”

Regulus nodded, more of a pensive gesture than one of confirmation. “Wiser than telling her in person, I expect. So if the Ministry was to find out after the pardon, it wouldn’t be a problem? I expect she will be very angry with me, and I cannot guarantee she would not bring it up if she were ever cornered.” Frowning, he added, “But I will take your advice in this, as I have a more difficult time guessing at the Ministry’s actions than I do guessing at Bellatrix’s, unfortunately.”

“It definitely wouldn't look very good!” Dedalus said, warily. “But there's no legal recourse for it, and coming out with it will make you seem a lot more entrenched than you seem to be.”

Regulus pressed his lips to a line with a soft huff. As long as speaking with her could not be construed as a crime by some reading of the law that he wasn’t aware of, then he would rather not talk about it, so he supposed that suited well enough.

“Then let’s put our best foot forward, and get started!”

With the letter still in hand, Regulus dipped his chin. Leaving Dedalus to read through the newest version of his statement, Regulus briefly excused himself upstairs to where Deimos was perched and chittering to Kreacher, who was paying the owl as much attention as Hedwig did on her rare visits... which was to say very little. He felt sorry for Deimos, social as the bird seemed to be. Regulus smoothed his owl’s feathers, and when the hoots quieted slightly, he grabbed a treat from the pouch near the window.

“I have a letter for you to deliver, Deimos,” Regulus said as he pulled an envelope from a nearby desk.

Before sticking the parchment inside, he glanced over the words. In truth, it could hardly even be called a letter so much as a note, short as it was: ‘I must decline your offer,’ signed with his initials. He had written drafts that were more expansive, but each seemed to devolve into topics that were poorly covered in a letter format and had been burned in the fireplace, in the end. This was not a conversation - it was an answer.

Dedalus’s hesitation prickled in his mind, and with a pause, Regulus considered the point that letters could be tampered with. It did not change the fact it was safer than a face to face rejection, not did he want to leave the answer ambiguous… After all, there was a certain off-footedness to not knowing what she was thinking, and it almost seemed better to know she was angry than to wonder
if she she knew enough to be angry yet.

Pulling out his wand, Regulus cast a permanency spell on the parchment, then tested it with a wave. As expected, the letters all remained in place. Forgery was still a possibility, but there were few letters available, and he had written enough letters to his cousins that it was not this note that would prove the problem.

Satisfied with the level of precaution, Regulus folded the parchment, stuck it in the envelope, and held it out to Deimos, who grasped it in a talon.

Anxiety was already tightening in his chest, but his tone was resolved as he spoke: “Deliver to Bellatrix Lestrange.”

The infiltration of the Department of Mysteries had been the first time - and also the most recent time - that Regulus had ever actually stepped foot in their Ministry building. While he had followed Dedalus down to the courtrooms and other law-related spaces, Regulus had been trying to decide whether he was experiencing more or less anxiety than he had the day that he and half the Order had rushed in to extract Harry and the prophecy. Perhaps it was because he was dwelling in the moment, rather than riding on adrenaline, but the sick turning in his stomach might be a little bit worse now.

Regulus had already submitted his official statement, approved in full by Dedalus prior to their appointment, but he still felt that horrible plummet in his stomach anytime he thought about having to talk to anyone about the details of what he had done, teenager or not. Dedalus seemed confident enough - or at least he was saying so - and Dumbledore had thrown in his support, even if he was not physically present for the questioning portion of this ordeal… but that did not change the topic of the day.

On the bright side, Regulus reminded himself that it was better to be questioned by only a few people in a private room, rather than the full Wizengamot spread of a criminal trial… All he had to do was get through this interaction unscathed, and there was a chance he could just go home: home to Sirius, to Kreacher, to his life, to Emmeline - she has invited him to visit the new flat, when this ordeal was over. Though he tried to think forward, the staleness of the room kept pulling his thoughts backwards.

This plea was rooted in the past, and he felt rooted with it.

For the better part of an hour, Dedalus was going over the statement with the panel of interrogators; there would be three Ministry workers present, in addition to Dedalus himself - a member of the Wizengamot, representing the higher law, and two from the Auror department, due to the involvement of dark wizards.

When at last the door opened to end the agonising wait, he tried to keep his manner calm - rather than jumpy - but the first face he saw strolling through the door nearly knocked the wind out of him.

It was Sebastian Avery’s father, looking him straight in the eye with an expression that suggested his involvement was not accidental. Regulus had not even realised he sat on the Wizengamot, but after a decade and a half, perhaps it oughtn’t be surprising that he would have moved up in position…

The nostalgia only made the roiling in his stomach worse. Magnus Avery had always been very friendly to him - had even taken him and the Avery children to a quidditch game one summer,
around Regulus’s birthday - but his eyes did not look friendly at all. Why it wasn’t Dumbledore as his representative, he did not know - was Dumbledore not connected to the Wizengamot? - but perhaps his willingness to vouch as a character witness proved a conflict of interest… or perhaps he was busy chasing horcruxes. It was difficult to say.

Filing in after were Dedalus, Kingsley (relieving, at least, to have a second Order member involved), and a man that Dedalus introduced as Gawain Robards. Though he kept his stubborn stare locked to the front, Regulus felt a niggling temptation to look at the floor - and a more chaotic temptation to stare at Avery’s father, as if taking his eyes off the man might result in some sudden attack, Aurors present or not.

It was an absurd thought, of course. There was an attack in progress, but clearly, that attack was not intended to be physical.

Each of the men took seats at the table, with at least one chair between each of them. Robards, a serious-looking man with slicked back hair, was the first to break the silence as he initiated a dictaquill.

"Record a new interview reference. Monday, 4th of November 1996 at ten past three in the afternoon. Staff present are myself, Gawain Robards, Head of the Auror Office; Magnus Avery, resentative of the courts; and Kingsley Shacklebolt, senior Auror. Also present, Regulus A. Black, with his representative, Dedalus Diggle. I have the document present that was entered into evidence. This is being submitted for sentence bargaining under voluntary circumstances; thus, a waiver of right to trial and authenticity of information will be produced and signed if terms are met. The details of this meeting will remain sealed until after a conclusion is agreed upon.

“We are not here to discuss whether or not Black has been a Death Eater, as it has been agreed upon that he doesn't contest this fact. We are here to discuss sentence bargaining. The circumstances affected are age, time period of involvement, voluntary admission, key information insight - which will have to be reviewed for authenticity - character recommendations filed, and behaviour. If an agreement is met with consensus on appropriate recourse, it will be taken to the Wizengamot for approval. Mr. Black, it is my understanding you have been briefed on this. Do you any questions before we begin?"

Regulus’s limbs felt as rigid as steel, posture prim but frozen as he shook his head. His eyes flicked down to the dictaquill, then, hovering still, and he forced himself to speak before someone else inevitably reminded him. “No questions.”

"Can you confirm the date of your last action that falls under the purview of being a Death Eater?" Robards continued, with a nod.

Already, Regulus could feel his mind start to reel, and though he was focused on Robards, he could feel Avery’s father watching him - undoubtedly trying to discourage him from going through with it at all, or at least spying on what he was saying… Whatever the purpose, Regulus did not like it, but he could not stop now. The Death Eaters were going to try to kill him, no matter what he said…

“Spring holidays of my seventh year at school,” Regulus started. “I cannot recall the exact date, but it was mid-April, 1979. I estimate April 18th, or within a few days of it.” As his mouth closed to a steadying line, he reminded himself to speak carefully - honest, but not too detailed if no one asks...

"And that action was?" Robards prompted.

“I permitted use of my house-elf for some task, at the suggestion of my cousin Bellatrix. I was not told the nature of the task, but I was aware that it was for the Death Eaters.” Technically, the task
was solely for the Dark Lord’s selfish benefit, but now did not seem the time to get into those particular semantics.

"More of a verbal agreement than an action," Shacklebolt said, evenly.

"Agreed," Robards nodded. "Can you confirm the last action you personally took, prior to your departure?"

A fair point. The other actions he had taken were varying degrees of stressful to discuss, but he supposed that was the point. “Earlier that week, I took part in a training session that was focused on continuing to hone the use of dark magic and illegal curses.”

"Please describe the training session," Robards replied.

Without meaning to, Regulus flicked his eyes over to Avery’s father, whose dark gaze locked with his challengingly. The man’s face was still and calm, save for the subtlest flicker in his eyebrow, but Regulus forcibly returned his attention to Robards before he lost his nerve.

“I was primarily instructed by my cousin Bellatrix.” Saying her name twice within the span of a minute probably did not bode well for her mood with him, assuming that the Death Eater in the room was planning to tattle, but when her anger rained, it poured, and there was already a storm coming. “She was a mentor to myself and Barty Crouch, Jr., who was also present.” He pushed past the stinging feeling to add, “I believe the spell that night was ‘fauciem submersi’.” A spell to conjure water in a person’s throat - a little flutter of panic was starting to stutter in his chest, and he put intense focus into breathing that feeling away and speaking again, to derail his thoughts: “The location was the Lestrange Manor, if that matters.”

"So Bellatrix Lestrange was instructing both you and Crouch in the curse," Robards summarised. "On who or what was this practice done?"

Regulus could feel his mouth and throat drying, but he made sure his voice was steady before answering. “Rabbits.”

"Was there ever an instance of it being used on a person?" Robards questioned, without comment.

“That spell?” Regulus clarified, uncomfortably. “Not for myself, but I cannot speak for the others.”

"For any dark magic while under direct instruction," Robards clarified.

Though Regulus knew that the entire point of being questioned was to answer those questions and thus include them in the plea for immunity, he still felt deeply uncomfortable, bringing up Unforgiveables to an Auror… Dedalus had said it was essential that he acknowledged the punishable crimes, lest they be brought up later, but that did not make them any easier. He expected this feeling was only going to get worse, the further back they went…

“Barty and I cast the Imperius Curse on each other, for the purposes of practicing both casting it and breaking out of it.” Regulus said, and because he knew Robards was going to ask: “The other two Unforgiveables were part of the same series of lessons, but I have not cast either on a person.”

“Ever?”

“Correct,” Regulus said, glad there was at least one thing to feel confident in.

“For all three?” Robards clarified. “Then can you confirm your age at joining?”
“For all three, yes,” Regulus confirmed. “Only the Imperius on Barty, within the context of training. As for when I joined… It was the summer between my fifth and sixth year. I was fifteen-sixteen, within a couple of weeks.”

Robards looked from him, to Kingsley, who remained unreadable. “We have had scattered reports of seventh year students becoming involved, but fifteen is unusual. Why then?”

“It was a… tumultuous time for my family,” Regulus said, carefully. “My brother had run away the summer before, and there was a great deal of tension - both within the family itself and in respect to how it made us look, I suppose.” He shook his head, guilt burning hot and sick, as if they were sitting right there, hearing him speak about their family stressors freely - but he continued. “I was under the misguided impression that it would somehow solve my family's problems if they didn't have to worry about me being a traitor… It did ease some tension, though I would not say it actually solved any problems.”

"And no mention was made of the fact you were significantly underage, to the point where you would still be under the Trace for a significant period of time?” Robards continued.

"Nor apparition," Kingsley added. "I saw that noted. If the last action taken was in early 1979, then you had only around six months in which you were capable of apparating. Most of which would have been spent in Hogwarts - a place you cannot apparate to or from. Would that mean you were only active, of age without the Trace, and capable of apparition in the end of July, August, and the winter holidays of 1978, then spring holidays of '79?"

Regulus tipped his head in a small nod. “Prior to that, it was primarily training and occasional surveillance.” His eyes flicked over to Magnus Avery's stone-still expression, and Regulus could feel another twist of nerves. Telling the Death Eaters' training protocols and workarounds was probably another punishable offense to add to the list, but this was his chance to make the necessary points. If he was too vague or seemed to be hiding anything, he could lose this opportunity - making Avery a risk he simply had to be okay with taking. Looking back to Kingsley, he forced himself to keep talking. “In instances that I was assigned to a task that required apparition or magic, then portkeys, proximity to an adult, or magical artifacts were utilised as needed.”

Regulus could feel Magnus Avery's glare boring into his head, but he kept his attention on Kingsley.

"None of this is giving me much pause for thought," Robards said, bluntly. "If this was all it was, I'd be inclined to suggest we forgo the rest and simply arrange an agreement now. However, there is one incident stopping me from doing that. I imagine you already know which - can you confirm the circumstances around it?"

The tension closed in on Regulus's chest and turned in his stomach, mind flashing with the heat of roaring flames. This was the subject he did not care to discuss, but silently he urged himself with the reminder that hiding it was the only way to guarantee he would not have immunity from it. Anything he was silent on could be used against him later - and he did not like the Death Eater ears listening to what that was.

“The summer before my seventh year, I was given instructions to take the lives of a witch and a wizard - the Boots.” He could feel his face burning, but he forced himself on, trying not to think too hard about it. “I did so, with my cousin's supervision, because the Trace was still in place for another week or so.”

Kingsley leant back, whispering something to Robards, who then simply nodded.
Robards then asked, "Why them?"

“I’m not sure,” Regulus said, and he was watching the far edge of the table now. It felt even more horrifying to say as much to an Auror - two Aurors, even if one was Order - when it had felt bad enough, saying it to Sirius. He didn’t even want to look at Avery’s father’s face, if for a different reason. “I asked Bellatrix beforehand, but she did not see fit to tell me.”

"How long between instruction and act?" Robards asked.

“Approximately twenty-four hours,” Regulus said to the table, wishing the floor would go ahead and swallow him up. Suddenly, his earlier thought of Death Eaters storming the meeting seemed like a desirable alternative, but they were doing him no such favours. “To prepare and carry out, as needed.”

"Did you choose the method?" Robards asked.

Regulus nodded slightly, his throat threatening to catch, so he paused just a beat before responding. “I could not use magic without risking the Trace, but she told me to problem-solve, so I did.”

Kingsley spoke up next. "What did you do, directly afterwards?"

Regulus flicked his eyes up at Kingsley. “I went home.”

"After that," Kingsley gave the slightest of nods. "Did you do anything specific, or speak with anyone? You were still living at home with your parents, for example."

Regulus frowned, slightly. “I did not feel like talking... I just went to bed.”

"Would you say then it had little effect on your life?" Robards asked, bluntly.

The words felt like a punch to the gut, and Regulus frowned deeper. “Do you expect me to have celebrated? I felt awful, so I didn’t want to talk about it,” he said, a little sharply, though the Dark Mark’s ceremony still made him feel ill to remember. He had not felt celebratory at all. “I killed two people - of course that affected my life.”

"Yet you remained another year," Robards said, evenly. "Why was that?"

“Because I was trying to keep my family together, not devastate them even more. Because essentially every person I interacted with on any sort of regular basis was a Death Eater or an avid supporter, from my family and my friends to my acquaintances, my friends’ parents and a dormmate at Hogwarts,” he started, feeling his voice strain slightly as emotion built up in his throat. The tone had gone a little pointed, though he didn’t dare look at Avery’s father. “Because once you join, you don’t get to change your mind. Those hypocrites kill you, no matter who you are. Because I was a teenager and didn’t know what to do except try to make it to the next Hogwarts term without getting myself or anyone else killed and hope that the war ended before Christmas.” He put a hard stop on the words, took a steadying breath, then added more evenly: “But it did not.”

"No, it did not." Robards lifted his quill, writing down something unknown. "We'll need to get the other work in order, establish an event timeline with the other people involved who have considerably larger case files associated with them. Diggle, you have your references in order?"

"We do!" Dedalus replied, fishing out more parchment from his bag. "Written and sealed, but we are quite obviously willing to give it at court if it's required."
"This could take some time. We will call you in again, so remain in country and register your wand on your way out." Robards took the parchment, glancing over it and lifting it to get a better look. "If these are accurate and information provided is good, I will recommend - provided the circumstances in which these crimes were done under age and can be considered coerced - a sentence without incarceration. Mr. Avery and Shacklebolt can confer with their colleagues, and I'll speak to the Minister. Any other queries?"

Tension gave way to the feeling of being completely drained, but the questioning was finally over, so it was not a wholly negative feeling. Regulus held his posture and shook his head - first at Robards and Kingsley, then lastly to Magnus Avery, whose gaze he held a little longer.

“I have said all I need to say.” Regulus watched the subtle flickers around his eyes, wondering if it was anger or fear that Regulus was going to say something about the fact that there had been one Death Eater present in the room, and it was not the one being questioned. Regulus did have to admit the temptation was there, but now was probably not the opportune moment. They would not arrest him on the spot without proof… most likely… He would need to ask Dedalus what he was meant to do in a situation like that...

“We will be in touch,” the man said, and though his tone could not have sounded menacing to anyone else’s ears, Regulus doubted he was referring to the Ministry. The hammering in Regulus’s chest returned, but he just held the look and nodded, willing the interaction to simply finish itself.

Fortunately, it did.

"Then interview concluded, record time." Robards stood, and both Dedalus and Kingsley took their cue from that to do the same.

"Front desk?" Dedalus asked, nodding his head in the direction of the door. "It won't take a minute, then we can be on our way. I don't really think you want to linger!"

Regulus flicked his eyes back to Dedalus and nodded. Steadying himself to stand, he did not wait for a second invitation to leave.

Regulus was still turning over the Ministry appointment in his mind when he stepped into the house. Before he even made it halfway down the hallway, he saw his brother appear at the top of the stairs that led up from the kitchen.

"You're still here, then." Sirius leaned his shoulder against the wall, exhaling deeply. "Good. You seem like the type who gets seasick."

“They were unclear about what is going to happen, but they at least indicated that it oughtn't be Azkaban,” Regulus said with a heavy exhale of his own. “That is sufficient for the moment.”

Sirius looked down briefly, then nodded. "Right, then. I'll give Dumbledore something, even when he's elusive, he can come through in a pinch when he wants to. How was it?"

“Awful, but not as awful as it could have been. Kingsley and an Auror named Robards were representing law enforcement. Magnus Avery was unfortunately present as the Wizengamot representative, but he did more pointed staring than actual questioning,” Regulus said with a frown. “I suppose there is some benefit to knowing what they know, rather than wondering if they have dug it out of some case file they are not supposed to look at.”

"They sent a Death Eater representative from the Wizengamot," Sirius said, his voice thick with derision. "Whose kid has now been arrested twice."
“I was wondering about that very thing, but it was stressful enough without making an ordeal of it,” Regulus said, shaking his head. “Perhaps he is going the way of Barty's father - except it is a blatant lie when he says he didn't know about his son, and instead of actually writing him off, he's likely to accept him back if they manage another breakout…”

"That shouldn't be hard," Sirius replied, rolling his eyes. "There's no dementors, and if Tonks is right, the Aurors and hits are spread so thin that they're barely able to deal with the incoming cases, let alone babysitting. It's got to be a when, not an if."

Regulus nodded, trying not to think about how furious Mulciber was likely to be when that time came - but at least Regulus's status as an unrepentant defector would be old news by then. Mulciber could not tell them anything that would make them significantly angrier.

“I'm not certain what the intention was, sitting in, other than to hear what I said,” Regulus added, shaking his head again. “I might actually be more nervous if he tries to 'help' me than if he contests it, but silence is not the most terrible option. I suppose I will bring it up to Dedalus, tomorrow - make sure his name on the document won't void anything down the line.”

"That's probably why it was him; they know half your family tree is waving the Voldemort banner, and obviously, he would know something about that and 'appreciate' your point of view." Sirius gave a bark of laughter, then grinned. "He understands a lot more than he's letting on. Should be alright. Dedalus and Kingsley both know he's lying arse about face, and they should be checking it."

Regulus nodded. “I just want for this to be over.”

"You don't want it to be over that quickly," Sirius said. "When it's quick, people say no."

“I suppose so,” Regulus allowed with a frown. “It will be worth it in the end, yes?”

Sirius raised his eyebrows. "Am I really the person to ask?"

“Well, you are the only person I am on speaking terms with who has endured an unpleasant legal situation and come out better on the other side… the difference being that you didn’t actually do it, and I did.” He frowned, feeling another stab of guilt. “But the point still stands.”

"I wasn't present for it," Sirius pointed out, lightly. "Good thing, too. If Avery'd shown up, I'd have probably thumped him and gotten nicked for that. At least they can't leak anything - the Ministry will already know, vigilantism aside."

Regulus nodded. “That is good, at least, because I cannot imagine they are going to be very happy.”

"Do you care?"

“Not enough to regret it,” Regulus admitted, though he felt a different sort of guilt, imagining how angry Bellatrix was going to be between this and his rejection of her offer - and what Bellatrix was likely to say to Narcissa. Most of his social peers had written him off from the start, but Cissa had at least hesitated. Somehow, he doubted he would have much opportunity to explain himself… and even if he did, he doubted she would understand. “I don’t care if the Death Eaters are angry, or if the Dark Lord is angry - although this isn’t how I imagined it would all go.”

"Your imagination has more common sense than the people involved," Sirius told him, bluntly. "Betrayal always feels like shit, even when it's the right thing to do.”
“It does,” Regulus said - a sentiment that he could agree applied to both points, even if the first was a bit rude to the individuals in question. “I did not intend to betray anyone, but it has gotten rather messy.”

"If it makes you feel any better, they did it first," Sirius replied. "They're the idiots who put their family, friend, whatever applies in the murder club at fifteen and thought it was a jolly excellent idea, then said no backsies when you sobered up."

Regulus nodded, slightly. “I cannot say it exactly makes me feel better, but I appreciate it, all the same.”

Sirius sighed. "So more Narcissa-laden guilt for you?"

“Just the normal amount of Narcissa,” Regulus said with a frown.

"So is this guilt over what you've done, over their perceived betrayal, over dobbing in people who were once your friends and now likely want you dead, or that this is going down without any sort or plan for her kid, or something else entirely?" Sirius asked.

Regulus shook his head with a little huff of a sigh. “You ask that like there’s only one thing to be guilty about.”

"At least only feel guilty for things that are truly your fault," Sirius said, then shooting him a smile. "The rest can piss off."

Regulus’s mouth flicked up at the corner, and though he still felt a bit miserable, it was less so. Every one of those things often felt as though they were at least partially his own fault, but logically, he knew that wasn’t the case, and it helped to hear as much. Though he could feel gratitude on the tip of his tongue, he instead strengthened the smile and looked to his brother with a nod. “I will make an effort to distinguish as such.”

"I'm always available to provide a checklist for you," Sirius offered.

Quirking an eyebrow, Regulus paused a beat before asking: “Do you actually have a checklist?”

"A small one, in my mind." Sirius put his fingers about half an inch apart. "Attaching blame to the wrong person just makes vengeance really unsatisfying."

“That is one way of looking at it,” Regulus said, feeling his mood lighten a bit more.

"You were also a child around a lot of adults who should have known better," Sirius added. "I blame you for having a stupid idea, but I blame them a lot more for letting an upset fifteen-year-old determine his fate."

“It was a really stupid idea,” Regulus granted. “Hindsight is so jarring.”

"You were just trying to fix something that you couldn't. I'll take my fair share for leaving you to deal with it alone," Sirius said, quietly. "I really should have known better than to assume you'd get any more than I did, and it seems obvious now. It'd been so long, I'd forgotten how it felt to be afraid to lose them."

“I assumed you truly didn’t care, back then - only when it suited your convenience… but I’m glad I was wrong.” Regulus looked upwards, as if he could see through the ceiling, up into drawing room, then down the line of portraits along the hallway. “Thank you for coming back. I know you hate it here, and that isn’t convenient at all.”
"You were younger than Harry is right now." Sirius shrugged. "Whatever happened in the Death Eaters, I'll leave you to deal with as you see fit. Just try and cut some slack on the family front, because something so fragile that it can be torn asunder that easily has a lot more problems than any one person can solve. They were a mess before us, and angry if people noticed. From your tree research, I reckon a mess for a long time."

Nodding, Regulus crossed his arms and looked back to Sirius with a pressed smile. It was defeating to think that everything he did was only making the larger family situation worse, but he tried to pack away the thought for later. However sharp the sting, he suspected that Sirius was not wrong in his point, either. “I will try.”

"They ask you about Bellatrix?" Sirius asked.

Regulus gave pause for a beat before answering. “I suppose they did not ask, per se, though I did mention her in respect to my training. There seemed little point in hiding it when it’s rather evident at this point that she is a Death Eater.”

“If she gets arrested again,” Sirius began, hesitantly, “you may end up being asked about corroborated evidence.”

A deeply uncomfortable thought, yet it was surprising, to some extent, that the Aurors had not asked him about Bellatrix. Perhaps they were saving such questions for later - when she was captured, as Sirius was speculating. “That is certainly possible.”

“Can you do it?” Sirius asked.

“I don't know,” Regulus said, quietly. “I don't think I'll lie about it.”

“I think it’s something you have to prepare yourself for. You’ve already lost whatever she was to you.” Sirius made a vague dancing movement with his head. “But….if you believe Narcissa still trusts you enough at your word, I have an idea on getting her attention. Unless you want me to butt out.”

Regulus frowned slightly. Though he was not completely confident that Narcissa was still willing to take him at his word, that was a hope he was not quite ready to give up on, so he looked at Sirius and responded, “What is your idea?”

"This house is where old junk goes to die,” Sirius said, gesturing vaguely with his hand. "Most of them are. My guess is that Narcissa doesn't know Voldemort's background nor identity, and she doesn't have the blinders on that Bellatrix does. Prove it. I have old school pictures, and I bet you do as well, and he was in the same dorm as Uncle Alphard, a year under Mum and Aunt Lucretia, and he would've been Dad's prefect and head boy. He was probably prefect with Aunt Lucretia. If he played quidditch, he'll be in the team pictures. Even if he's scrubbed most mentions of his real name or face out of existence, what's the bet the evidence for it isn't in this house, in my basement, or down in Cornwall?"

Nodding, Regulus ran the options over in his mind. It was not impossible that Narcissa knew and was ignoring it, but he did doubt she knew the details of who was leading them all into ruin - however deceiving that ruin might look. He had considered the option quite some time ago, back when he had first learned who 'Lord Voldemort’ really was, but Narcissa and the others had not been particularly receptive… Perhaps he had waited too long, but perhaps he had waited just long enough. Most likely, he would only really know after trying - and either succeeding or failing…

“It's a good idea,” Regulus said, with another punctuating nod. “I cannot say for certain if she will
listen or act on it, but I suspect I cannot make things too much worse by pointing it out now.”

"She doesn't have much in the way of leverage. Her husband, sister, and kid are all involved; she doesn't know enough to hold any of it to them; everyone she knows is blindly devoted to the bastard." Sirius made a 'why not' motion. "Give her something she can weaponise that doesn’t cost you anything. See if when she's pushed, she chooses to use it and who she chooses to use it against."

Regulus nodded. “There's a chance of it, at least.”

"You never know what someone is capable of if they're pushed hard enough," Sirius said, gesturing towards him. "Case in point."

A little flicker of a wry smile tugged at Regulus's mouth. “There has been no shortage of pushing. I suppose it is high time to share that push.”

Behind them, the door opened without much ceremony. When the large, pointed umbrella was whisked away, Emmeline gave them a quick wave hello while she opened and closed the umbrella to get most of the water off. "That was unexpected," she commented, giving the umbrella a more violent shake now it was folded and placing it in the stand. She finally shut the door behind her. "It was sunny when I started unloading earlier. Did it go well?"

"No," Sirius said, tonelessly. "They convicted him then sent him on his way."

"It has some precedent," Emmeline replied.

Regulus pressed his lips to a line, just for a second. “Too true.” An uncomfortable point but nonetheless a valid one. “Details are still to come, as I understand it - I believe they are verifying to the degree they can do so - but the decision has shifted away from Azkaban, so that is positive.”

"I wanted to pop up and see you after," Emmeline said. "I may still see you there when I'm charged with Sturgis's violent death. He got the pensieve camera working and spent most of the afternoon following me around narrating my unboxing process until I - purely by accident - dropped my bed on his foot."


"Do you still want to come over?" Emmeline asked. "I understand if you've had enough stress for one day."

“I don't expect it to be particularly stressful,” Regulus responded. “I would still like to come.”

"Honestly, we got distracted looking at the old memories. I understand that it doesn't have quite the same nostalgic lens for you, but it might be fun to have a peek behind the old Order curtain." Emmeline looked then at Sirius. "He has some for you and Remus as well, should you want them."

"We will," Sirius nodded. "But give it a bit of time."

"I thought as much," Emmeline said. "But it means we can document the next adventure for posterity and review."

Regulus tried to shake off that heavy, grey feeling that lingered. His own nostalgia felt like a smothering pillow to the face, but Emmeline was a comfort amidst the stress, so he nodded.

"Do you want me to wait for you and side-along?" Emmeline asked. "I need to get these reports
sorted out and ready for Dumbledore as it is, but I can linger after or see you there."

“We can side-along,” Regulus decided. “I have relayed the pertinent aspects of the appointment today, and I have decided to wait until tomorrow to debrief further with Dedalus and Kingsley, in case there is any progress to report.”

"Can I come and find you when I'm done, or do you want to find me when you're ready?" Emmeline asked.

"More than likely, I will just be reading, so you are welcome to find me,” Regulus said. “I don’t plan to start anything time-consuming."

"You could lose entire days reading," Emmeline replied, pointedly.

“When there isn’t a designated, pre-planned interruption,” he specified.

"I'm an interruption?” Emmeline asked.

"I'm going to stop you both," Sirius said, putting both palms up. "You, go finish up so you can flirt somewhere that's not got half our dead relatives watching on, let alone me. You, I'm glad you're not in prison, now you just have to try not to die, and you're set."

“I will try not to die,” Regulus said, dryly. As he turned toward the staircase, he added to Emmeline, “Interrupt at your earliest convenience - I will be in the study.”

The pensieve camera was a strange-looking camera, and Regulus thought it a relief, in such company, to not have to pretend it was not a curious contraption.

“So it captures movement over long periods of time, then plays it back?” Regulus clarified as he turned the object over in his hand, though it was not the first time he had asked, given Emmeline’s past explanations. Even so, he still found it baffling to think muggles could have managed such a thing without magic, no matter how many times Emmeline insisted.

"Give it a whirl," Sturgis suggested, reaching over to show a button on the side. "Just click that, look through the lens like you would a camera, and you can take about ninety minutes before you have to take out the record. Then you can play it using a box and a television."

"My house warming gift," Emmeline replied, lightly. She gestured to a box with glass in the middle, sitting on top of another plastic box. They’d come through the front door into the open plan living and dining room immediately, but it only had a couple of sofas and a coffee table unpacked.

"I haven't decorated since I was twenty-one, and I'm discovering an indecision problem."

“"You are not short on decorative decisions, no,” Regulus commented, thinking that he had not had to make decisions of that nature in a long time, either - and decor had not been a priority when he had moved to France… if it could be called ‘moving to France.’

Clicking the button on the side, Regulus fit his hand into the strap on the top and adjusted his grip as he peered into the lens. Everything narrowed, like being trapped in a box and looking out the end, but he could still see the room clearly. Pointing it first at Emmeline, then to Sturgis, he asked, “How does it remember what it's pointing at?”

"It's just taking a lot of continuous photos, and on the top, it has something that reads and mimics sounds so you can hear them when you play it back." Sturgis tapped on it. "I dunno all that much about the sound, 'cept that it works, but it takes all the photos and plays them like a flipbook
drawing, so fast it looks like it's seamless to humans. Not to birds, though. Birds get bored."

"Since none of us are birds," Emmeline said, "is there anything you'd like to document?"

Regulus was unfamiliar with the ‘flipbook’ example, but he got the general idea of what it must be, so he simply turned the pensieve camera to face Emmeline. "I don't have any particular ideas in mind."

"We could watch some old ones instead," Sturgis suggested. "I've got some funny ones."

"They're only funny because we were there," Emmeline said. "They're not that interesting. We'll make new ones and then watch those."

"What sort of uninteresting things did you record?" Regulus asked.

"We got some test runs on there-" Sturgis started.

"-which just means seeing Benjy and/or Fabian with no hair after a portkey mishap and not terribly interesting to someone who didn't know them-" Emmeline interrupted.

"I've got some of your sit in," Sturgis said.

"Sitting and chanting with a bunch of girls doesn't hold much comedic value either," Emmeline added.

"The time the Knight Bus became a Carol Bus?" he suggested.

"Only if you want to see a tone deaf driver attempt to sing about the feast of Stephen," Emmeline replied. "They're funny because they're nostalgic. You can record other things which we will all find funny later, or if we should all perish horribly, whoever's left can."

Regulus felt a little twinge in his chest at their exchange. His own friends and memories were increasingly tarnished, and he wondered if that mild sting of envy would ever going away, knowing that the people around him could look back on their youthful friendships as a bright spot in a dark war. He used to feel some approximation of that, but their memories carried a deeper shade of misery, the more clear it became that those friendships were probably gone - and the more sharp his adolescence felt. Barty was a husk - had tortured people alongside Bellatrix - and Regulus hated knowing that such was the view everyone else had of him. (Perhaps more, he hated wondering which version had been more true.) He had never been as close to the other boys, with the exception of Evan, but Mulciber was a total loss, Avery was unlikely to feel friendly after Azkaban, and Snape had never been easy to connect with, even less so, now that Regulus had patched things up with Sirius. Perhaps it was the appointment at the Ministry, but their memories felt more miserable than usual.

With a twinge of a different sort, Regulus wondered if perhaps Emmeline suspected that very train of thought - if not consciously, then intuitively. Although it could be the avoidance of some embarrassment, she was not using her huffy, embarrassed tone that she had with the baby pictures plastered at her birthday, so that probably wasn’t the primary concern.

Whatever the reason, he decided he might be glad for it. He was glad, too, for the fact that the pensieve camera plastered to his eye was big enough to shroud his expression somewhat and give him something to distract from his sudden discomfort.

"Any suggestions?" he asked.
“My suggestion is that our cameraman take his leave, and we'll arrange a time that requires recognition to come back,” Emmeline said, firmly. “I appreciate the gift, and when the situation warrants and it's been a less trying day, let alone week, I look forward to exploration, should you be amenable.”

“Is he the cameraman, or am I the cameraman?” Regulus asked.

“You are a man holding a camera,” Emmeline said. She then looked to Sturgis. “You know how to use it. You've also been here all day.”

“Am I being kicked out?” Sturgis asked.

“Absolutely,” Emmeline said. “I moved out to get half an ounce of privacy. Don't third wheel.”

“I hope you caught that crabbiness,” Sturgis said. “That should definitely be recorded.”

Regulus pulled the camera lens away from his eye and found the button that had supposedly made it start working. He pressed that button again, seeing a light go dim, then held out the pensieve camera again. “Until next time.”

“You can come look any time you feel like,” Sturgis gestured towards Emmeline with his head. “She knows where the workshop is.”

“He has a lot of junk,” Emmeline added.

“Brilliant junk,” Sturgis corrected.

Although Regulus suspected that 'brilliant' could be replaced with 'muggle' without significantly changing the intent of the sentence, this time, the thought did not claw at his insides like he might have expected. In that moment, whether the spiral of guilt was starting to numb or whether he was starting to get used to the muggle items proved difficult to say, but whatever the reason, he was glad for the reprieve.

“There is something to be said for brilliant junk,” he said. “I will keep that in mind.”

With that, Sturgis bid his goodbyes, and Emmeline seeing him to the door for a few minutes. She returned with an indulgent look. “He’s just trying to be friendly. The problem with being an introvert around many extroverts. I’m sure you can relate.”

Regulus nodded, wondering if his expression had given away the sting or if she was merely acting on a hunch. “I can relate, yes. I interpreted with friendly intent.

"No one's going to be upset if you say no," Emmeline said. "It's a reasonable answer."

“I was not bothered by the invitation,” Regulus said, shaking his head, “but I will decide what to do with it later.”

"It wasn't the right time," Emmeline said, gently. "Today had to be difficult."

“To say the least.” Picking a spot on the sofa, he sat down and glanced back up in a silent invitation as he added, “Living it was awful, and I can now confirm that recounting to Aurors and a Wizengamot Death Eater is also awful, as expected.”

"No one likes to deal with ghosts in public," Emmeline nodded. "Let alone be judged against the person you were as a child. I'm only sorry it's necessary. I'm not interested in a long-distance
“Nor am I,” Regulus agreed, wryly. “Remote island getaways may sound fine in theory, but I rather like where I am right now and would prefer to avoid any drastic relocations.”

"I wouldn't be against a holiday when we've double- and triple-checked that he's truly dead and gone this time," Emmeline said, with a shrug. "Besides, remote islands are quite overrated if you're not a big fan of nature. I'm more of a cubby hole person. Perhaps I should've been in Hufflepuff."

His mouth flicked up a little at the corner. “Cubby holes can be nice for reading,” he granted. “Assuming they are sufficiently lit. A Ravenclaw-shaped nook.”

"I'm going to make this a day room," Emmeline said, gesturing to the large hexagonal windows at the front. "I can hear Moody now - 'those are a hazard, what if someone throws something in' - but the late light of day would feel nice there. I know it's not quite as grand as you're used to, but I think it suits me."

Regulus shook his head. “‘Used to’ is relative, I suppose. I spent as many years in a small space as a large one, so I don't mind it, per se. More a matter of preference for the history and contents.”

"There is no history here yet," Emmeline said, looking around. "I suppose I'll have to work on giving it some character, though I think I'll stay away from the dramatic lighting and gothic overtones. It doesn't suit me as well."

“What manner of decor are you planning to use?”

"I don't know. Wall-papering seems fiddley. What if you overlap?” Emmeline shrugged. "I was built for uncovering the secrets of magic, not figuring out what colour goes best with what. I'd ask Dedalus, but everything would end up with bright and welcoming. I don't always want to seem welcoming. Sometimes, you want people to go away quickly - present company excluded."

Wry amusement tugged t his mouth. “I can wholeheartedly relate to that sentiment - from the limited gift for colour coordination theory to the limited social preferences.”

"You didn't receive the decorating gene?” Emmeline asked. "But the house is such a...cohesive theme. Is none of it you?”

“Generally speaking, the decor has been consistent, with the exception of removing the elf heads that were on the staircase,” Regulus admitted. “I have not put much effort into adding more since returning.”

"You've had other concerns," Emmeline pointed out. "I have other concerns, largely that I'll end up having to box everything up again in a month or two."

“I am still willing to help with additional wards and security charms, should you want them,” he said with a nod. “Hopefully another move can be avoided for a while.”

"I will want them," Emmeline said, looking around. "But after some research for the most appropriate ones. Particularly if we decide to do something publicly, which will alter danger in a more civilian way and would need to be accounted for."

“There are no shortage of offenses, as it is. I'm sure we can manage a variety of protections.”

"I don't think of them as offenses, but if that's what floats your broom, you feel free." Emmeline sat back on the sofa, sinking in with a content noise. "So would you prefer to be distracted, or do you
want to talk about what happened today?"

Pensively, Regulus pressed his lips together in thought. On the one hand, he would rather spare her the details - and on the other, he did not particularly want to risk her hearing about them elsewhere. Already, he felt loaded with guilt, though perhaps the truth could not come as too much of a surprise, given that she had scarcely batted an eye at him being a Death Eater, even at the start.

“If it is something for which you desire greater detail, I am willing to expand while I already feel miserable, but if not, a distraction is ideal,” he decided.

"I don't want my curiosity to be a source of more misery." Emmeline said, firmly. "I can keep it in check if you'd like to come and tell me that a skylight in my dining room is irresponsible and should not be attempted."

With a light, flicking smile, Regulus shifted forward on the sofa. “Let’s go look at this potential skylight, then.”

The drawing room fireplace gave of a soft, warm glow, punctuated by its familiar crackle. Held in front of Regulus was a book - fiction, this time, to better unwind - but even as the night hours weighed on his eyelids, he did not feel quite ready to leave the fire. The house was a soft sort of quiet, tugging at his chest, but he could not pinpoint which part of this exhaustingly long week was the culprit.

Behind him, he heard a soft creak. Emmeline was now settled elsewhere - an absence he felt keenly - but Kreacher was always about, and it was not quite midnight, meaning his brother was unlikely to be asleep yet. Sirius was slowly starting to recover from the Halloween funk, but they had not quite settled into their normal routine yet. Perhaps some of that was Regulus’s fault, as well, he privately admitted, but everyone in the house had seemed to be in a foul mood, so it was not just him, at least.

Twisting around to check the doorway, Regulus was opening his mouth to speak when-

"Crucio!"

All at once, Regulus felt his nerves tearing apart, flooding every centimeter of his frame with white-hot pain. For a harrowing moment, he could not tell if he was screaming aloud or simply in his head, but he clamped his jaw tight and tensed every muscle into a curl against the back of his chair, forehead digging into the wooden trim. Jamming his forearm up between his mouth and the chair like a muzzle, he could already feel it trying to jerk away again of its own accord, but just as he felt another scream start to bubble to the surface, the curse lifted.

(For a moment, Regulus thought he might have screamed anyway, but fuzzy though he felt, he was pretty certain it was his mother’s portrait downstairs, not himself…)

“‘You must decline’?”

His cousin’s tone was as irate as it was mocking, and he knew he should get into a defensible position immediately, but his hand was a little shaky, even as he fumbled for his wand. She must not have been very worried about the move because she continued:

“You did not deserve this opportunity, yet I handed it to you on a silver platter. Any other traitor would be dead by now.” She raised her wand again, but Regulus met the red beam with a silent, sweeping Protego as he stumbled backwards out of his chair.
It was then that he noticed a page crumpled in his hand - from the book he had been flipping through, no doubt, but he had no time to think about it before she was slinging another spell at him. Again, Regulus lifted a shield charm as he darted a little clumsily to the side, but he couldn’t quite get his legs to steady.

“No fight in you this time?” she said harshly as he cast another shield, deflecting a gold bolt of a spell this time.

“Bella-”

“I don’t want to hear it!” she cut off. “You were a pathetic excuse for a Death Eater then, and you are a pathetic excuse for a traitor now. I stuck my neck out-”

There was a startled noise from her throat, as a sudden mass of black pushed her forward. At some point, Sirius must have changed into his animagus form and charged from behind, given that he currently had his teeth piercing Bellatrix’s shoulder and pulling hard against it.

“GET - OFF OF ME!” she shrieked, grabbing at the scruff of the huge dog’s neck, her wand sticking out from the fur and fingers haphazardly, but with her other hand, she reached into her robes and pull something out. Regulus saw the glint as it caught the light of the fireplace, and panic immediately rose in his throat.

“Accio knife!” Regulus yelled a little too loud with a sweep of his wand as Bellatrix was jamming the blade into the thick fur of the dog’s back leg.

Regulus couldn’t tell if it had connected - or how severely - but his chest was thundering wildly as he grasped at the flying handle with his off hand. Bellatrix looked at him with fury in her eyes and seemed to be trying to untangle herself from the massive dog - probably to shoot a better aim spell in his direction - but all it seemed to be doing was smearing blood.

Finally, the dog moved off of her with a yelp, clawing at the floor of the drawing room for a frantic moment then lunging behind one of the nearby chairs. There was blood dripped along the carpet, but it wasn’t easy to tell whose it was. There was a quick pop noise that tended to happen when Sirius shifted back.

"When someone gives you a distraction, use it!" Sirius called, gruffly.

“If you both want to play, I suppose I can oblige!” Bellatrix was calling out as she sent a blasting curse squarely at Regulus, who barely dropped to the floor in time for it to instead crash into the wall behind him.

Another curse sliced through the sofa he crawled behind, catching his arm, but he was unable to even feel embarrassed by the scramble with all the adrenaline pumping in his ears. He dared a look to the doorway, where Kreacher was staring in horror, and a fresh wave of panic rolled over him. If Bellatrix turned to see him - if she wanted to land just any target-

Lunging again, this time behind the same chair as Sirius, he saw that the knife must have got him, after all. Guilt was already rolling in his stomach, but he didn't respond to his brother's remark, instead grabbing Sirius by the shirt, sticking his head out from behind the chair, and making eye contact with the house-elf as he shouted: “Kreacher!”

Without further instruction, Kreacher apparated across the drawing room to where they were huddled, grabbed Regulus's arm, and with a telltale crack, the three disappeared at once.

The room was dark and the floor was hard, where they landed, but Regulus did not pause to look
around as he shifted, wincing at the weight on his arm. He wanted to curl up, to get the ghost of the Crucius off of his skin and his nerves and his bones. Sirius was bleeding, so he tried to focus on that. “Your leg.”

"It's fine," Sirius gritted out through his teeth, trying to reposition himself on the floor. He pulled the clothes aside to get a better look at it, then he winced as his hands came away stained red. He pressed his hand behind his knee. "It'll hurt like hell when this adrenaline wears off, but it's too slow... and I haven't puked up... so it's probably not lethal. Why does it smell like Mum's closet in here?"

Regulus glanced around, heart still hammering as it dawned on him where they were.

“Great Aunt Lycoris... Kreacher and I came here, after the cave - with the inferi,” he said - an automatic association on Kreacher's part, perhaps - before pushing past the thought.

“Alright,” Sirius said. He glanced around the room, then tried to stand back up. He made a strangled noise, then sat down again.

“Don't stand on it,” Regulus said, holding his hand by his brother's shoulder to block further attempts. Twisting slightly to see Kreacher, he tried to focus thrumming thoughts long enough to deal with the situation at hand. Bind it... there were unlikely to be any healing potions after so many years away, but even a stopper ought to help... “Kreacher, fetch a clean cloth.”

Sirius shrugged in apparent acceptance. “Is the floo still connected?”

Back to Sirius again: “I am not aware of it being specifically disconnected, so I can try. Were you thinking to contact the Order?” Regulus asked. A patronus would be easiest, but Regulus was having difficulty concentrating on a happy memory, so he imagined Sirius must be too.

Sirius shook his head. “Andromeda. Tonks can send out an alert, and Andromeda'll have the good painkiller potions and the next best wards.”

With a nod, Regulus went over to the fireplace, peeking into the small black jar on the mantle. He was halfway surprised to find that there was still floor powder in the jar when no one had lived in this house since he was four years old. In that moment, he found himself wondering for the first time if floo powder could deteriorate - he had never kept a stagnant supply for that period of time before - but he suspected it was probably fine...

When the fire call was set and connected to Andromeda's house, he steeled himself for the late night greeting and hoped that she would hear…

“Andromeda?” he said into the fire, eyeing his view of her darkened front room.

"Close," and if it didn't immediately sound like Tonks, the sound of a screeching chair and bump would have given it away. The lights went on immediately after, bringing her into view. "She's an old lady. She's in bed by midnight."

"We're having a bit of a situation," Regulus started, grimly, trying to steady his tone as his cousin’s face and slinging wand flashed angrily in his mind. “Bellatrix let herself into the house and was not in a particularly friendly mood - most notably, she landed a knife in Sirius's leg. If you could direct your mother toward our late Aunt Lycoris's house and pass the word along to the appropriate parties, we would be much obliged.”

Tonks swore loudly.
"Nymphadora! Andromeda's voice rang with exasperation. She must not have been sleeping too heavily. "If you're going to be loud and belligerent, can you please do it elsewhere?"

"I have a good reason, I swear," Tonks said. "I got to go sound the alarm. Bellatrix Lestrange just attacked Grimmauld Place, and we've got injuries."

"Where is-"

"At your Aunt Licorice's house," Tonks said. "Stab wound. Dunno what else-"

"Yes," Andromeda finally came into view in her dressing coat. "Go, but be very careful."

"There aren't any potions here I would trust, so if you could bring the necessities, I'm going to disconnect for the moment," Regulus piped back in, and when Andromeda confirmed, he stepped back from the fireplace. Neither Sirius nor Kreacher looked particularly pleased, but the latter was back with the clean cloths, so that was something.

Grumpily, Sirius took one of the cloths and placed it on himself with a hiss. "Do you want to sit down or something? You look worse than I do, and I don't even know Bellatrix doesn't curse her silverware."

"I'm fine," Regulus was muttering as he took a seat next to Sirius with a deepening frown. After just a beat, he shook his head. "Fine is not the word - but I wasn't stabbed with a knife, much less a questionable one, so there is that..." he added, rubbing a hand over his face and trying to relax that underlying rattle in his head.

"Are you just taking up screaming for fun as a hobby in your later years then?" Sirius asked, without looking up. "Mum seemed to like it."

"I'm trying not to think about that right now," Regulus said into his hand.

"Suit yourself, but don't fret about me," Sirius said, shifting uncomfortably. "I've gotten worse from Remus having a bad time of the month, and if you're willing to sit in a decade of a grime, you're definitely in a worse state."

Regulus took in another deep breath, then let it out slowly. The stillness and silence gave way to his own thoughts, but Regulus did not particularly like those thoughts, at the moment.

There was a sudden whoosh of the floo, then Andromeda stepped out. She'd obviously put on a coat over her house coat but looked around the place with a critical eye. "I don't know what it says that I remember where this place is," Andromeda muttered as she cast to brighten the room more. "Alright, let me see if I need qualified reinforcements."

She took what looked like a towel down and placed it on the floor, kneeling on it. "You're not as pale as I feared, but blood replenishing regardless because it's still more than I'd like. This'll sting for a moment, then it'll go numb, but let me splint and wrap it before you try getting up. You," she pointed to Regulus, "Stay put, I'm not convinced you're not hiding something."

Regulus pressed his lips to a flat line but nodded in acknowledgement, sitting still in place as she set to work on Sirius's leg.

"Does anyone want to explain what happened?" Andromeda added, placing salve to rag and rag to wound.

"Avery was at his 'agreement' hearing," Sirius said, wincing. "I don't think Bellatrix liked what he
had to say."

Silently, Regulus thought that Bellatrix was probably angry with him for more than just the hearing. (‘You must decline’ - she had certainly received the owl.) Regulus had yet to tell anyone but Dedalus about the meeting, though Halloween had come and gone - his brother’s birthday had come and gone - and he doubted Sirius was going to become less irritated, should more time pass. Even so, Andromeda was probably going to agree that it had been stupid to go, and he did not particularly want to be outnumbered, either, so he watched the floor.

"I suppose Bellatrix wanted to lay claim to the house sooner or later. Chin up," Andromeda glanced at him briefly, as she was applying the dressing. "You always seem to look as if you think I'm about to shout at you. I'm not that scary, am I?"

Regulus shook his head. “It’s not you. Rather, we seem to meet on days that are abnormally miserable,” he said, sincerely, though it was probably his silence-born guilt that she was picking up on, more than anything. Stiffly, he added, “I don’t intend to give her the house, but that can wait."

"Alright, no putting the full weight on that. Even if you can’t feel it, the damage remains," Andromeda said, leaning back and using the side of the chair to stand. "I very much doubt she left you unscarred. You're not slowly fading away, are you?"

“Nothing permanent.” His eldest cousin’s curdling Cruciatu rang in his head again, tensing his frame against the memory, but the explanation got stuck in his throat. Instead, he shifted his focus to his arm, which had caught a slicing hex and since reddened the back of his sleeve.

"Anything I can do anything about?" Andromeda clarified. "I'm afraid I can do nothing about metaphorical stabbings in the back."

“This one isn’t a stab, but it isn’t metaphorical either,” he said, lifting his arm to show her.

"A little murtlap ought to set that to rights," Andromeda said, reaching back into her bag for a small mason jar. "I went through a lot of jars of the stuff while Nymphadora was growing up, so I always have it on hand."

Regulus nodded and shifted to better reach the cut. He only let a few beats of silence pass, and though he suspected that he knew the answer, he nonetheless asked, “Did she ever attack you, personally, before she was captured?”

"Bellatrix?” Andromeda almost sounded amused, if a little darkly so. "Of course, although I can't be sure how much of that was related to her delving into the Death Eaters and how much of it was merely familial rage. Lean on the arm! Do you need a crutch, or can you be sensible?"

"Rarely,” Sirius replied, the eyeroll evident in his tone. She handed him a potion, which he downed with a wince. "If ever."

Andromeda huffed. "Do you see, with Bellatrix, part of the problem is that she does not play by the societal rule of ignoring the 'traitorous', if we must call it that. You will find that most will deny all relation to a disowned person, and Bellatrix, much to my eternal annoyance, still calls me her younger sister, and to date, has never been lethal towards me personally. She talks a big game of it, has threatened many times, and had even had the opportunity, but always goes for pain over permanence. Much worse, she is lethal towards my daughter and my husband. Arguably much worse than a Killing Curse."

“It is,” Regulus agreed firmly, thinking it fortunate that Bellatrix was unlikely to know Emmeline
in connection to himself, if only for that point. “She probably wants to kill me for a different set of reasons, but she does take her time with it.”

"What she wants and whether she will do so are two different things," Andromeda replied, pinching the top of her nose for a brief moment. "She's a headache, but do correct me if I'm wrong, we still have a pureblood privilege, so to speak, in that there are so few left who have not put together that a lack of genetic diversity leads to mental and physical problems down the line that it is quite rare for a Death Eater to outright kill one."

"They've done the fate worse than death," Sirius said. "Frank and Alice."

"Yes, a relentless quest for answers they did not have." Andromeda sighed. "But aside from that - even you, have you ever seen the Killing Curse come from her?"

"Someone did in the Department of Mysteries," Sirius argued.

"But you don't know who, and many Death Eaters were present," Andromeda said.

"Lucius did pop up right after," Sirius replied. "So what?"

"I say it’s not in excuse, there is no excusing such behaviour, but simply to point out she is attempting to build a world enforcing rules she cannot keep to herself," Andromeda replied. "It is the height of hypocrisy, but does give some strategic advantage."

“As far as Unforgivables go, she certainly prefers the Cruciatorus, but I've seen her cast the Killing Curse,” Regulus responded, when Andromeda had finished her thought. “Not directed towards myself or another pureblood, but the number of pureblood adversaries was admittedly limited at the time. Perhaps blood still matters to her on some deeper level, or perhaps it does not, but such things are meaningless to the Dark Lord, whatever he might claim, and that is no small factor. I think I have offended her quite thoroughly, beyond the ongoing familial split…” He shook his head. “But of course, any possible advantage is worth considering."

"That's why the curiosity struck me," Andromeda said. "She doesn't have a problem using it otherwise. However, it could simply be that she enjoys the sadistic aspects. I don't invite her over, so since I was nineteen, it has been a limited experience."

“What a surprise,” Regulus remarked, applying some of the murtlap to his clean off arm.

"I assume you're not staying here," Andromeda said. "I doubt any property can be considered safe, if she employs some critical thinking."

“I suspect not.” However well it might have worked when first he had left home, there had been little reason for them to thoroughly check the properties right away. This time, Bellatrix was likely to be more motivated about determining where they went. He flicked his eyes over to Sirius, wondering if he had a better idea about the state of the alternative safe houses.

"We've got a back up," Sirius said, though he didn't sound fully sure. "But we need a regroup quickly. Someone will send word when they're ready, and given that school's in session, it'll probably be the Hog's Head."

"Do not drink with that," Andromeda warned.

"I know, it's not my first stabbing," Sirius groaned.

Regulus did not particularly wish to see people at the moment - just the thought was exhausting -
but he supposed a regroup was important, all things considered, so he nodded.

"Then Nymphadora can catch you both up when it's done," Andromeda said sweetly. "You're both coming back with me, getting fluid in you, and sleeping for a while. Aunt Lycoris looks better than both of you, and she has been dead for thirty years."

“That's not a very polite thing to say,” Regulus responded, if with little conviction.

"On occasion, it is better not to be polite and to be honest instead," Andromeda replied plainly. "You're not going to kill each other if you have to share the room, are you?"

"What am I going to do, limp him to death?" Sirius asked.

"Oh, don't moan, you’re a grown man" Andromeda replied, before looking towards the house-elf. "I rather think he won't like it, and though I'll extend the same courtesy, he may be safer with his Hogwarts brethren."

Regulus did not much like the idea of sending Kreacher off to Hogwarts, even if there was an element of distance, protection, and obscurity to roaming with the elves. His manner would stand out immediately - and if he caught wind of Draco's presence… Of course, Kreacher was bound to dislike any time spent at Andromeda's, too, but-

“She would separate Kreacher from Master Regulus… send Kreacher away…” the elf was muttering sourly as he hovered the used cloth into a metal pail, not looking very impressed with the suggestion (or perhaps with Andromeda, though it was difficult to determine for certain).

“I will plan to keep Kreacher with me, for the moment, but will take the suggestion into consideration,” Regulus decided, looking back to Andromeda.

“As you wish,” Andromeda replied. “As long as he’s comfortable. Sirius?”

“He hasn’t tried to kill me yet,” Sirius said, leaning against the chair. “No guarantees.”

Regulus doubted there was a feasible option in which Kreacher would be comfortable, but he opted not to press the point with Andromeda. Given the circumstances, they were all bound to be uncomfortable, for the moment.

Andromeda's spare room was too small for two people. The entire house was entirely too small for three people, if you asked Sirius, because he could whack his head against the beams if he wasn't careful, but the sloped ceiling and one small window did nothing for the cramped feeling. The double bed had been pushed right up against the far wall, with the cot bed pulled out and squashed next to it. There was only a shin’s width to shimmy over to the double bed, but Sirius had insisted his brother take it. He knew his own sleeping habits well enough to know he had a tendency to wander, and putting him nearest the door meant no trying to climb over him with a busted leg.

Tonks had scarpered by the time they got there, so Sirius resigned himself to being stuck till the morning. He could have headed out anyway, but he was wary of splinching his leg, and doubtless, Remus would be along in the morning. Losing headquarters was a blow, but he couldn’t deny being a little pleased not to currently be stuck in Grimmauld Place. He'd have to write to Harry, or get someone to pass along the message. He pulled his boots off the moment Andromeda deemed the room overnight-worthy, and however much he wanted to be in the thick of it, he couldn't deny how nice the cushions felt.

Kreacher was mumbling in the corner but seemed to be settling, and Regulus was perched in the
bed, back flush against the wall. He might have looked ready to crash, if not for the concentrated stare he had been giving the blanket pattern for the last few minutes, but this time, he broke his own silence.

“I'm sorry you got mixed in all of that,” Regulus began with a frown. “I'm the one she was angry with.”

Sirius looked at him blankly. No matter how old he got, Regulus always tried to apologise for everyone else’s behaviour. Strangely enough, he was usually recalcitrant when he had actually done something wrong and would rationalise it all day long, but everything that wasn't his fault, he'd trip over himself trying to take responsibility.

"For someone so damn smart, you can so thick," Sirius said, when he at last found his voice in the face of staggering disbelief at that of all things. "I did not get ‘mixed up’ in anything. That sounds like I stumbled into a backstreet brawl and decided to go in fists flying. I don't give two shits who she's angry with; she's the one who came in and attacked my brother, of course I'm going to jump in. Do not try and take responsibility for her.”

“I don't mean that it wasn't her fault - attacking us in our house in the middle of the night is definitively her fault,” Regulus clarified, though he still looked troubled about it. “It's just that aggravating her puts you in danger too, and you don't even like it there. I have been exceptionally aggravating.”

"It doesn't matter how aggravating you were being," Sirius scoffed. If anything was aggravating, it was the apologising. Or the 'our house' remark, but he'd come back to that when he had the strength to have that argument again. "If she's under the mistaken impression she can waltz in and you'll turn into a blubbering mess, I'm happy for you to set her straight. The more aggravating, the better. If she's angry, you're doing something right. Don't get pissy with me for intervening. I'm allowed to have your back.”

“It's not that either,” Regulus began, looking for a moment like he was going to retreat under the covers in a huff, but instead, he had the huff above the covers and continued. “You are making this very difficult. You told me that you want me to tell you things, and I am trying to apologise for not doing so in a timely manner, so can you just let me so that we can move on and be done with this day?”

Something akin to warning bells rang out. "What are you trying to tell me?"

Regulus frowned, quieting again for a beat before answering. “I suspect she is angry about more than just secondhand information from Avery because... she contacted me recently - offering terms for them to leave me alone, I suppose is a way to think of it. I have since sent a letter to decline, and I do not think it is what she wanted to hear.”

Terms? What the hell did that mean? "Define recently."

“Last week,” Regulus answered, though it was closer to a mumble.

Sirius clenched his jaw and tried not to think about the fact that he’d been mucking about for the last week when they had a real crisis to deal with. Or the fact that once again - again - he's the last to know. Did that mean Regulus not only had the gall to be in contact with Bellatrix - knowing what she’s capable of and knowing what she was likely to do - but he had more than a vague notion of where she was and said nothing? Did he not realise this wasn’t some idiotic game of hide and seek he was playing with his oldest cousin, but rather, a woman responsible for the misery of others in such a profound way that leaving her running around was gross sentimentalism at best
and irresponsible at worst? It was at times like this that Sirius really wanted to thump him and see if his brain would come back into function with a good shake.

"Come over here," Sirius said.

Regulus eyed him. "Why?"

"Because I want to smack some sense into you, and I'm going to wreck the bandage if I have to climb over there," Sirius grumbled. Had they not had this exact discussion recently, as well? No wonder he was feeling guilty. He had been obnoxious about telling him the most inconsequential of things but *Bellatrix* he clams up on?

“I suspected as much. I will stay over here,” Regulus said, sinking down just slightly. “I was going to say something, but you were dealing with… a lot, as it was, and then I did not want to spoil your birthday yesterday… but today felt miserable enough that I did not want to make you angry, too, so I thought I might say it tomorrow… As things are, tomorrow will probably also feel miserable, so…” He shook his head.

There was always something, did Regulus not understand that? You had to grab every moment, be upfront, and let the other shoe drop when it needed to. Otherwise, someone having your back wouldn't know when your back needs guarding. Especially if he was going to do things as stupid as talk to *her* Sirius was trying to protect him, did Regulus not understand that? Or was he again just assuming because Sirius had been wrapped up in his own grief, everything of his would have to wait? Even now, did he not understand what his value was? Worse, did he imagine Sirius was going to scream bloody murder at him for being contacted? He might over him talking back.

"I'm not angry," Sirius argued. "My birthday got wrecked twenty years ago, through no fault of yours. I just want you to stop treating yourself like you're a burden I'm stuck with so you don't want to trouble me. Last year had mitigating circumstances. I'm not going to lose it with you every time."

"I kept thinking about saying something, but…” He shook his head. “But I did not… so I apologise. It was terrible timing - absolutely abysmal."

"It was purposeful timing," Sirius said. He could feel the fuzziness of sleep beginning its pull, despite the fresh wave of irritation. Of course Bellatrix would know he'd be distracted now. He felt stupid for not realising it before.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," Sirius said, bluntly. It wasn't going to be a fun thing to raise to the Order, so despite the feeling of uselessness that was accompanying sleeping while shit was going down, he felt a little grateful he wouldn't have to deal with it tonight. "Go to sleep."

Regulus pressed his lips to a thin line, nodding silently as he slid did onto his back.

That was the kicked dog look, wasn't it? Why was it never easy? "I'm not being moody with you," Sirius added, shifting to try and find a position that was comfortable with a dead leg that wouldn't leave him aching in the morning. He was a little moody about it, but more so of the lack of common sense and that he’d promised to talk to him about this stuff. "It was reckless and irresponsible and probably exactly what I'd do, but it's been a shit day and maybe cooler heads will help after twenty winks, if not forty."

“She knows who killed our father,” Regulus said suddenly, looking up at the ceiling. “Or at least she claims to.”
Sirius stilled again. "Aurors have a shortlist. Ask one of them." That wasn't the same as a definitive answer, but Sirius could see the manipulation attempt a mile away. He suspected then, with a drop of fear that he severely disliked, that Regulus had at least considered it. She always knew just where to dig the knife in. "No more secret correspondence."

“I know. I'm not planning on it.” Regulus said with a heavy exhale. “It just makes me angry to think that she could know and prefer to dangle that when he was her family too…”

He had to get his thick head around the fact that she just didn't care, if she ever had, or he was going to get himself killed. “If she ever had any family loyalty, it's been dead for years.”

Regulus shook his head. “I know she has other priorities, but I don’t understand how she could not be at least... offended by it. If not upset, then offended.” Crinkling his expression slightly, he added, “Of course, she might’ve been offended and dealt with the situation already, and she merely intended to say as much… or she might not know at all - might not care at all - might assume I wouldn’t do anything about it, regardless, or at least nothing more than is done to any other Death Eater at present… I’ve turned over any number of possibilities, and it’s aggravating, whatever the reason.”

“She doesn't have other priorities; you're either useful to her or you're not,” Sirius couldn't keep the snappish tone from his voice now. This hanging on had gone on too long. “She didn't lose anything she could use when he died. Worse, he was clearly more neutral than not if he didn't want to be involved, and she has no patience for neutrality, does she? Blood means little when you consider what she did to Frank and Alice not two years later for no reason beyond her own idiot belief that Voldemort couldn't be defeated.”

“That belief is another issue entirely,” Regulus said, heavily. “But I preferred to think that she used to care about some aspect of it all - even partially - yet even if she did, I suppose it does not change much about the present.”

"But it's not!" With a frustrated noise, Sirius swung his legs back around so he was sitting facing the other bed. He needed to convey this and actually be heard, not just rationalised out. "Listen to me, will you? She freely gave her loyalty to him for what, exactly - the prestige that comes with being a favourite lackey? The chance to kill muggles and muggleborns, to torture at will and get a pat on the back for it? I don't know what's wrong with her, but I do know this: even then, the only time she took notice of you was when you stopped acting like Dad and decided you wanted to hop onto her path, instead of his."

For a beat, Regulus held his frown before responding. “I realise that. Trust me, I noticed the point that she started paying attention. It was the ‘cannot be defeated’ part that I expect she is seeing from a markedly different perspective than you are.”

"I was talking about what happened with Harry," Sirius said. He was a little surprised there was no fight on that. Bellatrix was still technically 'family' for Regulus, and he expected some claptrap about how everyone is capable of change, but maybe he wasn’t in as bad a shape as Sirius had feared then.

For a moment, Regulus just looked at him, then shifted to sit up a little straighter. “Would you rather know something and hold yourself to a standard of discretion, or would you prefer to avoid secrets altogether? I know they can be an uncomfortable subject.”

If he shook his brother upside down, would a hundred more secrets just fall out of his pocket? At this point, he would rather know than get blindsided again. He was sick to death of secrets and the way they tended to screw up his life. "Secrets are not an uncomfortable subject," Sirius replied, as
firmly as he could. "The belief that I'm incapable of keeping them is."

“My question still stands,” Regulus said, though his expression was more searching than impatient. “I trust you, but it’s very important, so I would like to clarify that you are committed to keeping it secret, even if it’s from most members of the Order.”

That meant Vance knew, didn't it? He couldn't not know now, even if he wanted to say later or leave it to when he could think more. “I'm prepared for that.”

Regulus nodded slightly. “Then I will take this opportunity to specify that, although I know you were referring to the Dark Lord’s fall, I have reason to think her conviction about his immortality might be based in more than just fanaticism,” he began carefully. “I cannot confirm what she does or does not know, but… I know for a fact that he is using dark magic to overcome death, which is what allowed for his recent resurrection.”

Sirius knew from Harry’s accounts that he had floated about, taking possession of others in a state that wasn't life but wasn't a ghost either. It was no big surprise that he’d used the dark arts in a way he didn’t understand and ended up with some sort of cursed, half-life for his trouble. “As in the part of him that possessed people?”

“In a sense,” Regulus said. “He has… split his soul and anchored the fragments. I believe the diary that possessed Ginny Weasley was one of them, but they don’t all seem to use possession.” With a steadying exhale, he continued, “I discovered what he was doing when he tried to sacrifice Kreacher in order to hide one. I was told nothing, so I do not know how upfront he has been with other Death Eaters… but I researched until something made sense, and I am confident that it was the correct conclusion.”

Soul-splitting. Just when he thought he could get his head around the monstrosity of Voldemort, he uncovered something else. It did shed some light on Regulus's insane protectiveness for that elf, if nothing else. Only Regulus could be convinced of the inherent evil of Death Eaters by someone deciding to off Kreacher. "So what you're saying is Voldemort decided to conceal his attempts at mortality by making a scavenger hunt for himself, but you stumbled on a clue?"

"Essentially," Regulus responded. "One of them was hidden in the cave - that is what I took when I left... I found no indication that more could be created, so when I destroyed it, I thought it was the only one. Suffice to say his return was a very unpleasant indication that there were more to deal with."

“That’s was what that was?” It was a ballsy move, if nothing else, but also incredibly risky. He wasn’t sure whether to feel angry all over again that Regulus had not just come to him if he knew about the danger or impressed that he managed it at all. It gave, if little else, some sense to the reasons he’d left finally. If someone had read him, they’d have known what he did. It explained the inferi. It explained why Voldemort would just not stay down. He was using anchors to this plane of existence.

Again, Regulus nodded. "Fortunately, I don't think he has noticed. Tampering with his plans for immortality seems like the sort of thing he is likely to be particularly angry about... I was nervous that he might put it together, given the timing of my departure and return, but perhaps he just has confidence in his hiding places."

"Or he just figured no one else is that crazy about a house-elf," Sirius suggested. Even Sirius himself thought the attachment was bloody peculiar, but useful, he supposed.

“It’s not a matter of being ‘crazy’ - I wasn’t going to let Kreacher die, especially not for something
I volunteered him for...But I have thought from the start that he failed to consider house-elf magic,” Regulus commented with a little nod, “so I suspect he misestimated other elements, as well.”

“If he thinks other magical people are beneath him, can’t be surprised he thinks even less of magical creatures.” Something in Sirius’s mind clicked into place. Anchoring - as in parts of himself - had been encountered before. His heart suddenly kicked up with adrenaline. “Is that what you asked Harry to be on the lookout for, since he found that diary?”

Regulus nodded slightly. “Nothing dangerous - just looking out for any information related to the founders, be it books, portraits, ghosts, things of that nature,” he specified. “The first one I stole was contained within Salazar Slytherin’s locket. Perhaps it was only due to the Slytherin connection, but Emmeline and I are hypothesizing seven of them, so there are a few left unaccounted for, at present.”

“Because if there's more than three, then seven is the next powerful number.” Not that he was going to fault swotty logic, even if a (perhaps) unfair part of him was annoyed Emmeline had known first. Their relationship was newer, but he thought grimly that it had none of the trappings that he and his brother had from their past. He tried not to feel a sense of betrayal, regardless; she was his friend first, but it just reminded him that he hadn’t pushed. He’d waited for Regulus to be ready, even if he’d wanted him to be ready months ago. Maybe it was only after these attack experiences they could speak more openly, which likely left plenty of opportunity for it, the way things were going.

“Precisely. Three have been destroyed so far - the locket, the diary, and a Gaunt family ring - but I don’t quite feel settled into the assumption that it is all of them. Technically, his present existence increases the total number to four: “We are following any lead we can think of, but it is slow-going, without any means of certainty. Worth the effort, but slow.”

“Does his existence count?” Sirius pondered aloud. If Bellatrix did know this, no wonder she was being so damn cocky. It’s not a needle in a haystack, it’s a needle in the country the haystack is in. “Or...when he was resurrected, did he sacrifice an existing one that wasn’t accounted for, which would bring it to either four or a previous five.”

“Unfortunately, that is one of the things I am not certain about,” Regulus admitted. “I have found no more than a page dedicated to this particular piece of magic, between only two texts... one of which only mentioned it in order to say that it was not going to talk about it. The majority of our conclusions are guesswork based on what we can logically deduce, but there is little to confirm it.” His tone sounded a little flat, at that, but he continued, “Nonetheless, my guess is that his... existence does count as part of the number he is considering, to make the total at seven, but it's hard to say how he is thinking about it. For that matter, there's no way to be certain if he managed to finish before he was first defeated - but I suppose he has had time to do so now, if not then.”

"But he could theoretically also replace them if some are destroyed," Sirius said, as he tried to will himself to be more awake for this. This was magic deconstruction; he was good at it. Less so when dulled by potions and an itch from a wound, but good nonetheless. "Wait, so, you are the biggest swot this side of Hogwarts. If you're working with limited information, where did he get his? That diary was a teenager, which means it can't have been when he buggered off round Europe. He has to have had another source.”

“One of the texts explained the general process of how to make one, and I found it in the Lestrange library. If he was friends with Alcander Lestrange, it's possible that he got his information from the same place,” Regulus mused. “And I did wonder about replacing them, but it destabilises the soul, so the risk of splitting it further is probably very high. That does not mean he would not do so, but I
don't think he realises there are any beyond the diary that require replacing.”

A terrible thought struck him. Didn't Harry have a letter for Regulus that Sirius had just left sitting in the house? It was unlikely Bellatrix in a rage would wander about reading correspondance, but it'd been too hectic to deal with it for the last day or two. "We might have a problem then," Sirius said. "Because Harry wrote to you, and I left it sitting in the downstairs dining room."

Regulus shook his head slightly. “I picked it up last night when we were done talking. It ought to be tucked away in my room, so it is less likely to be accidentally found unless she is very specifically looking through my things.” He tipped his head slightly. “Which remains a potential problem, but less visible, nonetheless.”

“She could just burn it down in a fit of rage,” Sirius suggested, trying to keep the note of hopefulness out of his voice.

With a flat expression, Regulus responded, “That is not helping.”

"Do you want help or were just notifying me?" Sirius asked, because it seemed a hell of a lot more like the second one. Of course Sirius wanted to help, but was this just him saying what he was doing, or was it some veiled way of asking to help that didn't make it seem like he actually wanted it and thus wouldn't be put out if he didn't offer? Sirius desperately wanted Tonks to return, or Remus to show up, not just because he was desperate for news but because interactions with Slytherins were no easier when you actually cared about them and couldn't just hex them for being complicated twats.

“At this point, it is primarily combing through texts until we find something to hunt down and investigate more closely… Do you actually want to do that?” Regulus asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"No," Sirius admitted. He didn't particularly. It was just an uncomfortably familiar feeling that his brother had gotten involved in something that was important to Sirius himself, and seemed to be doing a better job of it. He could research if it came down to it, he'd done it before, but it was bordering on ritualistic for the rebellion, and he had no part of that. It was more Remus's domain than his own. It didn't mean he didn't want to do something if that was being offered. "It just explains a lot."

“I imagine it would.” Regulus dipped his chin with a little nod. “At present, the informed Order consists of myself, Emmeline, and Dumbledore, as well as you, now. I provided some context to Harry because of his frequency of contact - some of which he had already pieced together - but no actionable information."

Sirius had meant more that he'd been sneaking about with Harry, and Harry (who was naturally suspicious) hadn't said anything. It also explained why he had such an interest in talking to Ginny. "So that means Ron and Hermione know," Sirius concluded. They were deeply close, weren't they? Besides, if it was more about research than anything else, Hermione Granger seemed the perfect person to involve. Harry had inherited his father's attention span when it came to all things academic.

Regulus flattened his mouth a little at the point.

"Aw, you're vexed," Sirius said, shifting to lay down again. He could no longer see his brother’s face, but he could guess. By way of potions or simply because of how terrible the subject matter was, there was something distinctly funny at watching him threatening to go into a pout. "Some things never change."
“I hope you will apply a more strict definition of ‘secrecy,’ given how vital and potentially dangerous it is,” Regulus said a bit more stiffly.

"You let something slip once at fifteen, and no one ever lets you forget it,” Sirius grumbled. He had kept a hundred more for a lot longer, but it always boiled down to that. Did he need a reminder that he managed to keep a hell of a lot of secrets, from animagi, to maps, to Remus's crochet habit? Regulus had heard about Remus’s condition from Snape, undoubtedly, so why he was more trustworthy to his eyes, Sirius would never know. Even when he wasn’t around, that bastard ruined everything. “I understand why you didn’t say anything; it’s why I didn’t ask. You needed your leverage. I’m not an idiot.”

“You needn't be defensive. I'm simply clarifying that I intended for it to include silence among friends, in case there was any ambiguity, given the Harry remark,” Regulus responded pointedly. “I would not have told you if I did not trust you with it.”

"Harry's a kid," Sirius responded, because there was absolutely a difference between the two. A bitter thought struck that Regulus had only told him because Dumbledore, and perhaps Emmeline, would assume he knew in the wake of leaving, and he was simply trying to control the damage. Perhaps he hadn’t wanted to tell him at all, but felt forced by circumstances and just wanted reassurance. "I'm not going to blab."

Regulus shifted to look out the small window between the bed and the cot but didn't say anything else.

Sirius took it as a sign and let himself slip into the long put-off sleep, because tomorrow everything would still be there to deal with, and the quicker he slept, the quicker he’d see Tonks and try to get everything back on track. He’d been wanting something he could throw himself into that he could actually do. Bellatrix had broken the uneasy stalemate they’d been in for months. It was time to repay the favour.
When Sirius awoke, he was couldn’t quite remember where he was for a split second. It was still dark outside, which meant very little as winter had rolled in, and it could be hours since he last checked. As gently as he could, he swung himself around and tested out walking on his leg. Still numb, but numb was better than painful. The room still felt too cramped to be tucked into, so as quietly as he could with an irritating limp, he slipped outside. There wasn’t much use in waking his brother - let him get him some rest before they had to deal with the morning after.

There was an old clock on the landing, illuminated by slivers of moonlight. It had only been a couple of hours, but Sirius was surprised he slept even that long. He wouldn’t put it past Andromeda to have slipped him something in his potions, especially with his body’s obvious irritation at being moved from the bed. However, sitting and staring at the ceiling would have driven him nuts too. Where the hell was Remus? Or even Tonks? Remus might step on ceremony to not call in the early hours, but this was Tonks’s home. Had the meeting really run so long?

Getting down the stairs quietly was no easy feat, but he didn’t want to wake up anyone. Ted was likely to have a few words about someone injured wandering about; Andromeda would get annoyed at his inability to stay still; and as sorry as Sirius had been to lose a perfectly good safe house, he knew it wasn’t going to compare to his brother’s obsessive love of the place, so it was probably better for him to be dealing with that (not to mention Bellatrix in general) on some rest.

Something moved over by the wall high bookcases, and to his own annoyance, Sirius realised he hadn’t brought his wand with him. His heart rate kicked up for only a moment before he realised it was just Regulus. “Someone needs to put a little bell on you,” he hissed in greeting, more upset with himself that he’d not noticed Regulus getting out of the room than him being up.

With a slight - but nonetheless visible - jolt, Regulus twisted back to look at him, and alarm was melting off his face again as he lifted his shoulder in a shrug. “The intention was to not wake anyone up.”

It was a successful endeavour, but really irritating to someone who could literally refer to themselves as a guard dog and mean it. He didn't like the idea of anyone sneaking about and him not even registering it. "The intention was for you to go to sleep," Sirius said, voice low. "Did you?"

“I'm not in the mood to sleep,” Regulus replied, though he looked too drained for that to be entirely true.

"You should've let me smack you when I wanted to," Sirius replied. "Then you'd have slept regardless. What are you doing?"

“I'm not doing anything in particular,” Regulus answered, then gestured to a cup of tea sitting on a nearby side table. “Just looking around, having tea, thinking.”

About which part was he thinking? How the Order was going to react to him having been in contact with Bellatrix, which seems to have prompted her coming in and having a tantrum? If she was capable of doing that, regardless, maybe it was better to expose that hole in security for what it was. Maybe he was thinking more about telling Sirius how exactly Voldemort had survived the backfired killing curse. At some point, when he was feeling less like he had a mouth full of feathers, he was going to go step by step through the circumstances of his brother’s leaving and exactly what he'd been up to right under Sirius's nose; but as it neared five, he knew nothing good
would come of trying to talk about it now.

"It was going to happen sooner or later," Sirius said, more in reference to their earlier talk about Bellatrix coming in than anything else. She was trying to lay claim, and even if he fought it, the house wouldn't be safe again. From the moment Narcissa had walked in, he thought they'd collectively realised it wouldn't be safe anyway. He tried to contain his glee about that. He could also have been referencing Bellatrix trying to use one of her remaining bargaining chips, and even if Regulus hadn't said anything, again, at least his brother had come to the right decision on his own. "If she's still alive at the end of this, you can exercise your legal rights with the house."

Regulus nodded with a solemn expression, pinching a little around the mouth and brow. "I know - I just hate not knowing the state of it. If she's going to actively try to murder her own blood - not just spells flung in a wartime skirmish - then she's the one who doesn't deserve to be in the house. Expecting it to happen did nothing to stop it from being aggravating or upsetting."

If there was ever a nightmarish abode that Bellatrix probably did belong in, Sirius would have put his money on Grimmauld Place. However, it wasn't hers, and depriving her of something she wanted was always a priority. "You," Sirius corrected, because she had absolutely targeted her blood before. "Not her own blood, you."

“Yes, I realise. I was there,” Regulus said, picking up his tea as he lifted his eyebrow, “and am also blood-related to her, making that an extraneous correction.”

"I'm counting myself," Sirius said, loathe as he was to admit any sort of relation to her in the slightest. "You were the only new aspect. The location too, but when I said I would go back to that house over my dead body, I didn't expect anyone to take it so literally."

“She stabbed you in the leg. I am counting you too,” Regulus said with a huff, though his tone was less pointed as he sat back down. “But I can agree, that turn of phrase truly is being taken far too literally. I expected to dislike the feeling of being targeted in my own home, and those expectations have been thoroughly met.”

"Just don't make a habit of it. I know it might be a bit much to ask; you are dating the record holder for having to move house because of the Death Eaters." The still alive one, as Lily and James would have beaten them in a heartbeat if they were still here. This wasn't the time to think about that. "But it could have been much worse. Terrible aim at close contact. I think her eyesight’s going in her old age."

“Whatever the reason for her poor aim, I'm glad for it,” Regulus said with a little nod, leaning back into his chair with a small frown, “and that Emmeline was able to move out of her own accord, however close the timing might have been.”

"You'd have a whole new problem to deal with if she'd walked in on you two," Sirius said, grimly. Pressing his lips to a line, Regulus paused just a beat before replying, “I must space these things out, of course: every six months, a new reason to want to kill me.”

Sirius was unable to stop the snort of amusement at that. It was true; he did seem to be keeping to a schedule with his rebellions. It might be the thing most in keeping with his previous behaviour: even independent thought has a time and place and must be scheduled in for display. "You might beat her to the punch in murderous desire if she really does destroy the place," Sirius replied. “I really will have to congratulate her; she’s done more damage than any blood traitor or scorchee has.”
Regulus's expression shifted to a scowl. “That is an irony I am not particularly pleased about.”

"Your entire life is filled with ironies you aren't pleased about," Sirius said. He could scowl all he liked, but this put them on a more even footing. Bellatrix could not claim a higher ground on any front from family when she was happy to sacrifice anything to some misguided sense of duty, since she didn't have any kids and liked to bend over for a fraud. Oh, to get that image out of his own mind. Where was an obliviator when you needed one? "At least you know where you stand, and so does she."

To that, Regulus nodded with a slightly less aggravated expression. “That was the purpose, so at least I can count myself successful on that front.”

"You'll get used to it." Or it would all be over quickly, and there would be no time to, but they thought that twenty years ago, and here they went again.

“I suppose so,” Regulus said noncommittally, taking a sip of his tea

"What's the alternative?" Sirius asked.

“Not becoming used to it,” Regulus responded with a dim tone, “but I do not much like that alternative, so I hope you are right.”

If they gave out awards for being pedantic, there'd be a trophy case the size of a floor in Regulus's room. Maybe he never thought she'd actually do it - break in and try it on. Maybe he thought that he'd somehow escape that, on some level. Whatever it was, the hurt feeling was so obvious that Sirius wanted to be comforting, but he couldn't think of anything that Regulus would find comforting. Betrayal could remain fresh forever, eating away, so when you're not thinking about it, it pops up and ruins your day. He couldn't say he was sorry about the house, because he wasn't really, and the emptiness of the gesture would be obvious. He couldn't claim to be sorry over Bellatrix, as he'd long given up the slightest hope of there being a decent person under there. In the end, this would make the fight easier. He wasn't sorry for the end effects, but he was sorry it was painful now.

'I'm sorry you're sad' was so childish, but he couldn't figure out another way to phrase it. It was a betrayal of heritage, blood, and if she really did know who'd offed their dear old dad and had done nothing about it, a betrayal of the pureblood values she clung to. It wasn't something Regulus clung to anymore, but Sirius wasn't sure he knew that on a conscious level. He could face inferi, shattered remains of dark souls, bloody battles, and squaring off against pureblood traditionalism at its peak, but facing up to his own changes - and that no one he had been still clinging to by the tips of his fingers accepted it - seemed to cause a kind of dull ache of pain, guilt, and restless sadness. Sirius could relate to the effect, if not the reasoning behind it.

"It helps to be angry about it," Sirius offered. Anger was easier. Anger could be constructive and destructive as need be. The rest was just a foray into the depths of circular despair, a place it was hard to climb up from. At least he wouldn't have to do it alone. "I hope you get there."

“I expect I will,” Regulus said with a little nod. “I'm already rather angry about it.”

"You burn slower than I do," Sirius said.

“It's true,” Regulus agreed. “I prefer to pace my deep capacity for anger, too.”

"I don't think social snubs will work with Bellatrix," Sirius said. It didn't even really work that well with him. “Are you wallowing?”
Regulus shook his head. “I'm trying to formulate a plan.”

“For what?” Sirius asked. More trouble?

“Keeping her out of places I do not want her to be,” Regulus said with a pensive look towards the window, just an arm’s length away. “Checking on the house without getting killed. Where to next focus research and investigation towards… the subject I brought up earlier. Any number of things.”

“The house is easier. Moody can see all over it, Dung’s good for alarms, and worse comes to worst, I'll reacquaint myself with cartography.” Not a terrible idea if they could include some of those motion alarms Regulus had over the place. Sirius wondered if they were still there.

“Evidently, those things were not sufficient the first time,” Regulus said, dryly. “I found a spell recently that ought to supercede the family blood ward, but I have been lacking the actual blood component. Unfortunately, what has been presumably left on the floor is indistinguishable from yours, but I have another idea, so it may be worth a try.”

"Neither Moody or Dung were there at the time," Sirius said. Mad-Eye had his own life, and Regulus had a deep seated dislike of thieves.

“That is part of my point; they cannot function as reliable protection if they are not reliably there at all times, and I would not want them to be,” Regulus said, shaking his head. “My own alarms for the entrances would have been more useful, had I been wearing them, but I was not. I can resume that precaution, but that relies on consistency, too, and would not have helped if I had been asleep.”

“You’re being very literal.” Though Sirius would have thought the alarms would have woken him - what was the point otherwise? “It was meant only as a way to make sure it’s safe to go back in, and Bella hasn’t set up something to take your head off.”

“And I merely meant that I still need to put more in place, as I don’t really count them towards my criteria for security,” Regulus replied. “We've been back in the house for a year and a half at this point, after all.”

"Don't remind me," Sirius said, a shudder barely suppressed. "Counting them towards immediate security instead of long-term. I imagine you want a long-term."

“I do want long-term solutions, yes.” Regulus tipped his head in a little nod. “Hopefully a blood ward will be sufficient.”

“You could tell Mum on her,” Sirius said. “The screaming might be off-putting for her.”

“Off-putting, perhaps, but maybe not a deterrent,” Regulus said wryly, shaking his head.

"What did she want from you?" Sirius asked. "I'm assuming waltzing back into the Death Eaters saying you overslept but better late than never wasn't it."

Regulus nodded, slightly, then crinkled his nose. “She wanted for me to sabotage Moody, but I am not intent on being that variety of traitor, so of course I did not.”

Traitor had never had so many varieties before their family. Sirius pointed lazily at his brother. "Last remaining member of your house, and she attacked you in your own home. It's not you who deserves the traitor branding tonight."

With a thin smile, Regulus responded, “Thank you. Even if I know that, for the most part, hearing
it from outside of my head makes it feel a little less like an excuse."

"Never listen that voice," Sirius said, his voice clear and blunt. This he had some experience in. If he had ever listened to it, he would never have found his own courage, but it didn't mean he still didn't have to go a few rounds with it now and then. He imagined Regulus had that a lot worse than he ever did. "She's the one playing lapdog to a half-blood who didn't like his old man and is having a decades long murderous snit about it. You're trying to conserve almost a millennia of historical objects and information and standing your ground. I think we both know where the strength lies here, no matter what your overzealous mind is throwing at you."

Looking heartened, Regulus tipped his head, slightly. "It has been persistently disapproving, as of late, but I am trying to ignore it."

“Maybe Andromeda has a point about not living there,” Sirius said, though he knew he was on precarious ground. “Sometimes, if you're so inclined, but that's a lot of enforcing to deal with if you're trying to question it every day. I do speak from experience.”

With a thinning expression, Regulus lifted his tea for a drink, letting a beat of silence pass before saying, “I'm not going to settle for being kicked out of my own house.”

“I didn’t expect you to,” Sirius said, barely resisting a strong urge to roll his eyes. “Take it back by all means - but having it back doesn’t mean you have to stay there and listen to it all the days of your life.”

Regulus flicked his eyes to Sirius from over the tea cup, then looked at the window again. “I suppose not.”

Guilt and him, it was a love story spanning decades. “You can bet no one else went there to look after it,” Sirius said, with distaste. Hypocrites.

“If anything, that would be a point of concern. I know you don't like it, but I don't want the house to just deteriorate,” Regulus said with a frown.

“I have...all right, I have something against you maintaining it, but it’s a lesser evil.” If nothing else, Sirius owed him some honesty. “They didn’t look after it when it was theirs, so I don’t see why anyone but you has any claim on it.”

“I expect it was more a desire to make me unhappy than it was for ownership,” Regulus said, flatly.

"She could have just killed you," but no, this was Bellatrix. Everything was a dramatic and ridiculous farce. "It's not as if you'd use anything lethal near her."

Regulus nodded. “Both of those things are true.”

"But she doesn't know that," Sirius reasoned, aloud. "She doesn't know who you are now, or who you're willing to let show now, or what will work and what won't. You've changed. If she ever knew how to deal with you, she doesn't now, and she's got to hate that."

“I always felt that she found me to be frustrating in the past, too,” he responded, pensively, “but I don’t imagine any changes were in the preferred direction, no.”

“You are frustrating.” It was horrible to try and guess what he was thinking because he kept everything clamped down. Maybe not as much as he used to, but enough to make it tricky to know what would set him off. “Bellatrix has the subtlety of a horny erumpet. If I have trouble, she must
be furious.”

Regulus crinkled his expression, slightly. “Yes… I imagine she saw it going very differently.”

“She doesn’t like something she can’t control,” Sirius said. Though this was a common theme, and one Regulus shared, he rarely reacted with his wand or fists.

“That is... accurate,” Regulus said, slanting his mouth downward. “She seems to be taking it as a personal affront, but I suppose there are those who might argue that I am comparatively less agreeable, these days, Bella or not.”

"No one should be as agreeable as you were," Sirius said. It was just crawling to people, which got on his nerves. "Especially not someone with as strong opinions as you have. I'll take an argument over a wet blanket any day."

“I prefer to have the opinions without the arguments, but how well that works out is highly dependent on the audience,” he responded wryly, taking another sip of his tea.

"Wonder who Narcissa will argue with," Sirius thought, aloud. "Her for attacking you and wrecking the place, or you for not grovelling."

“I suppose we shall see.” Regulus shook his head. “I have emphasised that I don't intend to grovel, so I does not seem as though it ought to be a surprise - but I suppose it's possible that they have not been taking me very seriously.”

"Which is surprising," Sirius replied. "Considering you've been serious - pun unintended but a happy coincidence - from the very moment you were born. Your humour is so dry it's almost impossible to know when you're joking."

“Perhaps they thought they past six months were meant to be some ongoing joke.”

“They probably think you’ve gone mad,” Sirius said, honestly. “I wouldn’t have believed it back then. Can you imagine someone like Dad, or even Lu, making the decisions you have?”

Pausing for a beat, Regulus frowned and shook his head. “No.”

“And if they did, you’d probably assume they’d gone round the twist or there was an imperius at work,” Sirius said.

“I suppose so…” Regulus said again, the frown still pulling on his mouth. “The thought is just jarring. It does not feel as though the difference ought to be so marked.”

"I don't think I've changed at all," Sirius admitted. He'd been very confused when, as an eleven-year-old, he was suddenly treated differently despite not really feeling differently. "But there's people who could argue I have. Every choice sets your path, and the moment you made your own independent ones, you changed your path. Even if it's a bit shit now, I'm still glad you're here."

“I cannot tell if you mean physically present or still breathing, but I appreciate the sentiment, regardless,” Regulus said, his mouth tipping. “We've both changed, to some degree, but the reactions often feel disproportionate.”

“Can we aim for both here and breathing? I know it's a difficult concept for you.” Sirius replied.

“It's not *that* difficult - I am both here and breathing, as we speak.”
“Only until your girlfriend finds out you kept life-endangering correspondence from her,” Sirius said, cheekily.

“Saying something would not have helped, with Bellatrix,” Regulus countered as he took another drink of tea, a bit huffily.

"It's not about it helping." Sirius ran a hand across his face. Why was he forever cursed to deal with relationship dynamics that were not his own? They were probably why he never got around to having his own. At least James had girlfriends before, even Remus had dated once or twice before becoming a cradle-robber, but this was so hard to explain. Was there a book on this he could just give him? Books had more respectability on the subject than someone whose last date was in 1980.

He tried to think of the best way to put it, as he'd understood it. "There are certain things you have to tell the other person if you're in a relationship with them, whether it'll help or not. Stuff like I'm feeling under the weather, or I really liked this band, or my cousin tried to get me a fancy new accessory to murder conviction that wasn't covered by the Ministry pardon. It's part of the whole 'sharing a life' thing people who are not our parents do."

“I intended to say something,” Regulus responded. "I was just waiting for the situation to settle, first.”

“I don’t think it’s meant to work like that,” Sirius said, with a shrug.

Regulus shrugged back.

“We need someone with a normal relationship on this one,” Sirius said, thinking it over for a moment. "I don’t think we know anyone with a normal relationship. I'm convinced Molly and Arthur are part rabbit.”

Making a slight face, Regulus shook his head. "I guess we will have to make the best of abnormal relationships, then.”

About to reply, Sirius realised he could hear something moving. A quick look over Regulus showed what he suspected, that the sound was coming from outside. The sound of fallen leaves under feet, trying not to disturb them. His hand drifted down to his cursedly non-existent wand, as he held a finger to his lips. With a little nod, Regulus set down his tea and hovered a hand over his own wand, sitting on the like table beside him.

The moment broke with the sound of birdsong. Rearing back, it took Sirius a moment to realise four things at once. First, someone had used the knocker, which Andromeda had clearly charmed. Second, that he had never known Bellatrix or any other Death Eater to knock. Third, it was four, perhaps five in the morning, so what civilised person knocked at such an hour? Finally, he came to the conclusion that Remus was precisely that sort of person, but he thought Tonks would just have come back with him at her heels through the floo, or even apparition.

He made a move to go to the door, only to find himself narrowly ducking out of the way of wand sparks. Andromeda was peeping round the top of the stairs, her lips drawn in a line and frowning as if her sheer glare could communicate with him. "What are you doing up?" she said, clopping down the stairs. "I almost stunned you."

"Answering the door," Sirius said, making a vague gesture towards it. "It's probably Remus."

"Nymphadora would not knock," Andromeda replied, glancing back towards Regulus. "You, as well?" Then she looked to Sirius. "You're a bad influence."
As if Regulus hadn't gotten up long before he had, snuck out, and gone through her kitchen. Still, Sirius took his compliments where he could get them. "Thank you," he beamed.

"At least go and sit down," Andromeda said, her wand still drawn. "You're supposed to be healing and resting, and it's still my door to open."

"D'you want to open it, then?" Sirius asked. "Bit nippy out there, and he can't have fur at will."

Andromeda rolled her eyes skyward in response.

Regulus had given up on his wand and returned his attention to the tea. "Odd timing, though it is difficult to say whether it is strangely late or strangely early."

Andromeda opened the door only a crack, for no reason Sirius could think of than so they couldn't immediately see outside it.

"No need to stand on ceremony," Andromeda said, with a sigh. She still didn't move. "Oh, I see. I expect you're the girl."

Sirius shot his brother a look that he hoped communicated the gravity of the fact he was absolutely f*cked in this situation. It was difficult to tell if Regulus was taking it seriously, with the way he sat up more to lean in towards the door until their visitors were seen inside.

"-apologise for the late hour," came Emmeline's voice, prim as he'd ever heard it. Was she nervous? Or just worried?

If anyone looked worried, it was Remus following her. He looked like he was about to get detention.

"The late hour is expected, given the circumstances. Where is my daughter?" Andromeda asked.

"She's gone into work," Remus said. He gave Regulus a light nod in greeting. "No one was sure whether or not it would be reported as Death Eater activity."

Nodding back, Regulus piped in, "Perhaps it should be, though I admittedly have limited experience with this particular chain of events."

"As I understand it..." Remus glanced back to Sirius himself, so he gave him what he hoped was a very sarcastic wave. "...She entered your home and attacked you. Both of you, but Sirius is less of a surprise."

"I'm fine, thanks for asking," Sirius said.

"I've seen you in worse shape," Remus replied, but the smile that came with it was weak. "Are you alright?"

"Just a little nonconsensual knifeplay," Sirius said. "Old place still standing?"

"There've been no reports otherwise," Emmeline replied.

Regulus nodded again, this time not saying anything as he took another sip from the never-ending teacup. He could be faking it by this point.

"Are you alright, considering?" Emmeline asked. She probably still thought this was related to the Ministry.
“I’m still in one piece, which is more than can be said for the drawing room,” Regulus replied.

"Oh, no," Emmeline said, deflating. "I really would report the property damage."

“A strange thought but nonetheless a good point.” Regulus leaned back into his seat again. “I’m not certain of the extent of the damage, but she was not careful of the surroundings.”

“Bellatrix is full of shit,” Sirius said, bluntly. She could claim wanting to protect legacy, or pure blood, but when it came down it, it was all for Voldemort.

“If I may,” Emmeline’s hand hovered, almost as if she looked ready to raise it to ask a question. “The girl?”

“I was aware there was a relationship afoot, but not many particulars,” Andromeda reasoned. “But you both knocked and apologised, which means you’re well-mannered and not Remus, which meant it was a good assumption.”

Emmeline looked to Regulus, brows raised. “There were people thinking you were seeing Remus?”

“I don't think so,” Regulus responded, looking a little embarrassed. “Perhaps she’s referring to Tonks and Remus.”

"No, simply the only polite friend I could think of," Andromeda said, dismissively. "But a little more blood to your cheeks is at least in the vicinity of your brain, so perhaps you'll go get some rest now."

“My brain is fine.” Regulus punctuated with a nod.

“So what’s the plan?” Sirius asked. “Go look at the newest safe house?”

“Ideally,” Remus nodded. “But checking she has vacated the house also seems like a priority. Is there a reason she would hang around?”

“Wreaking nonspecific havoc on the house, perhaps, but I can think of nothing in particular,” Regulus added. “Potentially an information sweep, but all sensitive information I'm aware of is hidden in a manner that would require very intentional searching.”

"There are still things that need picking up," Sirius added. Half of the stuff that had been left around the house was probably Harry's more than his, but he had a few personal things he'd like back. Some of them were older than the last few years, but he hadn't really had much of an opportunity before. He looked to Regulus, "Pack up anything you'll lose your mind if she torches."

“I would rather she didn't torch any of it,” he said with a huff, “but I understand your point.”

“You can’t pack up the whole house,” Sirius said. “You don’t need the whole house. Some of it is just naff jewelry And’s mum gave to ours to piss her off.”

“I don't want to have to pack it all up. I just want her out of it,” Regulus responded pointedly. “But we don't need to revisit that concern. I can prioritize, in the meantime.”

Had they gone back a step in communication? He could have sworn they were better than this now. "I mean for right now. Not forever. As much fun as it is, I can barely fit in the spare room when I stand up, let alone you."

"It's like part of the landscape. It reminds me of something by Tolkien," Emmeline said, looking
around the dimly lit room.

That sounded familiar. "Wasn't that the bloke with the elf fetish?"

Emmeline's worry-etched face turned sour. "I am never letting you near my books again."

"Oh no," Sirius deadpanned. "The horror."

"If we may return to topic," Remus prompted. "Kingsley will be back with something later today, but it is a rush job. We'll have to add protections as we go."

"Increased protections are the plan," Regulus said with a little nod, though he was looking out the window now - at what was anyone's guess.

"We might as well brainstorm ideas then," Sirius said, because at this point it was obvious no one was going back to sleep. Vance was hovering about looking like she wanted to say something but couldn't; Remus did not want to look at Andromeda; and Andromeda was giving him a dirty look for standing up. "Kitchen?"

"What did I tell you about putting pressure on that leg!" Andromeda barked at him. He thought he was supposed to be canine in the family. "Oh, I give up on both of you. Call me when Nymphadora reappears or someone shows up to kill us all."

The room cleared within a few minutes, leaving only Regulus and Emmeline. Exhaustion was buzzing under his skin, pulling tight at his stomach and behind his eyes, but his mind would not settle, whether whirring with thoughts or fixating on the others around him. Emmeline's presence was reassuring as she settled in next him, even if he could feel a little prickle of guilt starting to surface. Sirius was probably right. She was unlikely to be thrilled about the truth of the situation, however reasonable it had felt, but there was little to be done now...

"Do you think they're listening in?" Emmeline whispered, straining her beck back to look towards the kitchen.

"Probably," Regulus whispered in return, thinking back to the commentary given, the last time he and his brother had visited. "They have been known to do so."

"Do you want to make a break for it?" Emmeline suggested, lowering her voice further.

His mouth broke into a little smile as he tipped a slight nod. "I think that is a splendid idea."

"Do you want to go to mine?" Emmeline asked. "You're used to being able to put five floors between you and loud socialisation, but it's quiet, if only two floors."

"Yes… Two floors and half the width of the country should be sufficient," he quipped.

"Well enough to side-along?" Emmeline glanced him over. "I don’t want to leave part of you behind."

"I should be alright," he confirmed. Splinching was awful enough that he would not risk independent apparition, but to side-along... "I can focus enough for that."

Risking only another quick look over to the kitchen, Emmeline took his hand and the tell-tale tug of apparition took hold.
The frown lines on Remus's face were developing their own frown lines. It was still strange to think of, with all their years missing in between. He'd had a lot to worry about in those years, in a way that made Sirius angry deep in his throat, and he knew that somewhere, whatever comes next, James must've been going ballistic about that. They'd spent so long trying to make sure things would be easier for him. Fucking Wormtail.

“It's just a setback,” Sirius said, quietly. “Kingsley was already looking at places. Regulus still being around made it less safe regardless.”

“I'm not worried about the house,” Remus said. “Actually, yes, I suppose I am, it was such a good hiding spot.”

“Death Eaters really take the fun out of fighting them,” Sirius replied, pulling himself onto one of Andromeda's stools. “But if you crease up anymore, you're going to resemble Kreacher.”

Remus looked at him blankly for a moment. “Where is Kreacher?”

“Up destroying whatever's in Andromeda's attic,” Sirius said, unable to keep the sourness from his voice. “I should tell her to make sure to check him before he leaves in case he's got sticky fingers.”

“He came here willingly?” Remus asked.

“Regulus wouldn't go anywhere without him,” Sirius said.

“That appears to have shifted,” Remus replied.

It was Sirius's turn to frown. That wasn't going to do much good either; he'd end up looking like his great aunt if he started doing it too much. A scowl is at least worth it. “What makes you say that?”

Remus simply pointed behind Sirius's back. Sirius got up, leaning onto one of the wooden beams in the wall and taking a few steps over to look back to where they'd all been minutes ago, only to find it empty. No Regulus. No Emmeline. No signs of any sort of struggle.

“Has he pissed off and left me with the world's most mental elf?” Sirius asked.

“Apparently,” Remus replied.

Running off with a half-blood girl without telling anyone. Rebellious, impolite, and inconveniencing. If it weren't for the lack of sleep, the returning ache to his leg, and the fact he would now have to deal with Kreacher, Sirius could almost be proud of him.

“Are you alright?” Remus asked.

“I will be if people stop asking me that.” Sirius replied, curtly. “You've done worse when your inner fuzzball was in a cranky mood.”

For a moment, there was a telltale look of guilt, but it vanished just as quickly. “Fuzzball?”

“You've got some fuzz,” Sirius shrugged.

“Werewolves don't have fuzz,” Remus replied.

“You do,” Sirius insisted. “I've seen it. Have you ever seen yourself transformed?”

Remus waited a beat. “Well, no, but—”
“Never looked in a mirror on wolfsbane?” Sirius pressed.

“No!” Remus said, now looking ruffled. “Why would I? Do you go around looking in mirrors while transformed?”

“Sometimes,” Sirius said.

“Why?” Remus asked, looking at him as if he had grown another head.

“Natural curiosity.” Sirius left off the part where he did occasionally bark at his own reflection, because it was not pertinent information. Trying to think with a canine brain isn't always easy.

“More like natural vanity,” Remus replied.

“Some of that too,” Sirius agreed. He was very distinguishable, which could be a pain in the arse at times, but most of the time, he liked it.

Remus waited a beat. “Why are we debating canine appearances?”

“Because you looked like you were going to apologise or go all melancholy over a little mauling between friends, and it's taking my mind off my leg,” Sirius reasoned.

“You never do it the simple way, do you?” Remus asked, but the tone of his voice could be thought of as more fond than exasperated.

Sirius shrugged. “Where's the fun in that?”

“Are you up to going to meet up with Dumbledore this afternoon?” Remus asked. “I think McGonagall is going to let Harry know it's not safe to contact there. I think the evacuation procedure will need to be the Burrow for now.”

“Second place they'll look,” Sirius warned, a prickle of something he didn't like coming to his mind at the idea of losing out on yet more time with Harry. This hiding lark gets old really fast.

“Which is the reason for the prioritising,” Remus replied. “Get Harry's things – and whatever you or Regulus require – and get a new route in place if we need it.”

“When,” Sirius corrected. Bellatrix had broken the uneasy truce of the last few months with this. They would be unlikely to go underground again, with nothing to lose. “Not if. Sweep the house tonight?”

Remus gave him a solid nod. “I'll be there.”

As it turned out, apparating while sitting led to arriving at their destination in a similar position in the most inelegant way possible - wobbling onto Emmeline’s front room.

“That was embarrassing,” Emmeline winced.

Straightening up and steadying the both of them, he offered a thin smile. “At least it is just us.”

"The upside of no owl is not even a creature can mock us," Emmeline replied. "Where is yours?"

“Still at home,” Regulus responded, feeling a sharp dread in his stomach.

“You should ask - oh, no, that would be disastrous,” Emmeline replied, shaking her head. “But
Harry. McGonagall is going to go and see him about it at breakfast. If you ask, he may lend you that cloak to go back this afternoon.”

Regulus nodded a little, though his mouth dipped again into a frown. “A good idea, even if it feels awful, having to sneak into my own house.”

"You've never had to sneak in before?" Emmeline asked. "Oh, I suppose you wouldn't have. Your illegal activities were supported. Perhaps this is something Sirius should do; he must have done it frequently enough as a teenage delinquent."

“He did… but I'll have to go back in, regardless,” he said, thinking of some of the higher priority items, in addition to Deimos - the venom, Harry's letter, other books and notes. “I can manage.”

“Right now, you need to manage yourself into my bed,” Emmeline said, before quickly adding, “For sleep! While I’m at work, then we can see about making up for your rule-adjacent youth.”

The sound he made was caught somewhere between awkwardness at the turn of phrase and amusement at her slight fluster, but he was too exhausted to pick apart which felt more prominent. Talking about sleep made his entire body feel heavier, but he had been unable to grasp any semblance of relaxation since the previous morning - since before the Ministry visit, to be more exact. He did not want to know what his mind might barrage him with if he gave it over to sleep. Perhaps it was pride that wouldn't let him ask Andromeda for a potion, but Emmeline’s refuge felt more and more welcome by the second.

He considered quipping that a remark like that would have been more embarrassing than even a fumbly apparition, but he felt that he was unlikely to deliver it properly at the moment, so instead, he squeezed her hand like an anchor. “Thank you. It has been a long day and a long night.”

Seeming calmed by the gesture, Emmeline nodded. "No one makes good decisions on little sleep. Tea in the pot, food in the larder. It goes double on empty stomachs."

“So very true,” he agreed. “I'm hoping to avoid making decisions of too much import before sleep comes.”

"Your only decision is going to be whether you're getting under the covers, using my throw, using both, whether you want the main pillows, the decorative pillows, or both, and whether you prefer Earl or Lady Grey," Emmeline said. "That sounds like a lot, actually. Sleep first."

“Yes, I do think I will require at least a nap to make a proper choice about my sleeping array.”

"And without sleeping attire," Emmeline said, gently. "What will people say?"

“Better not tell them, I suppose.” He shook his head. “It is most undignified.”

Emmeline placed her finger on her nose and tapped twice. “Secret's safe with me.”

Regulus met her eyes with a warm, if tired, smile. “I know.”

"You realise I'm not leaving till I see you go," Emmeline replied, before sitting straight. "Unless that is part of your fiendish plan."

“Is it really so fiendish?” he said, mouth still quirking a little.

Emmeline crossed her arms. "Do you want new reading material or not?"
“A convincing point.” Regulus squeezed her hand again with a little shift. Explaining the actual circumstances of his cousin's fury could probably wait until he was less exhausted and she wasn't due for work, anyway... “I suppose I will go sleep, then. It was upstairs, yes?”

“Yes,” Emmeline replied. “Don’t fall.”

“I can manage a set of stairs. I'm not quite that unaccustomed to a lack of sleep,” he said, lightly nudging her shoulder.

“Alright, as you wish,” Emmeline replied, leaning on her knees to get up. “This vigilante schedule was easier on me when I was eighteen. Do you want me to wake you when I get in or wait for you?”

“I will rouse myself,” he said with a little nod.

“Rest well,” she replied, and then she was gone.

Silence fell after the door clicked behind her, and Regulus lingered for a beat longer before at last he stirred himself to move towards the stairs. Though he was not yet familiar with the ins and outs of Emmeline’s new living space, it did not take him long to wander into the bedroom. The was was already set up with bookcases that lined the walls like protruding wallpaper, framing a window and an ornate desk on the far side.

He felt a brush of shyness, walking into the room, and despite being by himself, a judgemental stare prickled in his mind, exacted by an audience that wasn’t even present. Sirius had suggested it was the house itself that was bearing down on him, but in these moments, Regulus suspected it was more the House than the house. Sometimes those two were the same thing, yet at other times...

Shaking away the thought, Regulus toed off his shoes and slipped into the bed, pulling its covers over his legs. Turning off his mind was no easier here than it had been at Andromeda’s, but with privacy came some measure of relaxation. If sleep betrayed him with some unwelcome, nightmarish thought, at least it wasn't with an audience, conscious or not.

Yet whatever intentions he might have had to dwell on his daytime robes, the probable impropriety of his girlfriend’s (vacant) sleeping quarters, or his cousin's furied shrieks were cut short the moment his head hit the pillow, and in less than a minute's time, he was tugged into the darkness of sleep.

Harry awoke abruptly to the sound of his name being hissed in his ear. The resulting scramble brought back the fact he still seemed to be wearing his glasses, which meant he'd fallen asleep sitting on the bed again. Work load for NEWTs were even more than he’d imagined. Add in detention with Snape, and he was starting to struggle, but every time he thought of complaining, he remembered the nightmares of the year before and shut his mouth.

This wasn't a nightmare. This was Hermione uncomfortably close to him. “Wha'sthematter?” Harry asked, even if it had come out as one word.

“You asked me to say something if I saw anything shifty going on,” Hermione said, casting a look behind her. Harry felt a wave of irritation at the ongoing snit between his best friends. “But I overheard Flitwick when I was coming back from the library, talking about defences to protect something. Since the last thing they did that with was the stone—”

It was probably something important. Harry hurriedly put on his shoes and grabbed the cloak, but it was hard to move in any sort of cohesive way with the two of them. They made it down to the
second floor only in time to see a light blink out and movement in the dark. It took a moment for Harry to realise where he was.

“That's how you get to Dumbledore's office,” Harry whispered. “I think we just saw the gargoyle move back into its spot. Did you see who left?”

“No,” Hermione huffed. “Are you sure it was the gargoyle?”

“I've seen it enough,” Harry replied. “But what would they hide in the Headmaster's office?”

“It's obvious, isn't it?” Harry waited for her to elaborate. “The prophecy!”

Harry shook his head, but he didn't know if she could see it in the dark. “It's too obvious.”

“Or it could be transfigured as something else,” Hermione replied. “Unless you have another idea of something he might have that he might want to keep a secret.”

Harry could think of one thing, but he wasn't sure how coordinated the horcrux effort was. Even then, why not just destroy it on the spot? Why hide it? Out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement again. “Someone else is here,” Harry whispered.

“Where?” Hermione shifted uncomfortably. “I don't see anyone. There was no one else around when I overheard them either.”

That didn't mean there wasn't anyone there. “Let's go back to the common room,” Harry said, wary of talking where unknown ears could hear them.

The work day dragged on. Emmeline had checked with her colleagues and instruments that no one had created some sort of time-slowing charm or that a time loop hadn't been inadvertently triggered, but in truth, she knew she was simply worried. Between herself, Dedalus, and now the HQ, it was getting pretty dicey out there, and she knew entirely too many 'act first, think later' people. She wanted to go to HQ now, if only to make sure her remaining two books didn't want to come home with their brethren, but she knew they'd need to meet up, discuss where to go, and what was needed. They needed to be together now, more than ever.

When the day ended, she wasn't surprised to find Regulus on her couch with one of her books. It was a sight she'd grown used to at Grimmauld Place, one she wouldn't admit she missed, but she really kind of did. He still looked a little worse for wear, but not at the point where she thought he might fall over, as he had that morning.

"Are you feeling any more human?” she asked him.

Marking his place, Regulus looked up with a little nod. “I appreciate the hospitality. Solitude helped.”

"You know you're welcome here, regardless of timing and circumstances,” Emmeline told him, leaning down to sit on an overstuffed chair next to the couch and heeling off her shoes.

“I know,” he said, closing the book with a soft, punctuating thump. “I was hoping the refuge would not be required, but it has been a rather maddening 48 hours.”

“Do you want to talk about what happened?” Chances would be ‘absolutely not’, but the offer felt important.
"I expect it is important to do so," he said, shaking his head. "Bellatrix has been an ongoing issue, so in that sense, it was only a matter of time… but I must confess to a degree of provocation."

"I don't find your existence to be provokation, unless you've been doing some other sort of mocking," Emmeline replied.

"It was not mockery, but I expect it was interpreted to be offensive. More offensive than existence, that is." He slanted his mouth downward, looking a little more uncomfortable now as he thumbed the cover of her book. "She… I suppose you could say she extended a proposal that I betray an Order member in exchange for information. I declined, and I think that has put her in a very foul mood…"

"Well, you can't show up announced and demand total and utter betrayal," Emmeline replied. Not an ounce of subtlety at all. "For a start, it's rude. For another point, I don't think you've even hinted you'd be interested."

"She did technically owl to meet, but the point stands that I would have expected my answer to be more obvious than her reaction suggested." Again, he shook his head. "I suppose she just assumed I would because she said so."

Wait, so had they met in person before the house? "What meeting?" Emmeline asked. "Before she came to the house?"

"Yes," he said, looking a little more like he was trying to power through it now. "Although I know the goal is to communicate and avoid extraneous life-threatening situations, with everything going on, it seemed best to just deal with it. The conversation was brief - but at least it's clear now, I suppose…"

Emmeline had to fight the urge to roll her eyes. He really did have the self preservation of a wooden spoon, didn't he? "Regardless of what is going on, I want you to talk to me. Especially if it means trouble is brewing, but even without, you can show up because you found an error in a century old volume and need someone to share your disgust, if you so please."

Regulus pressed his lips to a line, watched her for a silent beat, then nodded again. "I was not trying to hide it, though I know it must look that way. Addressing it myself just felt less complicated when everyone’s emotions were already running high."

"I wasn't accusing you of hiding," Emmeline sighed. It was more the fact of him doing the dreaded martyrdom again. "I just want you to tell me when something happens to you, no matter what. Lily and James won't be any less dead, but you could certainly get hurt, so you take priority over moping."

"I will try to be more forthcoming, regardless of the surrounding situation." He tipped a little nod. "It may not have made the interactions any safer, considering how closely she would be monitoring for duplicity, but I sense that is not always the point."

"I'd trust those senses," Emmeline said, pushing herself back into the chair with a sigh. "I cannot watch your back if I don't know you're in danger at that moment. Whether it helps or doesn't, I must try."

"Skilled though I might be at side-stepping mortal danger," he began in a quippy tone, "I will prioritise communication at my next available brush with death."

"I'm going to the the source of the mortal danger if you keep that up," Emmeline replied, sourly.
This was Bellatrix Lestrange; no ordinary Death Eater, and someone who could step over their own mother to get what they want. "Well, no, I won't because frankly at this point, you've had enough brushes with mortal peril to paint an obnoxiously large canvas and need no encouragement. I was simply worried for both your safety - and my remaining books, of course."

"I must admit that the state of the drawing room has been troubling me - books included." Shaking his head, Regulus huffed dryly, "I accept that she does not have any respect for our lives, but a bit of respect for the ancestral home and its contents would have been nice."

"I don’t claim to know what she thinks," Emmeline admitted, other than pain and death and other dreadful things. ""I don’t suppose there’s anyone else you can ask."

"I am planning to go back and check on the house, collect Deimos and any other things I would like to keep with me, so I can look, then,” he said, drumming his fingers lightly on the book cover in his lap. “I will watch for your books, as well.”

"I was joking about the books," Emmeline said. (Sort of joking.) "Books are replaceable. You are not."

His shook his head, slightly. "Though I appreciate the distinction and consider you to be equally irreplaceable, I would be going back, regardless, and I'm not going to ask someone to check my own house for me."

"I agree," Emmeline nodded. She hadn't expected anything less from him. "But you should not go alone."

"I expect Sirius will want to gather anything he values, but you are welcome to come along too, if you decide you would like to,” he offered. “In case your wayward books decide to resurface.”

"I have what I value most from the house already," Emmeline said, trying to fight the desire for a blush. A little sappy, perhaps, but true nonetheless. She had the feeling he didn’t hear much about his own value very often, either. "But I meant more of traps. She's had the time."

Flattening his mouth a little, Regulus nodded. "It’s true."

"Take an Auror," Emmeline requested. "Even if it's Tonks. She'll stumble into the trap, and it'll misfire, because I bet no one would ever think you'd be even half as accident prone."

"An ingenious plan," he said, lightly. "I will see if she is interested."

"You can ask when she gets here," Emmeline replied. "They'll be invading shortly."

"The full Order?" he clarified.

"No, we more or less covered it early this morning,” Emmeline replied. No conclusions had been come to, but everyone became very worried. "There were no further attacks. This was wholly personal."

"Personal is an accurate descriptor, yes,” Regulus said dryly, releasing a huff. “Anything of note to report from the first round of discussion?"

"Other than worry it is a pattern, regardless of it being personal.” Emmeline couldn't deny this was Order member number three to lose their home in recent months. "Are you staying here?"

"Nothing had been decided beyond the immediacy of last night,” Regulus responded. “I believe a
new safe house is being arranged, but I don’t know the timeline.”

Emmeline leaned closer. “But you don’t like other people in your space.” That was something hardwon for herself, and even then, she didn’t go snooping about that much.

His mouth flicked up a little. “You are correct. Safehouses are not what I would call ideal.”

"Then why are you putting yourself, and let us be honest here, everyone else though that?" Emmeline tapped on the fabric a few times. "Stay here. I probably have at least a month before it becomes a bloody inferno."

“I don’t make a habit of inviting myself to stay in other people’s homes,” he quipped lightly, meeting her eyes with a little smile, “but given the offer, I do enjoy - and prefer - your company… Though I must disclose that I have kept Kreacher with me, and given his disposition and sensitive knowledge set, it seems most prudent to keep it that way. I know the two of you are not particularly fond of each other, but leaving him alone with Sirius, with no mediation, is probably… not a good idea.” At that, Regulus crinkled his expression, slightly. “You needn’t feel obligated. I should not be displaced for too long, once I secure the properties.”

In all of her years, Emmeline had never imagined a situation that would cause her to be at a disadvantage for not taking care of magical creatures, but she supposed it was the closest thing to study she could think of in regards to house-elves. One quite belligerent house-elf, at that. "I think it rather does matter, though not for reasons pertaining to your current predicament," Emmeline added, her voice wavering and unsure whether or not to go for a humorous or a straight-talking but awkward approach. "I will always be grateful of someone else who desires to keep you still among the living, but it has been half a year of avoidances and selective hearing. Regardless of whether or not the entanglement we're indulging in becomes something permanent or not, we are still friends, and as such, spend a considerable time in and out of places. Either he'll adjust to me, and I rather think me to him as I'm aware I'm particular about my organised chaos, or it'll be troublesome. Regardless, it's something done with the best foot forward."

Regulus gave a small nod. "It is my hope that the two of you will adjust, but I do not want to impose on your space, either.”

"With all due respect," Emmeline began, in a loud whisper, "if his only experiences of the magical world were within the walls of Number Twelve, or even Iago, then well, it would be difficult. I wouldn't know what to make of someone like me if I were in that situation. Well, I do, I've seen the words carved into many a bathroom stall, but my point is that adjustment cannot happen without exposure, and if I expect to lug you off to the desert one day or to go touch moon rocks or what have you, then adjustment has to happen."

“Fair enough. If you do not object to his presence, then I accept,” Regulus said with a punctuating nod. “Though I must ask what plans you have for the desert.”

Emmeline smiled. "You'll have to stay out of trouble long enough to see, won't you?"

“Must I avoid all trouble, or just the fatal variety?"

"That depends," Emmeline asked. Half the people he knew were trouble, there was no way he’d avoid it. "Am I considered trouble?"

“I don't consider you to be trouble,” he said, taking her hand to press a kiss to her knuckles. “Or at least not troublesome. After all, you have technically been arrested more times than I have.”
The happy moment was so brief, as Emmeline deflated at that. "It was only a caution!" It was completely ridiculous, at that. There were many things she missed about Marlene and Lily, but at moments like this, she mostly missed the fact that she was the person left to deal with the mockery that came with their attempts at a little low-key activism. She could blame Sirius, if she so wanted, but telling Regulus he had a troublesome teenage sibling was a little redundant. "My single flirtation with the legal system, and it wasn't even my idea. That is the tragedy of outliving people - you have to try and explain their thought process when you're not entirely sure that you even knew at the time, and it never does them justice."

"I did not intend to dampen your mood," Regulus said, squeezing her hand. "You are very clearly not the source of trouble in this scenario."

"You didn't," Emmeline assured him, squeezing it back. "It was a long time ago now. Perhaps it should still be an all encompassing grief, but it's not. I just genuinely don't remember how we all ended up so riled we decided to take on civil disobedience. It could be the natural course of memory, or the fact that we weren't exactly sober, but I like to step outside of my comforts to get into the grit now and then. At least I'm a funny story to tell at family gatherings, up there with a cousin once removed who attempted to ride a muggle cleaning contraption instead of his broom and plunged to his doom, or the story of the topless garden for the millionth time."

"Topless garden?" Regulus echoed, lifting his brow.

"My great aunt lives near nude sunbathing but believes in some measure of modesty," Emmeline said, trying very hard not to picture it. "I promise never to take you there."

Making a subtle face, he shook his head. "I appreciate that. It saves me the trouble of declining."

"Your family has its quirks," Emmeline said, evenly. "As does mine."

"So it seems. I haven't had the pleasure of meeting most of them, but I'm sure they are lovely, nude scenery aside."

"Lovely isn't really the word I'd use," Emmeline said, trying to hide the grimace. "I don't know what your standards are for that, but..." A little earlier than planned, but Emmeline supposed that was the problem with dating a details man, so she supposed she could go with it and talk about it. "My grandmother is coming in a few weeks, so if you are staying here, that is a potential downside if you don't feel quite up to another interrogation."

"I expect that interrogations are inevitable... but will she be staying here as well?" He looked upward at the floor above. "I can find alternative arrangements, if you need the space."

"I'll invite her, but she'll stay at the same hotel she always stays at." She liked things a very specific way, and they were bound to get on each other's nerves. "She likes everything in its proper place and knows I'm still living out of boxes. She's ninety. I don't think her heart could take staying here."

"That is more manageable, then," he said as he lowered his attention back down to their conversation. "Far more so than trying to explain my current living circumstances. Unnecessary focus on my murderous cousin is not where I would like to start with impressions."

"It's not going to Bellatrix Lestrange you'll have to contend with." Emmeline winced at the idea. "But Nana Henley went to Hogwarts. Would you like to hazard a guess as to who her Headmaster was?"
Regulus didn’t miss a beat. “He isn’t that bad.”

"Nana Henley," Emmeline paused for effect. "She was in Gryffindor."

“Don’t worry, I won’t hold that against her,” he quipped. “Though it is strange to imagine you with a Gryffindor grandmother.”

Emmeline laughed; of course he had trouble seeing the Gryffindor traits in her when he saw her now, the settled adult; but she had been around them her entire life. "I forget that this is still new," she admitted. "But...I've been around Gryffindors more than any other house. My best friends were Gryffindor, my flatmate. I spent half my time in my later teens at protests with Lily, lighting up Knockturn with Marlene, going to gigs with Mary, smoking with Sirius and Remus on the floor of the flat, drinking in the back of the Hog's Head with Benjy and Fabian trying to solve some ridiculous ward sets we'd run into. I never made strong friendships in my own house, but I like people who do things with their whole heart, and sometimes I need a little push to do that too. I get too caught up in my head. A little more heart helps me balance myself out."

“It sounds exhausting when you list it out like that,” he remarked.

"I was young then," Emmeline tapped both her knees. "No more floor adventures for me. I prefer quiet, warm, and cozy these days."

“Sometimes, I get this strange impression that I did not experience youth in the same way as the rest of you,” he said with a flattened smile, shaking his head.

"It was liberation without guilt," Emmeline replied. "I don't know if you've ever really had that."

“The guilt is a very important component.”

“To you,” Emmeline replied.

Leaning back into the soda cushions, he sighed. “Jesting aside, I don’t particularly like the feeling.”

“Neither do I,” Emmeline admitted. “You don't need to feel guilty with me. “

“I know,” he said, pensively, “even if my internal state is not always cooperative on the matter.”

"And now I've upset you. We're a pair today." Emmeline sighed, wondering how two perfectly intelligent people got trapped this easily. "Do you want a study guide? I don't have a family tree, but I can attempt to make you feel a little prepared. If nothing else, I suppose you could ask her about the Grindelwald War things you found. She loves to talk about the war."

“T’m not upset - just thinking,” he clarified, shaking his head. “But I do appreciate a good study guide. I must admit some curiosity.”

"About the war or my grandmother?" Emmeline inquired.

“Your grandmother,” he specified in return, “though the war is a curious topic. Fortunately, my family was not particularly motivated to participate in that one.”

As far as he knew. It seemed like there was a version of what happened behind closed doors for his family and what everyone else was told. Like most families, she supposed. "At least it was Nana Vance whose thimbles were destroyed, so she can't hold that one. Nana Henley - Alexandrina, for a start, Henley is her surname - is the harder of the two to win over, but I can't truly blame her. The
wars have taken all of her children’s lives. I'm her only surviving grandchild, and I haven't exactly been proactive with procreation, so she can be a little protective. She means well."

“…I can understand that. The war is whittling down families, sometimes regardless of direct involvement,” he said, shaking his head. “I am invested in you surviving this one, too, so we have at least that in common.”

"Then we'd better get the gang together and raid your place," Emmeline replied. "In case something goes wrong, and I've left some giant clues as to the nature of our relationship lying about."

“Phineas could realistically tattle, but I don't think he will,” Regulus said with a thoughtful expression. “But I hope, all the same, that Bellatrix did not explore too thoroughly, in case he is feeling particularly bored. I would rather not motivate the Death Eaters into even more pointed attempts against you.”

It was a fascinating point. Phineas Nigellus had been a Hogwarts headmaster, thus generally seemed to be more neutral than biased, but he was also a purist. "When it comes to loyalty, do you think it's more to you or the ideal that Bellatrix represents?"

“Judging by his willingness to protect my vigilante status when given ample opportunity to reveal it directly to Narcissa and Draco, I think he is more loyal to me, at this point.” Regulus tipped his chin. “I don't think he particularly cares for the company I keep, but preserving the family name seems to be superseding political preferences. He even humoured my questions about the burn marks surrounding his generation of the tree, so perhaps he has decided he cannot be too picky. Or perhaps he felt that way before, too… I never knew him when he was alive, so it is difficult to say.”

"I suppose he might think you'll come to your 'senses' and settle down to continue the pure lineage one day." Emmeline was absolutely certain that's what Nana thought, given the earful she'd gotten. "Or he'd prefer a half-blood name survival to no survival at all, or perhaps worse to him, the last child around that house being Harry."

“Each of those are entirely possible,” Regulus granted. “Whatever his motivation, I'm grateful that it is favourable to us - even if my senses are perfectly fine.”

"I have to believe there is some family loyalty there," Emmeline said, softly. "Even if what constitutes it seems to vary greatly between my definition and theirs."

“…I would like to think so, too,” Regulus said, nodding slightly. “Thus far, that loyalty seems to be holding - a small comfort amidst the otherwise disappointing attempts to foster any sort of familial cooperation.”

Privately, Emmeline doubted familial co-operation of any sort was likely to happen at all, but she supposed he had to have hope. "I'll send the rally cry," Emmeline said, after a moment. It would be better to get this over with.

Confessing his rogue Bellatrix meeting to Emmeline had gone better than it could have - better than it had with Sirius, but Regulus supposed mutual exhaustion had not been the best timing. When night had fallen solid over England, the Order meeting formed around them right there in Emmeline’s home, shrouded by the relative anonymity of her new location. Sirius had arrived early, rolling his eyes with a stray comment along the lines of so you haven't been kidnapped, then, though Regulus though that was rather obvious. Perhaps not the politest thing he had even done
under the influence of sleep deprivation, but a logical enough assumption…

Kingsley and Remus showed up next - the former extending a sobered greeting, and the latter as polite as ever. Kingsley added that Mad-Eye Moody would be along at some point, but he had not shown up yet. Regulus could not shake the unsettled feeling of having to admit anything about Bellatrix while Mad-Eye was in the room, much less the details, but hiding it would only make it worse - and if nothing else, telling Dedalus, Sirius, and Emme about it meant that he couldn't get away with long-term silence, even if the temptation struck...

“Did you decide whether or not to report the incursion?” Emmeline asked.

“I intend to, unless there are recommendations otherwise,” Regulus confirmed. However unlikely it might be that Bellatrix or any other Death Eater would bring it up to the Ministry, having their attacks against him on file probably looked better for his ‘not a Death Eater’ case than anything, and he was not at all in the mood to protect Bellatrix from another charge if she was insistent on being this way. “It would look, to the Ministry, like a retaliation against my pursuit of a pardon, or even a family grudge, sooner than it would look like evidence of vigilantism, so it’s probably better to appear upfront with them.”

"My concern would be what she knows could be a potential problem if she decides to air it," Kingsley replied, grimly. "Vigilantism, yes, but other things could make life difficult."

“She can already make life difficult, reported or not. I imagine this is one of her least offensive charges,” Regulus said, shaking his head. “But you know the Ministry better than I can claim to.”

"It's up to you," Kingsley replied. "Every part helps, but it would be unfair for you to go into not knowing that being dragged through the mud is a possible outcome."

"How much more difficult can it get?” Sirius drawled. "He's already related to several mass murderers, torturers, thieves, and whatever our dear mother was."

Regulus shot a pursed look in Sirius’s direction; though it had vaguely resembled a supportive statement, more than likely, his brother was just capitalising on an opportunity to take a shot at their various family members, both living and dead.

Looking back to Kingsley, Regulus responded, “I was imagining a more subdued report, rather than something to openly incite her irritation. I don't care for broadcasting it in the Prophet, and the Ministry is already in pursuit.” Shaking his head, he added, “Of course, there are Death Eaters within law enforcement, so I'm aware they could access file information if they wanted to, but it would not be the most offensive thing I've done in the last forty-eight hours. With that being said, I do want to consider the factors ahead of time. I could imagine the time lapse being a potential concern, and it is not as though I like talking about it more than I must.”

"I can quietly add it to the file if you wish," Kingsley offered.

“That would be preferable, yes.” Regulus tilted his head in a little nod. “Thank you.”

"But the house needs to be gone through, regardless," Emmeline pointed out. "Molly and Arthur's children, even Harry, have left things there."

"Tonks is staking it out." Sirius replied. "But we also need to get another backup safe house now - nothing she knows of is an option because Regulus has really pissed her off, and I do that by breathing."

How unpleasantly ironic it was to own multiple properties and find oneself unable to live in any of
them because one’s murderous cousin knew those properties existed. Flattening his mouth a little, Regulus nodded. “It’s true.”

"Maybe you should keep a low profile," Emmeline suggested. "Just for a bit."

"Why?" Sirius asked. "She's not going to get less angry. That's not how it works."

“I’m not planning to directly aggravate her in the immediate future,” Regulus confirmed with a little nod, “but with that being said, her grudge is not likely to cool, no. It is more for the sake of reprieve than any hope for a calmer response. I’ve had quite enough interaction with Bellatrix for the moment.”

"Hear, hear," Emmeline added.

"Is everyone well enough to clear it out tonight, before it becomes suspect?" Kingsley asked.

"We can do it now," Sirius replied.

In response, Emmeline leaned over and prodded him in the leg until he moved. "Give me a list. I think you're sitting this one out. Do you know how to write a list?"

"I know how to write a list," Sirius hissed. "But it's my things, and I want to get them. Regulus won’t let someone go through his drawers, either."

“We’ve already established that I’m going,” Regulus said, punctuating with a nod.

“Then I will too,” Remus added, looking to Sirius."I think I’d know what you would want, and I doubt you can shock me with anything in there. If there are no objections?"

“I have no objections,” Regulus said, shaking his head.

“Then we should go,” Remus said, before rising. “We’ll be quick as we can be, Try not to get attacked in the meantime.”

Wryly, Regulus nodded. Perhaps mentioning Mad-Eye could wait a little bit longer. “Agreed.”

After Umbridge had gone, Harry had no intention of carrying on with Dumbledore's Army. There wasn't a new threat to take on at Hogwarts; just an old, snide one. There were some strange things happening at the school, though. Hagrid had told them about it over tea; Slughorn commented missing items in Potions, even his own stuff disappearing. Then there was whoever he'd seen in the dark, which was definitely Draco Malfoy, no matter how much Hermione rolled her eyes about it. He hadn't caught him out, but Harry was sure it was only a matter of time.

However, studying was exhausting, and being captain was harder than he'd thought. He wondered now and then whether his father had struggled, too, but dismissed it; he was probably just not really suited to it. But between practice, Dumbledore's looks into Voldemort's past, and NEWT study, he wasn't able to track Malfoy as much as he'd like.

“What about the map?” Ron had asked him, after a long grouse about it one night. They were alone in the common room, save for Hermione who had her back to Ron.

“I can't look at it all the time,” Harry said, though part of the problem with that was the map being one of a kind. He'd asked Sirius, but they'd not wanted copies flying about, so it would have to be done from scratch if he wanted another. Besides that, Harry reckoned if Snape got hold of it, he'd
burn it and claim he lost it.

“You could talk to the DA,” Ron suggested.

“Only if you want to hear about how snorcacks or heliopaths are responsible for what's going on,” Hermione interjected.

“So you admit there's something going on,” Harry said.

“I was there the other night,” Hermione said, still not acknowledging Ron in the slightest.

“You could have woken me,” Ron said.

Hermione ignored him, so Harry swiftly moved them along. “What would the DA do?”

“Well, they're everywhere,” Hermione allowed, gesturing across the tables but somehow still completely blanking Ron. “Even outside of Hogwarts. If you want someone to be watching for shady behaviour, it's not a completely terrible idea.”

“Thanks,” Ron deadpanned.

Hermione said nothing.

“No one's in Slytherin, though,” Harry said.

“Would you really want anyone from Slytherin?” Ron asked.

Harry thought about the Slytherins in his year with a barely suppressed shudder. “Not really.”

“Besides that,” Ron said. “There's a war on, right? There may not be any Umbridge to take down, but You-Know-Who's gotten in here before.”

Ron was right, Harry could admit. All of Hogwarts wasn't safe, in the walls or out. They'd heard whispers of students not coming back after the holidays already. If something was going on, it was up to them to figure it out and stop it before things got worse.

“Are you going to be able to handle it being in the same room together?” Harry asked, even though he really didn't want to.

“I'll be fine,” Hermione replied snippily. “But you may want to ask him if he comes sold separately.”

Harry didn’t know what he could say to that. He had come in to find Lavender sitting on Ron’s lap almost every time, but it was his business. Mostly, he’d been practicing silence, but without another person in the common room, it was hard not to notice how cold the air in the room became.

As if in answer to his silent hope, the portrait swung open. It wasn’t another student, but rather, Professor McGonagall. She seemed surprised to see them. “I don’t know why I’m surprised you’re still awake,” she said, almost answering his thought.

“It’s NEWT year,” Hermione said, as if that explained it.

McGonagall didn’t look like she bought it. “Come with me, Potter.”

Harry thought back to the night he’d been watching the Headmaster’s corridor. It was the only
thing he could think of he’d really done wrong lately. Wrong enough to get him in trouble with his head of house. “Just me?”

“Unless there’s something Weasley or Granger would like to tell me?” McGonagall flicked her eyes over both of them, but they didn’t seem to know what it was about either. "No? Then we’ll be back shortly. Come along."

Tonks was already at Grimmauld Place when Regulus, Emmeline, and Remus arrived shortly after their meeting’s conclusion. If there had been any special traps laid for entry by Bellatrix, those traps had been neutralised before they ever stepped foot inside. Tonks had no stories to tell, so more than likely, his cousin had been too fixated on the moment to set anything too extensive - or perhaps the curses were just set further in, considering the entrance was not representative in the least… More furniture looked to be knocked out of place, but nothing quite as damaging as the drawing room.

“We are splitting up, yes?” Regulus said, looking forward, as if to peer through the floors above.

Tonks nodded, then reached into her back pocket to draw her wand. "Haven't had a chance to get a proper look about, but the most incriminating stuff's probably upstairs. Library, study, bedrooms."

"If she's been smart about it, then checking to see how many beds look slept in would be the first stop," Emmeline said, glancing up the stairs.

"If we're lucky, she stormed out the moment you stopped fighting," Remus added. "But we can check the kitchens too, evidence of meals is also a telling point."

"Besides," Tonks said, with a wink entirely too upbeat for the conversation. "When are we ever lucky? Let's go down the basement, meet in the drawing room."

Regulus nodded, then looked to Emmeline. “Would you like to start upstairs with me?”

"I think so," Emmeline said. "Just don't tell people, going straight to the bedroom will ruin my reputation."

"We'll check Harry's room after we've covered the bottom floors," Remus offered, taking Tonks suddenly by the shoulders and moving her to the side of a table she was about to crash into without a word. "I have no doubt he's left things in there, and they'll have to go to the Burrow. Let's try not to wake any portraits, either."

Regulus nodded. “We shall see you in the drawing room, shortly, then."

Holding out an arm for Emmeline, Regulus then apparated directly to the top floor with swift *pop*, initiating their end of the search without further preamble. At first glance, no doors were blown from their hinges, so that was a decent start, but he knew better than to assume any certainty of safety when Bellatrix had been involved.

“You are welcome to come with me, or if you have the list, you can start in Sirius’s room,” he said as he briefly checked his door for any immediate signs of tampering.

"Are you planning to talk to Phineas in the - what, playroom? - afterwards?" Emmeline inquired, despite the fact she was already nodding.

“Yes. If he was in his portrait here at the time, he may well have heard the commotion, regardless of whether she found him.” No sign of the likeliest curses, so he opened the door and found that his
room appeared to be untouched - then some tangle of nerves loosened, slightly, as he tentatively stepped inside. Again, no terrible onslaught, so he approached the wardrobe to start collecting his things - starting with the bag holding the locket…

Emmeline disappeared down the hall for a grand total of about a minute, before she poked her head back around Regulus's door.

"Help," she said, in a loud whisper. "I can get the things just fine - they're half on the bed and floor - but I can't tell if the room has been tossed around or if he simply lives like that."

“I suspect it is a normal state of disarray, but I will come confirm,” he responded, setting aside a few robes and walking back down the hall with her to peer inside his brother’s room. Half of it was scattered around the various surfaces, and the chair wasn’t tucked into the desk, but it did not look especially different. He resisted the urge to cringe, but that, too, was consistent with his expectations. “This is typical, yes.”

"I suddenly feel less self conscious of my boxes," Emmeline replied, bending down to pick up some scattered pictures. She began collecting things without further comment, though did mutter to herself, "Someone introduce a photo album, or frames, or something..."

“He is highly allergic to organisation. You are in no such luck,” Regulus said wryly as he stepped back out again. “I will see you in the hallway in a moment.”

The gathering process did not last much longer; his horcrux materials were swift to be located, as was the letter from Harry, his robes and bedclothes for the immediate future, the high priority books kept his in his room, and of course, Deimos, who was hooting a bit frantically. If Regulus had to guess, he had not much liked being cooped up all day, but at least he could feel confident that Bella had not visited to top floors. He sincerely doubted she would have left his owl alive.

When he and Emmeline were out in the hallway again, he set Deimos’s cage down alongside his bag and approached the old nursery. Once again, it showed no signs of a trap, so he peeked in, lit the room, and saw Phineas Nigellus, snoozing in his portrait, as ever.

“Phineas?” he asked, waiting for an eye to crack open. “Did Bellatrix come up here last night?”

“So she was the one making all that commotion,” Phineas said, disgruntled, though he seemed to accept the interruption to his sleep (real or feigned). “No respect for a sleeping house.”

“Or for the house in general,” Regulus remarked in a dry tone. “She tore apart the drawing room to attack us, so… if ever she thinks to come talk to you, I would appreciate-”

“-Some discretion, I know. I think I’m having deja vu,” Phineas quipped, adjusting his sleeping cap. “That girl never sought me out before, but if she decides to now, I’m not going to help her kill off our name.” Phineas flicked his eyes over to Emmeline standing by the door, but didn’t say anything until he had looked back to Regulus. “Did you need anything else, or does that cover it?”

Regulus blinked for a beat, then shook his head. “I believe that covers it.”

“Good. Do try to stay alive.”

Regulus nodded, this time. “Of course. Sleep well, then,” he said, glancing at Emmeline as Phineas muttered some response.

"Do you want to check your mother’s room, while I attempt not to perish at the hands of leftover contraptions from the Weasley twins in the spares?” Emmeline asked, once they had vacated the
Regulus nodded, closing the door behind them - and they once again set to their task, bringing his bag and owl in tow. Peering into his mother’s room still felt strangely uncomfortable. Whether it was due to her previous occupancy or a hippogriff’s previous occupancy was unclear, even to Regulus, but the discomfort faded again when the door was securely shut.

As he was tentatively coming to expect, the rooms continued to be safe, one after the other. From the study and the library on the next floor down, he gathered a number of books and journals, some belonging to his father and some a part of the family’s collective accumulation. Old family photographs, items passed down through his family… he scarcely even knew where to start when so many rooms were bursting with both. Each space brought a fresh wave of hesitance about leaving any of it vulnerable to Bellatrix, or even to Narcissa if she took her sister’s side, but he knew he could not just shove every book, magical item, and photograph into a trunk. (Or rather, he could with an expanded trunk and a bit of wand-waving, but to clear the house would feel final, as if he was not coming back - and that prospect was a different, or perhaps just more intense, point of distress.)

When both Regulus and Emmeline had completed their search of the top three floors, they passed down to the next, and again, he set down Deimos and the bags. From the stairway, Regulus could see that Remus and Tonks were already inside the drawing room, and he tried to ignore the lurch in his stomach. Equal parts concern for the room and dread about the state of it began to twist anew. Moving forward, each step felt like the thunk of heavy stones, though he knew those steps could not possibly be as loud as they seemed. Remus and Tonks did not even notice them until they were stepping inside.

That lurch in his stomach jolted more aggressively as his eyes flicked over the room. Smears of blood caught his eye first, followed by broken furniture, disturbed bookcases, and a broken cabinet with no small number of objects now peppering the floor around it.

For a panicky moment, he did not even want to look at the tapestry. He thought to force his eyes back to the bloodied floor, turn, and walk out the door - or maybe to tell them all to leave so he could look at in peace… but it was so prominent a display that one had to purposefully ignore it to avoid seeing it. Silent tension was tugging between the other three as Regulus stood stonily in place. The thudding in his chest echoed up into his head with a frantic rhythm, knocking his thoughts around with each beat, and he thought he could probably stand there not looking at the tapestry forever.

Probably - couldn’t.

The sight of the Black family tree struck like a kick to the chest when at last he lifted his eyes, noting the careless marks of stray curses blemishing the ancient fabric, but it was a blackened burn near the bottom that made his head swim - matching char where he and his brother’s names had been.

Behind him, Regulus heard a soft shuffle, and a few beats later, a quiet thunk as the door closed. Silence filled the drawing room as he approached, eyes locked on the tapestry - but when he settled on the floor before it, framed by broken furniture, his spiraling thoughts were anything but silent.

*TRAITOR.*

“How just stop it…” he murmured, face pinching. Ducking his head between his knees with a steadying breath, Regulus tried to block out his thoughts, but even with his eyes clenched shut, he could still
see the scorch mark blackening the back of his eyelids. Bellatrix must have done it, but it was his mother's scowl he imagined, her voice he heard ringing.

TRAITOR.

The evidence of the fight was blatant. Though Emmeline hadn't considered it her home, it was a home, and it still brought back unpleasant tingles at the back of her neck to see another set of antiques torn apart, not unlike her parents' - her own, now. The bookcases looked as if someone had taken a battering ram to them, a splintered cabinet, shattered keepsakes, and a disturbing splotch of blood where the skirmish had obviously occurred.

When she met Tonks's eye, the Auror shrugged. No sign of anything other than sheer tantrum. That fit with what she knew of Bellatrix Lestrange.

Then she looked to Regulus, frozen, following his eyeline. Of course, this would be what he would worry for most in this situation - a family tree stretching generations. It didn't look destroyed, which she supposed was a small mercy for him, but then another thought hit her. Removal from said tree had long been spoken of almost in jest with Sirius, it being noted as the fate supposedly worse than death itself. A fear realised, she noted.

There was a sound that drew her attention. She waved her hand towards the door, with Remus and Tonks slipping outside it. It left Regulus alone with his melancholy, but she supposed that wasn't a bad thing. It seemed like a moment for privacy. They could talk about it later, and if that was a Death Eater returned to finish the job, she would certainly relish a fight.

However, it was just Mad-Eye that met them on the stairs. The sound must have been his leg on the stairs.

"Any sign of Lestrange?" he asked, his eye wandering about.

"Only of the fight," Remus said.

"You check the basement?" Mad-Eye asked.

"We checked the house floor by floor," Tonks said, in a rare appearance of her work voice.

Mad-Eye grunted. "Attic?"

"Admittedly, no." Emmeline replied. She'd forgotten about that. "But there is no evidence she went any further."

"That's how they get you," Mad-Eye waved his wand in her general direction. "You get comfy, and bam! There's a whole family with smouldering eyeball sockets."

Emmeline hoped deeply that wasn't spoken from experience. "I'll do it now, if you like."

"I've checked it," Mad-Eye said. "We'll do another sweep, then get out."

"Alright," Emmeline said. She made a gesture to the door behind them, "I'll attempt to handle this situation if you can do the double checks."

"Are you going back to Mum's?" Tonks asked, while Mad-Eye gave one of the Black ancestors a long, scrutinising look.

"At some point." Emmeline imagined when he was done, Regulus would want to retrieve the
house-elf before he and Sirius decided to become murderous towards each other. But they would need to take Deimos first, as he was currently ruffling his feathers with the bags on the floor outside the drawing room. She knelt down to talk the owl. "If you could be patient for a little while longer, you can stretch as much as you like as soon as we've relocated."

Leaving the others for a final sweep, Emmeline entered the drawing room again as unobtrusively as she could and then cleared her throat to announce it. "I'm afraid we really should go, for now."

Regulus was sitting, feet flat on the floor and his arms resting on his propped knees. For a moment, it wasn’t clear if he’d heard her, but just before she spoke up again, he responded, “You go on. I will catch up later.”

Even as he said it, he was shifting to a crouch towards one of the broken chairs, but the movement looked a little stilted, even as he picked up a torn book.

Emmeline heaved a sigh. "I can't leave you here by yourself," she said. If someone came back, he was already distracted. She walked over slowly, before attempting to squat and not injure herself. She held out her hand for the book. "I know you're upset. I'm sorry."

“It's not your fault,” he said, letting her take it, though he remained crouched in place.

"This was not yours either," Emmeline said, as firmly as she could. She took the book, and hugged it to herself. "It's temporary. You'll be back, and you can fix it up. You can’t do that if you die here. In fact, I expressly forbid such a thing. You have too much to do."

Regulus nodded, first flicking his gaze over to the tapestry again, then meeting her eyes. “I know.” He shifted, then, holding out a hand to her.

Reaching for his hand, Emmeline was struck by the vulnerability of the moment. Being attacked in your own home was awful, she'd had it done often enough to know that, but this wasn't something she could fully understand. It was merely something she knew was causing him a lot of distress. She pulled him into a tight hug because someone really should, and she doubted many others could get away with it. She wasn't entirely sure she would, but stomping down what he was feeling was a terrible idea. "It'll be alright," she said, quietly but she hoped convincingly. "You'll be back before you know it."

Slipping his arms around her, Regulus returned the embrace, resting his chin on her shoulder for a stretching moment - and quietly, he nodded.

"Let's go get your owl," Emmeline replied, pulling herself away and up. The last memory he had of this moment didn't need to be compounded by his mother's portrait being awoken by his owl and screaming. "Then we'll go?"

His expression was solemn, but he nodded again.

Emmeline took his hand to help get him to his feet. Sitting and staring at the tapestry couldn't change anything - but he could do that, if he wished. He'd done it before. One step at a time.
Chapter 23

The morning brought with it Mad-Eye, Remus, and Kingsley clambering into Andromeda's front room. Ted was still dozing on his hand at the table in his dressing gown, mindlessly buttering his toast and most of the plate it was on, but Andromeda seemed to have learned that there'd be people traipsing up and down the place in the early hours and had already gotten up before Sirius had. Regulus had remained at Emmeline's, and when informed of him having a little sleepover, Andromeda has rolled her eyes at him. Whether it was the idea of a bloke in his thirties having a sleepover with his girlfriend or the fact Regulus specifically was, Sirius couldn't be sure.

“That's nightshade,” Mad-Eye said, stalking about Andromeda's pot plants.

“Good eye,” she replied. “Yes, it is.”

“Private cultivation of it's illegal,” Mad-Eye said, poking at it.

“As is vigilantism,” Andromeda said evenly. “I have to trust people not to be stupid enough to just eat my plant life without asking.”

Moody gave a snort. “I've seen more than a few stupider than that.”

“We should get going,” Kingsley said, looking to Sirius himself. “Are you sure you're up to moving?”

Sirius snorted. “Yes. I love it here, And, but—”

“You need your own space,” Andromeda finished for him, lifting both her hands. “Just be careful not to exert yourself too much on that leg.”

“It won't be the first time I've turned up to a safe house a bit legless,” Sirius told her. “It probably won't be the last, either.”

They ended up apparating down near the Queen's Road station in Peckham. They must've looked a right group, wandering up, but it was important that things could be gotten to without apparating if need be.

“Didn't we have a place on the Queen's road somewhere in '80?” Sirius asked, attempting to keep up with Moody's stride.

“The old run down Victorian place?” Remus asked, glancing back at him. Sirius nodded. “Yes, but that was way up north. I'd rather not do that again. The pipes needed constant charming to stay warm.”

“That wasn't the pipes. It was just me and James mucking about with the water,” Sirius admitted. Remus looked at him sharply, but Sirius could only shrug. “You used to get so huffy, and it was funny.”

It was potentially even funnier to watch Remus try to glower and walk inconspicuously alongside their motley crew.

When they got there, the place definitely had seen better days. The floor had spidery cracks along it, walls half blue and half white with names carved into them. They looked like memorials. A
glance upwards revealed stained glass, hinting at what Sirius was already wondering. “Is this a church?”


“As in the place they put mental people?” Sirius asked, looking around to the sides. Plenty of chairs, a few tables, easily thing to transfigure into beds or screens. Wide and open, with no place to hide. Regulus would hate it; good thing he wasn't hanging about. Sirius didn't mind so much. No surprises. “I know we're a bit barmy, mate but I don't think you need to get the mediwizards involved.”

“It was bombed out in the muggle war,” Kingsley said, pulling chairs out and beginning to space them. “But the structure – and the windows – survived it.”

“We could use a bit of that luck ourselves,” Remus replied. “You're the transfiguration expert. Are you going to stare or help?”

It wasn't true. James had been the transfiguration expert. Though in comparison, he guessed that he could bear that title as well as any.

In the late afternoon, there was an owl from McGonagall to meet up in Emmeline’s living room again when they were done. People like Dedalus would want to move as quick as they could, though how he’d get around the official residence problem, Sirius had no idea. By the time they left, the group had gotten the plumbing functional in the two bathrooms, recovered the office, set up bunk beds with screen curtains, and set out a variety of comfy chairs. The place didn’t look half bad. It was now warded against the muggles too, but it’d need a few more obscure charms for it to be safe from magical hands. Luckily, Sirius knew someone who was pretty good with that kind of thing.

They filed in the back this time, almost stepping on the variety of brambles and whatever else lurked in Emmeline’s new garden. They found the woman herself chatting to Tonks, talking about Ministry things no doubt.

“Any problems?” Emmeline asked.

“No, we’re on track,” Kingsley confirmed.

“Anyone else here yet?” Sirius asked in return. “Aside from Regulus, assuming he’s here.”

“No, but it might take a bit for the professor to get away,” Emmeline replied. “Still no sign of our illustrious leader. Have you heard about this nonsense going on up at the school? It sounds like the restless spirits of your dorm have returned and are mucking about here, there, and everywhere. Regulus did come back here, however I’m not sure if he’ll choose join in or not. He may want a little privacy.”

“He always wants a little privacy,” Sirius replied, heading towards the narrow staircase. “It’s never stopped me before.”

All the doors on the second landing were closed. It wasn't likely he'd be able to hear Regulus even if he weren't upset, but there wasn't a shot in hell now. He picked a door at random.

“You decent?”

“Yes,” Regulus called back through the door.
Bingo! Sirius pushed the door open to find Regulus sitting with a book. Come rain, shine, or storm, that's where Regulus would be found. "You alright?"

Regulus frowned at his book but didn't look up. "Alive and well, no traps triggered."

"McGonagall is coming down," Sirius said. He didn't buy it for a minute, but he supposed he could humour him for now. "If you want to tell them why Bellatrix got curse-happy, now is a good time."

This time, he nodded. "I will... Has everyone arrived?"

"Not yet," Sirius asked. "Did you want to make an entrance?"

"No," Regulus said, lingering just a beat longer before he closed the book, set it down, and stood up.

"Are you sure?" Sirius asked. "I'm not forcing you to do it now. You can say no."

"Sooner is better than later," Regulus said, shaking his head. "I would rather get it over and done with."

"You can bring the book to hide behind if you want." He wouldn't take him up on the offer, but Sirius had to offer regardless.

"I'm alright." Regulus approached the door, then slipped past Sirius into the hallway.

That was not a real alright. Sirius might have been a self-centred little prick as a teenager, but he reckoned even then he would have known that was not a real alright. But this wasn't throwing him to the wolves. This was the Order.

On the way down, Sirius saw the telltale tartan cloth that gave away the arrival of McGonagall. He gave her a cheeky wink, then followed her into the front room. He flopped down onto the arm of the chair, leaning his head back. "Safe house is set up."

"I'm glad to hear it," McGonagall said. "I've let Potter know, but everything that isn't essential is being put to one side until we get our bearings."

Regulus settled on the couch beside Emmeline, exchanging a look with her but not saying anything.

"Anything to report from the house?" Sirius asked.

"Damage was contained to the drawing room," Emmeline answered. "Assuming you do in fact live like that."

Sirius flipped her off.

"You're going to the new place, aren't you?" Emmeline asked.

"Yep," Sirius said, with a shrug. "I love it at Andromeda's, but it's basically a dollhouse. I also don't fancy painting her as more involved than she is."

"Dedalus will be joining you," Kingsley added. "Regulus?"

"I am here, for the moment," Regulus responded with a shift.

"Any word on Dumbledore?" Remus asked.
"He's tracking something out of the country, but will be back in a few weeks." McGonagall replied. "Do you think everyone can stay out of trouble that long?"

Regulus nodded to that, paused a beat, then seemed to steel himself. "Speaking of trouble... Now that the dust has settled, I would like to expand on the circumstances of this recent attack. Bellatrix contacted me shortly before with plans to sabotage Moody, specifically. It is... quite evident that she is dissatisfied with the lack of cooperation... With that being said, I do not know if they intend to pursue this sabotage further, so I wanted to draw your attention to it, regardless."

"Why Mad-Eye?" Remus asked. "Out of anyone."

"You mean other than him being the best bloody catcher of Death Eaters in history?" Tonks replied, from her spot perched behind the couch.

Sirius had a better idea, even though Regulus had told him it was about offering him the Death Eater responsible for their father's death on a silver platter. For Regulus, family - especially close family - meant the world, moon, and stars to him, and even outside of Malfoy (who he could agree was a fop) or Lestrange (who was horrifying), there was one person he could directly attribute to Moody. Evan Rosier had been their cousin through Andromeda's mother - somewhere down in his rickety memories, Sirius could even recall a time he liked the bastard too - but Rosier and Moody had fought it hard. She could so easily use the fact he killed 'family' as a good reason not to give a shit about him.

"You killed someone he liked," Sirius suggested.

"Oh, I did, did I?" Moody looked around to Regulus. "Who might that be?"

Looking uncomfortable, Regulus shot Sirius a glance, then turned back to Moody. "Evan," he answered, stiffly.

"Rosier, eh?" Moody said, with a tap to what remained of his nose.

"He was Bellatrix's direct cousin," Sirius said. "Family can be a touchy subject."

Regulus tipped a small nod but didn't say anything else.

"She was probably expecting to snap her fingers, say jump, and Regulus to say how high. If I hadn't seen the changes with my own two eyes, I probably would have thought it'd work too," Sirius said. "The shut down defence didn't work any better with this crowd than it did with his old one, but Sirius at least had a decent idea of what he would say if he wasn't dealing with his childhood nightmare. "She tried to force a choice he had already made and had a tantrum when it wasn't what she wanted. Mad-Eye can watch his back, but beyond that, I don't think there's anything else you want to say. Other than 'I won't correspond with Death Eaters without telling someone as quickly as possible so I don't get tortured, dead, or worse.'"

Silently, Regulus nodded again.

"You talked to a Death Eater and didn't inform anyone for a week?" Remus asked, quietly. Sirius could see the echo of betrayal on there, but Regulus couldn't deny he'd made another stupid decision. He just had to ride it out.

"That's not cool, mate," Tonks added.

"He didn't do anything about it," Emmeline said, glancing towards Regulus. "He's also had severe consequences for it."
“But again, it's something having to be dealt with in hindsight,” Kingsley told her. “It shouldn't have gone this far without someone knowing. This attempting to do everything by yourself only leads to impulsive choices and danger to everyone.”

“I realise that,” Regulus said, tightly.

"I've done it," Sirius said. "Remember?"

Twenty seemed a long time ago now, but he'd gone to see Bellatrix then too. Not because he cared for the old cow, but because she'd been causing trouble - the Bella special of torture, death, and destruction. It was back when Regulus had already gone, Mrs. P had passed, and he'd gotten sick of the slow and steady. He'd thought he was ready.

"That was a long time ago," Remus said.

"Are you calling me old?" Sirius asked.

"This isn't a joke," Remus said, with a little more bite to it.

"No, it's not, but if you're going to hold it against him, you've got to hold it against me as well. That's how it works when it's fair," Sirius replied, before adding, "Except no one is going to say shit to me about the very idea of being a Death Eater because you already made that mistake. Fucking Snape has done worse, but no one's going to say shit to him either because he shows all this bravery in turning against the Dark Lord, and he didn't even have to give up half his life and bloodline to do it. Be pissed off about it, because I am too, but if you're going to act like him having poor impulse control is a punishable offense, or worse, indication of disloyalty, you can damn well explain to me why he's getting it for doing the same, or less, than two other people."

"We've been blindsided before," Remus said, quietly, to which Regulus winced.

"And he's not bloody Peter either!" Sirius huffed, angrily. "He's put himself on the line a lot, even when he didn't need to, and he fucked up once, and you're getting antsy about it. If he wanted to stay in a place where one fuck up gets you cut off, he'd have stayed with our mum. You got the magic Death Eater compass, Mad-Eye. What's it telling you?"

"That it was a fool’s move," Moody replied. "I don't suffer them much better than Death Eaters, let alone both."

"I’m not going to argue about him being an idiot," Sirius said, and though Regulus shot another look, he still said nothing. "But you’re taking Dumbledore's word on every other screw up around here, so you can keep taking it on this too. Are we done here?"

“T’ll be watching,” Moody said gruffly.

There was a beat before Emmeline said, “I’m not a screw up.”

“I didn’t mean everyone was,” Sirius replied. “Just that if we start getting arsey over people telling the Death Eaters no, we need to re-examine our priorities.

“That was a decent bit of emotional blackmail there,” Tonks added. “Really top notch.”

“Thank your mum for me,” Sirius said, with a quick grin. “I learned from the best.”

"I need a minute," Remus said, standing abruptly. Sirius left him to it. He probably needed to check himself.
"Is he alright?" she asked.

"He'll be okay," Sirius said. "Wrong time of year for this shit. Going to give Bellatrix her dues, she planned that timing perfectly."

With that, Tonks moved up and wandered after them. It was fine. She was young, and Remus hadn't been dealing with the same betrayal for as long as Sirius had. Of course he was going to get upset over the mention of betrayal.

Regulus flicked his eyes around to Kingsley, Mad-Eye, and McGonagall. “My intention was to minimise the situation, but I recognise intentions do not always translate to an ideal end. I will bear that in mind.” Shifting again, he added, “If there is nothing else on the agenda, then I, too, will excuse myself.”

“I’ll send Dedalus your way if he ever arrives,” Emmeline said, patting him on the arm. “The man needs a new pocket watch.”

Regulus looked back at her, nodded, then rose - disappearing up the stairs just a moment later.

Sirius ran his hands over his face. There was an awkward air to the room, one he'd like to run off from, but since Tonks had already decided to go after his best excuse to do so, he supposed he'd have to sit there and deal with it. They needed Dumbledore back at moments like these. A bunch of hot heads, some people who don't handle confrontation, and a lot of them lugging around enough damage that if their mental states were observable, they'd qualify for the Ministry's structural restoration funds.

A change of subject then.

"Any word on the dementor infestation?" he asked.

"The MLEP is out there." Kingsley raised both his hands. "They're doing what they can."

"We should prioritise helping them," Sirius said. He knew more than most, the damage fear could do. "Fear breeds fear."

"Do you have your patronus corporeal again?" Emmeline asked.

Sirius groaned again. How exactly had it turned from Regulus having to confess to fucking up into Sirius having to do homework again?

"I'll work on it," he said. "If nothing else, the thought of never again having to go to Number Twelve might be a happy enough thought to do the trick!"

Regulus's mood had soured significantly by the time he reached his designated guest room. Immediately, he dove into his book again, but his thoughts would not cooperate so easily, sticking instead on tension tugging him downward like a string tied to the living room sofa.

He did not blame them, really. They had their reasons for irritation just as he had his own for keeping a small circle around his problems, but every one of those reasons had fled his mind the moment he had brought the topic up. Even Sirius had managed to communicate Regulus’s situation better than Regulus himself had managed, which was an unsettling mixture of embarrassing and comforting. Naturally, he could think of those reasons now, without any disapproval to counter, but it was not particularly helpful to argue it to himself. As captive as the audience might be, Regulus already knew why he’d done it.
He did not track how much time passed before a knock on the door grabbed at his attention, but it was long enough for his mind to have settled its spin to focus on the book in his hand.

“Come in,” he said.

"Hello," came a rushed whisper as the door opened. "It's Dedalus Diggle! I'm so sorry I'm late, but I assure you, I have been quite hard at work!"

“That is understandable,” Regulus said, setting aside his book and sitting up straighter. “Is everything progressing as it should?”

“I’m requesting someone else from Wizengamot,” Dedalus said, shutting the door behind him, “But there are not too many friendly faces there these days. It’s not ideal, but I am confident in your case, if not the ones that may come after you.”

Regulus nodded, slightly. “That will at least minimise the Death Eaters’ ease in accessing information on the subject. I cannot imagine they have good intentions.”

“But it’s not just about your case,” Dedalus prompted. “Didn’t you also want to focus on there not being a new set of children inducted? Or what would happen if they were?”

Smothering a wince as Draco rose to his mind, Regulus nodded again. “I expect they are not taking me very seriously, at the moment, but I would nonetheless like to try.”

"It depends on what you want to do," Dedalus admitted. "They'll give some people breaks if their juice is good enough, if you know what I mean, but they will make examples out of others. There is something… but it just depends how much of a target you're willing to make of yourself!"

“I am starting to think that any breaks they are intending to give me are very literal,” Regulus said, dryly. “But go on. They already want to kill me, as it is, and I don’t foresee them changing their minds.”

"As contentious a relationship as we have with the media, it's one way to ensure no dirty dealing is done." Dedalus looked around, shiftily. "If you can talk about some of it - not all, but enough - then you could help show the traps some of these kids can fall into! It'd have to be overseen and edited, of course, but you did get out. You could show people it's possible!"

The idea of speaking on the subject sounded nothing short of horrifying, but even as Regulus felt his insides jolt, he could admit that it had the potential to be an effective option. He had considered such a thing, himself, before he’d jumped into the thick of the Order. Death was the price for leaving the Dark Lord’s service, and it had been well-accepted that trying to escape was to forfeit one’s life, most likely to a very unpleasant end. Staying alive became a more vigilant challenge once they realised one was not already dead, but to dismantle the air of permanence and plant even a seed of doubt in the possible recruits was a weapon that he had to admit could not be wielded by many others, at present.

Of course, Regulus recognised it immediately for the reckless taunt that it would be, but perhaps the foolish aspects could be minimised or modified… or perhaps it was worth the risk.

“A good point,” Regulus said aloud after a thoughtful pause. “Do you think the media would go along with something like that - even though I was a Death Eater?”

"I think you'd have to beat them off with your wand," Dedalus said. "But I know some people of the Prophet who aren't total degenerates! Written word would mean you can take more time to compose a response. Or for something more instant, the WWN. At least they couldn't sneak in any
edits.”

With a slow tip of acknowledgement, Regulus responded, “An intriguing option.” Already, the idea was rolling around in his thoughts, sprinkled with equal amounts of hopeful defiance and crippling anxiety - and more immediately, a dab of stress at the thought of bringing such a thing up to Emmeline and his brother after so recent a debacle. Undoubtedly, it would just sound as though he was trying very hard to get himself killed, but it was not so far off from the concerns Regulus had been harboring for well over a year… Dedalus had managed to sound reasonable when explaining it, so perhaps he could hope for the same. “I will think more on it..”

“You were one of Slughorn’s lot as well, weren’t you?” Dedalus chirped. “Now that is a man who knows how to work the presses!”

Regulus did not think his old head of house would be particularly pleased about the Death Eater aspect, but with how much Slughorn liked to feel involved, confiding ahead of time was certain to soften the blow. There was little else like a good tit-for-tat to brighten the man's mood, if he was anything like he had once been.

“Indeed,” Regulus said, punctuated with a nod. “I imagine his hands have been full at Hogwarts, but the term will end soon. Should I go forward with the idea, it is certainly worth reaching out.”

"I'll let you get back to your books, then. So sorry again for the delay in things, but so the wheel turns!" Dedalus said, grim in tone if not in delivery.

Regulus nodded, his own mind turning as Dedalus started shuffling out of the room. “So it does.”

Sirius was going to leave it to Tonks. Really, he was. They were at a relationship point between a few drinks and a bad idea to marriage and kids. This was where he handed to reins over and let it happen, but it only took a glance out the back to see a lot of shuffling about. She was indulging his self-pity. James had always warned them against doing that. Nothing makes you feel more like a victim than being allowed to wallow without intervention. But how could she know that? Sirius wasn't even sure if Tonks had ever met James. It wasn't her fault. She was young, and these wounds were old - scars she didn't have and would never have if he had too much to say about it.

He locked eyes with her, then lingered in Emmeline's hallway until Tonks joined him. This place was nice; pity the curse would probably take it. Even one of the best wizarding strongholds couldn't hold up to the Vance (formerly McKinnon-Vance) curse.

“Did you really go meet up with Bellatrix Lestrange?” she asked.

It wasn't the question he expected. “Yep. I was a stupid idiot back then, and as usual, Regulus likes to copy me about a decade or so late. You don't remember that?”

Tonks shook her head. “I barely remember you at all from back then, just how mum reacted. I'm not sure if what I can remember is a memory or just something I know happened.”

That was a little sad, Sirius supposed, but he could understand the fluidity of memory. His own wasn't always a straight shot either.

“He can't go meeting her.” She sounded serious now. “He's too familiar with her.”

“A little,” Sirius admitted, because it was true enough. Perhaps not now he'd had a real taste of her ire, but in general. “He likes to think he can save everyone.”
“Save Bellatrix Lestrange?” Tonks asked. “Is he serious?”

Unbidden, Sirius could feel the smirk coming even as Tonks rolled her eyes. “Letting go has never been his strong point,” Sirius admitted. “But I don't believe he'd willingly put anyone but himself in danger for that. He's an idiot, but he's an idiot martyr, not an idiot traitor.”

“Are you going to-” Tonks was looking back along to the back door.

“Yes,” Sirius interrupted.

“Cool,” Tonks said, a little forced.

“You'll get the hang of the old shit eventually, if you want to.” Sirius hoped that was reassuring, even as he was taking backwards steps to the door. “Worse comes to worst, I'll write a manual. Whatever she said about it, I reckon Lily did find hers helpful.”

Outside Emmeline's back door, there was just a small patio garden with high walls. While it was outside, it was as close to privacy as he and Remus were about to get. He shut the door behind him, then leaned against what turned out to be a bloody cold wall.

“Out with it then,” Sirius said, bluntly.

“Out with what?” Remus asked.

“Oh, whatever you're second-guessing. Some claptrap about there being signs before Wormtail turned his tail and went to the nastiest kids on the playground, about no matter how close you are to someone that you can never really tell if they're capable of betrayal, that nerves of standing your ground can look like nerves of betrayal, any of it.” Sirius waved his hand around. “I guarantee you that I've had longer to think about it, and while I've made some misjudgements with it, I think you're forgetting some pivotal differences this time.”

“It's not that different,” Remus said, quietly. He hadn't raised his eyes to look at him.

“Yes, it is.” Sirius had spent half his life – a third, actually, but who'd been counting – thinking about this stuff. He knew more than most that knocking it about in your own head without talking any of it out led to stupid decisions and even stupider thoughts. He'd never imagined Remus would forgive him for thinking he was a Death Eater, but there they were. He never imagined having Harry over the summer, but he had. He had definitely never thought he'd be here, now. “For one, it's not '79, or Vance'd still have a stash in her sock drawer, and I'd have led with giving you that so you don't try and do that calm act you like to do that makes you seem more reasonable than me.”

“I don't put on an act,” Remus huffed, but even from this angle, Sirius could see the telltale frown.

“Oh, whatever you're second-guessing. Some claptrap about there being signs before Wormtail turned his tail and went to the nastiest kids on the playground, about no matter how close you are to someone that you can never really tell if they're capable of betrayal, that nerves of standing your ground can look like nerves of betrayal, any of it.” Sirius waved his hand around. “I guarantee you that I've had longer to think about it, and while I've made some misjudgements with it, I think you're forgetting some pivotal differences this time.”

“I know he's your family,” Remus said. “And I do like him, but the problem is that – well -”

Sirius interrupted him. “You are family too. Just because James isn't here insisting on it every five minutes doesn't make it less true.”

“That's the problem,” Remus said, turning to look at him. “We were a family, and it only took one person to tear it apart.”
“So?” Sirius asked, crouching down and cursing the state of his knees as he did it. “Oh, I see. Someone didn't benefit from growing up in a family where you expect someone to run off, tear everything apart, and try to kill you. I'd like to thank my emotionally constipated parents and downright mental grandparents for their service in preparing me for this.”

“It isn't the same thing,” Remus said. “Or I thought it wasn't, at least. I thought we were okay.”

“Yeah, well. So did I.” Sirius shrugged forcibly. “But family evolves and changes, because it has to, or you end up an old crone with a burnt up tapestry surrounded by ghosts. I don't think my mistake was trusting Wormtail, not for what you're thinking of. Although it was a great mistake, the bigger one was not listening to what I was feeling. I was being practical. You were away a lot; we'd been fighting a lot more, but I was in a shitty mood a lot of the time, and I can rile with the best of them; you...weren't human. I didn't want to believe it, in my heart, because it hurt, but I let myself believe it because it made sense even if it felt wrong. Well, fuck feeling wrong. Facts don't tell you anything about who a person is in their heart, and I knew in my gut when push came to shove that he didn't have it in him to be truly brave. I won't make that mistake again. No more second guessing.”

Remus seemed to consider that for a moment. “What is your gut your saying about this?”

“That I am freezing my backside off with a half healed stab wound and a completely inappropriate set of clothes,” Sirius replied. “But also that if someone gives you no reason to doubt their heart, if they put themselves on the line for you, if given the choice they stay with you, then they have earned loyalty and respect. Wormtail chose the easy option – perhaps he thought that if it were him in James's shoes, we would have done the same and dobbed him in, but it's not true. He could have come to us any time that whole year, at any point he could have said he's screwed up, and we'd have helped. We'd have done anything to help him away from danger, wouldn't we?”

“You're right, Moony. We understood what it meant to be family, not just friends - not just related but fucking family.” Sirius could feel hoarseness in his throat, either from the cold, the fact he'd said more today than he reckoned he had in a long time, or because this wasn't an easy subject. “Believe me when I say Regulus knows what family is today more than he ever has in his entire life, and no one has ever been as devoted to the family ideal than he is. He's hurt, and he's gotten the shit kicked out of him, and it might take a while, but he's here. He's trying. He's making the right choices, no matter how much it's tearing him apart. I won't punish him for that. He just took the long way round, and yes, he put himself in danger, and it was stupid, but if we start acting like everything has to be done one way without so much as a toe out of line or a place for making a mistake, we're no better than my parents were.”

“All I ask,” Sirius said, with a nod.
Remus smiled, wanly. “You're getting good at talking things out.”

“That's exhausting,” Sirius said. “I hate it. I hate James for leaving me to do it, that selfish prick.”

Remus smiled tightly at him, then his expression shifted slightly. “Did you actually check Emmeline's sock drawers?”

“I did,” Sirius said. “Either she's moved it or she's gone respectable. It's probably a good thing. I can't imagine my brother high. I'm pretty sure he's been clenching since birth, and his heart might give out if he stops now.”

Remus shook his head. “I still think that might be crossing boundaries of some sort,” he said. “Looking in her drawers.”

“She took pictures of me in my sleep,” Sirius said, indignantly. “She can jog on with her bloody boundaries with that.”

“Do I want to know?” Remus asked.

“I don't have an answer for you,” Sirius replied. “Other than that I am a bloody masterpiece and should be photographed at every available opportunity.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Remus said, but he was at least smiling now. Mission accomplished.

“Remus?” Sirius asked.

“Yes?”

“I know it's been a while since anyone's actually seen me in the morning after sort of way,” Sirius said. “But I'm freezing, so can we please go in before I have to really redefine the meaning of blue balls?”

Sirius caught the tailwind of Dedalus, barely managing a quick hello before he was out the door. He ought to be thinking about getting back himself. He supposed if Dedalus was coming to the safe house, he could talk to him there. Remus bid his own goodbyes, and Sirius wasn't surprised to find that the place had emptied out.

“Dedalus knew,” came Emmeline's voice behind him.

“You need a bell too if you're going to keep doing that,” Sirius grumbled, wandering back into the now empty living room. “About what?”

“The Bellatrix Lestrange business,” Emmeline said, from her spot on one of the chairs. “He – and I quote – didn't realise no one else did.”

Sirius snorted. It figured, didn't it? Lawyers were sworn to confidentiality. It said a lot about Regulus's choices that he confides largely in people legally obligated to keep quiet - not that he's ever been law abiding in his life. “We are a mess lately. It's a good thing we're not hitting the Christmas do at Narcissa's. We can barely deal with our own people at the minute.”

“It's always been a bit of a mess,” Emmeline replied. “But somehow without Alice, or Lily, or Gideon, it feels even more out of sorts. It all feels so real again. We're a Ravenclaw Rebellion with barely a Ravenclaw these days. I'd even take a Dorcas dressing down about now.”

Sirius smiled lightly. “Yeah,” he said. “Me too.”
“Is it just us now?” came Regulus's voice from the stairs as he, too, appeared at the bottom.

"Yeah," Sirius said, glancing over. Bells for everyone. "I'll clear out in a minute."

“Before you do, there is something Dedalus brought up that I thought best to mention,” Regulus said, glancing between them.

That caught his attention again, despite the wariness in his bones. "There's not a problem, is there?"

Regulus shook his head. “Not a problem, but rather a suggestion.”

"Okay," Sirius said, sitting down on the edge of the chair. A suggestion could be good or bad. From a lawyer, potentially good.

"What is it?" Emmeline asked.

“Damaging the Death Eater narrative, I suppose you could say,” Regulus answered, settling down on the nearby sofa. “Appealing to the teenagers who may be experiencing similar pressure, and destroying the perception that there is no way out.”

"Are you going to give a very special assembly talk?" Sirius asked. He didn't think so. Regulus had never shown any inclination towards teaching, and he was as private as they come.

“Just the thought of that is horrifying,” Regulus said, shaking his head. “He mentioned the wireless and the papers. The latter would be more difficult to monitor for misrepresentation, but there are benefits to both."

“You’d have to talk about it on the wireless,” Sirius said, which might have been an obvious comment, he could admit, but Regulus tended to withdraw and nod or shake his head when he was talking about a subject he wasn’t comfortable with. It wouldn’t be riveting radio. “But the Prophet’s a hack.”

“Hestia did a couple of guest spots on the Healer column,” Emmeline said. “Though that might be because of Gwenog.”

“The Prophet never misses an opportunity to mingle with the rich or famous,” Sirius said. Slughorn should take over as part of his retirement. It’d be right up his alley. “This would give you the famous part. Can you deal with that?”

“I don’t particularly like the idea of anyone in my business, but I can deal with a lot of things. Communicating the point is my primary concern,” Regulus said, flattening his mouth slightly.

“It would be a massive invasion of your privacy. You’ll hate that.” That could be part of it, some sort of self-imposed penance because he was feeling guilty over getting out of it all without having had to serve some kind of time for it. “You’re talking about showing the worst version of yourself in a public arena and letting them react. Believe me, it gets you some funny looks.”

“You didn’t actually do any of it,” Emmeline said.

“Have an extremely public breakdown?” Sirius said, with a cringe. “Yes, I did.”

“Oh, I thought you meant mass murder,” Emmeline said.

“Having a public breakdown is much more humiliating and private than mass murder,” Sirius told her. “Besides, he’s not a mass murderer.”
A frown had twisted Regulus's mouth downward. Leaning against the arm of the sofa, Regulus paused a moment before responding, “Dedalus recommended avoiding details, but you are nonetheless correct: The premise is uncomfortable, regardless of details. At the same time, I can't help but think that destabilisation could be helpful at a time when the Death Eaters are surely trying to recruit. I would prefer something more targeted, but a more targeted audience is likewise a more dangerous audience.”

"It could incite discourse. It becomes harder to ignore the implications of something if everyone is talking about it," Emmeline said, with a bob of her head. "But you are putting yourself in danger, again."

"At least he's giving notice this time," Sirius said, only half-joking. Better late than never. "He's already a target. Bellatrix will make sure of it now. In fact, if he's - you're - not specific enough, you can bet she'll provide the specifics next time she gets the chance, and there'll be backlash regardless. Just sign the dotted line on your own immunity first, then decide if you want everyone to know something that embarrassing."

"Is embarrassing really the term?" Emmeline asked. "He didn't, I don't know, wet himself in public. He joined a large-scale terrorist movement as a teenager, and left promptly as an adult."

"That's not going to be what's going to get under his skin," Sirius said. "People will assume either he's complicit or was involved anyway. He's instead going to have to admit that he's hurt people and he doesn't really know why he did it, other than he was told to do it."

To that, Regulus made a face and nodded curtly.

If nothing else, it was a relief to know he was on the right track. As fucked up as it was, it was much more of a disgrace to seem weak than it was to have killed or tortured people.

"It only provides limited outcomes, and he won't like any of them," Sirius went on, listing on his fingers. "There's the fact that he wasn't technically forced to join, but the family - which was pretty big back then - looked bad and decided to let the fifteen-year-old throw himself to martyrdom for it. To anyone not born with the family name is everything shoved down their throat every five seconds, it looks superficial and self-involved to join up over a few snitty, society types."

He lifted another finger. "No one stepping in just makes him look like a weak-willed, gullible little kid who managed to be complicit in making himself a victim. It'd reveal them as the negligent bunch that a lot of them were, but no way is he going to be able to say that. He's only just stopped arguing with me about it, and he's not going to be able to do it under a reporter. Then we have the fact that he actually believed some of it at the time, and he's going to have to admit that to get the people who believe it to even listen to him. So he gets to look either weak, superficial, or gullible because he can't tell the brave parts without exposing exactly how much he knows and painting an even larger target on his back."

“Thank you for that uncomfortably accurate summary, Sirius,” Regulus said, flattening his mouth again.

“Sometimes you need a good bit of uncomfortable truth. Taking it to a public forum could help, but you deserve to know what you’re getting into if you do it. It could help people; it could show that it’s possible to get out; but it’ll cost you, and you’ll have to carry that mark with you for the rest of your days. Besides, you’ve had enough people lie to you for one lifetime, don’t you think?” Sirius said.

Regulus nodded, slightly. “I know. I don't actually want a lie.”
“Can you see a list of questions ahead of time?” Emmeline asked. “You don’t want to sound too rehearsed, but it would help gauge the tone.”

“I don’t wish to go in blind,” he responded, “so if they do not offer, I intend to ask.”

"You're definitely doing this?” Sirius asked.

Regulus pressed his lips to a line, only for a beat, then responded, “I am still turning over the idea... I do not want to rush a decision, but if I can help in a way that is unique to my situation, it is important that I do so.”

"It could help, if only for your unique perspective. The only other person who could make such a statement cannot, or he'll put his position in danger. At the risk of being rude, you are also somewhat more...personable than he is,” Emmeline said, leaning forwards. "If it's what you what you want to do, it's a noble act."

"If he does anything else brave, impulsive, and noble," Sirius said, letting the words drop because he knew it would drive Regulus nuts to be compared with Gryffindor, even now, "the hat's going to demand he come back and get re-sorted."

“You don't have the monopoly on those things,” Regulus said, dryly. “There is nothing wrong with my sorting.”

“No, but the greatest ambition you’ve shown is to have every rare book you can get your hands on,” Sirius responded.

“We agreed on Ravenclaw,” Emmeline said. “If we have to have a shift of house.”

“Anything else you two have agreed on without letting me know?” Sirius asked. Exactly how much time had they ended up spending together to have covered that obscure idea? "Decided on a new post-war career? Have you moved in together, gotten a cat?"

"Why a cat?” Emmeline asked.

"He likes Hermione's," Sirius shrugged. "You have a job, he'd have to be the one taking care of it."

"I have no objections to a cat, but no, we have not moved in together by romantic definitions," Emmeline said. "Though it is highly superior to be able to wander down the hall to talk, rather than to owl, so I can't claim it's not fun."

"Something tells me he wouldn't enjoy the bunk beds in the safe house, so it's probably better to leave that to the next life or death situation he's in." Sirius looked to his brother. "Which won't be long if you decide to tell Voldemort's followers they can tell him where to shove it and live to tell the tale."

“How much angrier can he get, I wonder?” Regulus said, his tone light but not particularly sincere. “By the time he learns of the locket, perhaps that limit will have been reached.”

"If there is one thing I've always been excellent at, it's pissing people off.” From his own dearest mother to the Death Eaters, there could be no doubt Sirius excelled in that area. "So if you want any advice in helping him reach his boiling point and beyond, I'm always happy to ruin his miserable existence. If it were me, I'd just tell the truth about him - starting with his name and direct family history."

"Did Dumbledore not give his name at the battle at the Ministry?” Emmeline inquired.
"I don't think they were listening. I heard they were a little tied up," Sirius replied. He may have been unconscious at the time, but it was all anyone could talk about for weeks on end. He'd gotten the gist of what happened. "Besides, they were old guard. He's trying to stop the bastard preying on the next batch of kids who think they can reclaim magic from its thieves or whatever it is. I'm sure Regulus has the party lines memorised more than I."

“Something like that,” Regulus said, thinly. “I will keep your suggestion in mind.”

“If you’re impending celebrity status is everything, I think I’m going to clear off.” A warm bath and bed was starting to sound nice, if only to dull the ache and cold. The day had been wrenching and long, the day before longer. If he couldn’t do anything productive until the dust settled, he knew he ought to rest. “Don’t do anything dramatic without telling me first. I got you that owl for a reason."

“I'm trying,” Regulus responded with a little sweep of his hand.

“I've always thought so, but the innocent facade gets most people,” Sirius said. He apparated out, if only to get the last word in. It was a rare occasion these days.

“Persephone Avery and children.” Narcissa’s words were punctuated by the scritching of a Dictaquill. On the desk before her, several sheets of parchment were arranged by category, coming together to form the plans for her upcoming winter gala, now just weeks away.

The guest list was her focus now - one that was not normally so daunting a task, but with each passing year, the names on that list seemed to be shifting, whether by purposeful exclusion or by their own volition. For a moment, she pondered at inviting Sophia and Arnold Abbott, along with their children. The pureblood branch of their tree had attended in years past, but Sophia had been rather cold, lately, since her halfblood sister-in-law had been lost to a fire started by the Death Eaters. Such a loss was decidedly not Narcissa’s fault, yet Sophia was not the only one who had chilled to Lucius’s arrest.

The Bulstrodes would be coming, as would the Fawleys, the Flints, the Greengrasses, a branch of the Macmillans, the Urquharts, the Parkinsons, among plenty other others. Whittling away the Abbotts because they wished to place blame was not going to impact the festivities, but she did not like that straining feeling - the one that had clamped down several years ago, continually tugging and tugging at the strings of her carefully knitted life. Killing off halfbloods did not seem like the best use of anyone’s time, but Bella had said she dirtied a pure line with her daughter - a girl in Draco’s year. Ostracisation was clearly the more reasonable response, but saying as much to Bella was a fight that Narcissa did not presently have the gumption to start when she had her own son’s life to worry about.

“Alcander Lestrange,” she said, the quill writing out her sister’s father-in-law now. Although he was a free man, able to come to as many parties as he’d like, she was uncertain whether he would. Since his wife had passed, his sense of obligation had recognisably plummeted. Undoubtedly, both Bella and Rodolphus were positively relieved that they were wanted criminals, unable to mingle with the Society masses, but Rabastan, at least, had seemed disappointed at being excluded.

As she neared the end of her list, Regulus suddenly felt like a strangely conspicuous absence. He shouldn’t, when he had been dead, for all intents and purposes, throughout the majority of their adulthood - nearly two decades. She had never put him on such a list by himself before, yet she felt sad, thinking how far off course he had wandered. That was what happened when impressionable youth foolishly faked their own deaths and disappeared into the sunset instead of asking their family for guidance when things became difficult. In the end, they would find themselves off
Bella had scarcely come home in the past couple of days, and her brief visit had been a stormcloud of anger (and dripping blood) that Narcissa had seen pour in - then pour out again to wherever Death Eaters must go when they were not hiding out. Rodolphus and Rabastan had gone with her, leaving Narcissa alone, but the sense of relaxation had only lasted as long as it took for her to receive a letter from Draco, saying that he wasn’t coming home for Christmas - which was to say no more than twenty-four hours from the time the Lestranges had left.

Narcissa was flipping through the stationary in one of the ground floor drawers when she heard the thunder of her sister popping in again - or perhaps returning, this time.

“I see your wounds were tended to,” Narcissa noted, breaking eye contact with a floral envelope to instead look at Bellatrix. “What happened? You did not say, before.”

“Regulus confirmed his true colours,” her sister practically snarled, “a spineless traitor playing puppet to the likes of Dumbledore.”

“R… Regulus attacked you?”

“No, his loathsome fleabag of a brother bit me with that disgusting maw.” The accusation was clear in Bellatrix’s tone, and Narcissa crinkled her nose sourly. “Whatever he once was, you are to avoid Regulus without exception. He has chosen defiance of the Dark Lord and insult to his heritage, and there will be no mercy for unrepentant traitors.”

Narcissa could feel her thoughts starting to spin, and she reeled backwards to try to piece together what Bella was saying. “He rejected your offer?”

“He rejected my generous offer with a letter.” Bellatrix scowled. “Not even a letter, a note. The arrogance - arrogance that demands a proper lesson.” There was a sharpness to her sister’s face, all hard lines and angles as she glared. “If he will not listen to words, the Cruciatus has a way of waking people up to the grave mistakes they’ve made.”

Narcissa’s insides went cold - the swiftly hot again. “You used the Cruciatus on him? Bella!”

“I did, and I would do it again. The only reason he’s not a smear on the floor is that house-elf of his. Regulus is no better than the rest of those blood traitors, Cissy,” Bellatrix countered, “and he does not deserve your pity or your excuses. You know that.”

“I know that he’s not to be associated with, but must it go that far?” she asked, her mouth sticky.

“He is more than a traitor to his blood - he is a traitor to the Dark Lord. Did you think I was bluffing?” Bella said, a little impatiently. “Do you expect the Dark Lord to tolerate a follower spitting in his face? Aligning with our enemies? All he had to do was sabotage the man who killed Evan, who has put our friends, families, and comrades in Azkaban at a harrowing rate - yet he chose to protect that Auror scum.”

Narcissa felt cold again, washed in a rush of fear and anger. Regulus’s logic had been incomprehensible since returning from wherever he had gone - and he must have plunged deeper into his foolish brother’s Order than she had assumed if favouring Mad-Eye Moody was preferable to avenging Evan… Her two cousins had been friends, and no matter how firm a traitor Regulus was proving himself to be, he had always understood family. Now, everything seemed to blur around him. Evan’s memory could not hold against this new alignment - but would she and Draco, still alive and breathing? Would Lucius? Regulus had insisted he would protect them - but even if
that claim could pave a way out, it could just as easily make things worse.

Though she had known her sister was not bluffing, to see it all unravel for Regulus did nothing to ease her fears for Draco. Draco was not a traitor, not like her cousin had turned out to be, but would Bella see him as such if he left the Dark Lord’s service? The penalty for defection was death-

She jammed her thoughts to a halt, but Bellatrix was still going on without notice.

“Furthermore, he has sought a pardon from the Ministry,” Bellatrix was now adding with disgust in her tone.

“I see.” Narcissa fought hard to mask the thought that a pardon was not in itself a terrible thing. If they could manage one for Lucius or Draco when all of this was over, she would pursue it in a heartbeat. Even so, his dismissal Evan's death stung no less, and she could not shake it. “He knows too much, and he will not stay silent for our sakes, Cissy. Even with his insulting treachery aside, he is a threat - collaborating with other threats.” Bella's eyes burned. “If he wants to play vigilante, he'll die like a vigilante.”

With a thundering chest, Narcissa stared at her sister, face still like a porcelain doll. “Is there really no other option?”

“No exceptions.”

Narcissa could not agree, could not even bring herself to nod, but arguing the point further with Bella would only cast doubt and put Draco in greater danger, and she could not do that either. Bella was angry-

-and she would stay angry, if the past was any marker to judge by. Narcissa felt angry too, but on the subject of traitors, there was no such luxury to show it.
In the ashes of the personal attack, things shifted once again into being eerily quiet. It was not so; Severus could tell them that much, but whatever was happening was either only known in the aftermath from the muggle attacks, or more like poor Fortescue, where there was little they could do. It was frustrating, even to Emmeline herself. She could lay bets on it being a great source of irritation to the more fiery Order members.

However, time plodded along. It was more of an adjustment to have someone in her personal space, but Regulus was nothing if not unintrusive. The house-elf, Kreacher, largely kept to himself but always seemed to give a watery glare whenever she gave Regulus a drink when she was making one for herself. It wasn't as if she could give him half-blood germs by making a cup of tea; she wasn't mixing her blood into it. The space felt more enclosed here, in a smaller place than Grimmauld Place. There wasn't really much she could do about that.

Eventually, she decided it would be better to have an informed defense if it came to having to deal with a house-elf that seemed almost as alarmed by her as he did by Hermione Granger's increasing attempts to be friendly towards him over the summer.

Gingerly, she put down a tray of hot chocolate onto her coffee table. "I'm going to ask something potentially quite embarrassing, so I'm buttering you up a little first."

Regulus lifted his brow as he accepted the mug. "Oh? What might that be?"

"While I have some knowledge of purism, I believe there may be some intricacies I've missed."
Emmeline took a seat opposite him, leaning forwards. "As I understood it, as 'half-blood', my blood is supposedly tainted in some way. However, there seems to be some sort of problem with my even touching things, even though I rarely get blood on them. Is there another layer to it I'm not understanding?"

At that, Regulus glanced up through the ceiling, possibly picturing Kreacher in his mind - shuffling about, or maybe hiding in the closet, as Regulus had mentioned he was wont to do.

The glance was brief, and when Regulus looked back to her, his tone had a measure of discomfort. "For half-bloods? Not in a literal sense. I would say it is more of a societal attitude - a generalized… aversion. With that being said, it depends on the situation, and the intensity of that individual's perception."

That would account for some of the peculiar behaviour, considering the Weasleys were pureblood as well. "So the aversion relies on personal preference, differing from person to person?"

"To a degree. I don't know any families who recoil from half-bloods as a general rule, but it's universally understood that purebloods are meant to marry purebloods - so the context of the situation comes into play," he said, mouth twisting slightly downwards. "For marriage, both blood and ideology matter. For general interaction, ideology is the primary factor in determining if someone is accepted, neutral, or rejected. Then, of course, there is the consideration of how recently the muggle was mingled in the bloodline, but if the ideology is accepted, then that is usually enough to take precedence…"

There was definitely a conflicting mindset, but Emmeline had cause to doubt this was the only potential problem arising. "So potentially, in our context, it could be one of several reasonings stemming from my social group, our relationship, my beliefs, and my blood. That does help, thank
“Is it Kreacher?” he asked, though he looked like he half didn't want an answer. “I could talk to him again.”

"I don't think that will help," Emmeline said. "There are multiple variables in place - many I cannot do anything about, and others I wouldn't do anything about. I've been an Order member since my last week of school - not quite as impressive as your early admission, but from Kreacher's perspective, I imagine a little more problematic. I don't claim to understand why he doesn't feel more angry with his own mistreatment at Death Eater hands, but I suppose I've also seen enough house-elves to know it may not be considered wholly unusual. I cannot change the fact I've been friends with Sirius for a long time, barring murderous mistaken identity. I wouldn't change my bloodlines even if I could, nor do I at all believe there's anything inherently different between the blood types. I feel no desire to halt our relationship, because it is a great source of joy, even if we've been truly horrible at taking things slowly at all. These are not things that can be talked away behind closed doors. They have to be confronted. My actions will speak louder than your words can, and they will hopefully show that I hold no malice towards you. Though I suppose that's also a problem, should things...progress. I'm not sure what will help."

Regulus shook his head. “Nor am I. This is not a conflict I have much experience in, but I suppose we will figure it out."

"I can attempt to reiterate that I have no intention of hurting of you," Emmeline said, catching sight of movement just beyond her sight line. "But I can't reassure that I don't mean 'harm' to the House in general because I think I do mean it harm by what I believe would be his definition of it. I don't want to lie."

Reaching out to grasp her hand, Regulus gave it a squeeze and offered a pressed smile. "'Adaptation' is a more palatable framing than 'harm,' despite his perception. These things do seem to take time."

Emmeline returned it, then let go. Waiting around would not make the task any more palatable. "I'll make a valiant attempt,” she said. "But I have never thought I'd ever be debating ideology with an house-elf. My life has taken a very strange turn."

“I wish you a productive debate.”

It wasn't too difficult to find him, but she had never had occasion to ask a house-elf if they would like to discuss what was bothering them. She had mostly seen them at Hogwarts, where they appeared to be relentlessly cheery. Of the many ways you could describe Kreacher, cheery did not spring to mind.

"Doyousupposewecouldtalkforamoment?" Emmeline said, all coming out in a mad rush. The elf was eyeing her warily. "I mean you no ill, either of you. I know there has been much change and uprooting, and to be forced from one's home is awful, and-" she noticed the face he was making. "I am talking at you and not to you. I'm sorry. I just don't want this to be more unpleasant than it need be for anyone."

"Kreacher has chores, things that need doing..." His eyes were darting for escape, as if she were a physical threat rather than a conceptual one. This was what she had been trying to avoid, but it seemed she has caused the distress regardless.

"As you wish," she said, tightly.
She needed to regroup and figure out how to talk to someone with so much pride in the things she couldn't bring herself to even speak positively about. Adaptation sounded logical enough, but she had the sneaking suspicion this was not to do with logic at all and, much more dangerously, to do with devotion. She needed time to build a more precise plan for exactly that and sent a silent thank you to any available deity that it was her house-elf and not Walburga Black herself she was preparing this for.

When she approached Regulus again, scarcely a minute later, he lifted his brow. “That was quick.”

"I don't want to cause even worse discomfort." Emmeline shrugged. She could hear the glumness in her voice, but it was true. No one ready to run that much would listen to anything she had to say. "Even speaking to me is uncomfortable. While that is so, any in depth discussion is not going to work."

“That is certainly true,” Regulus said, followed by a pressed expression, not exactly a smile. “Now that things have settled a little, I intend to set the blood ward in place at the house. Perhaps it is risky and foolish to consider doing anything but keep Kreacher near, in light of his involvement... but I wonder, too, if it is selfish, keeping him with me. He would probably be happier at home.” Regulus shook his head. “I wish it was not so uncomfortable.”

"So do I," Emmeline replied. They knew things would be difficult, but knowing that didn’t diminish those difficulties any. "But it's one of many unpleasant realities. You'll be careful, won't you?"

He nodded, slightly. “Of course... I think I might ask Tonks to come along."

"An Auror," Emmeline said, as some of the butterflies in her stomach began to settle. "You are taking it seriously. Or is it because she's also blood family?"

“Both, to a degree,” he replied. “I investigated the manor without much incident when I was in the time-loop, but there is no convenient means to erase the situation if it goes poorly this time,” he added with a wry look. “I would rather not get caught there without Auror supervision. With that being said, I do expect she might appreciate the opportunity more from a personal angle, too.”

At least he was still thinking about it. Emmeline didn’t suppose she was allowed to ask for more than that. “You used your present for something practical,” she said, a half-hearted accusation. She couldn’t complain much; he was at least trying to be better at taking care of himself, as she had requested.

“Practical - and very valuable,” he added, mouth lifting up slightly.

"Together, next time." If they both survived their uncomfortable domesticity long enough.

“Another dip into the time-loop?” he said, lightly. “I think that sounds like a lovely idea.”

"When one shows up," Emmeline said. There was rarely ever a time-traveling anomaly when you wanted to properly explore one with your friend/house guest/possibly boyfriend. "Perhaps I can try multiple methods, then, to see if I can get your house-elf not to run from me."

“I must say there are very real benefits to having multiple attempts without consequence,” he said, his mouth tilting up a bit more. “Though I do hope it does not require that.”

With a sly glance to the hallway she suspected the creature was hiding in, Emmeline shrugged. I guess we'll find out, won't we?"
He reached out to squeeze her hand, then. “I guess we will.”

It would soon be the holidays once again, with people coming home from school in less than a month, and family visits were on the horizon. With no further indication that Regulus was about to let his martyr inclination take hold, no budging on behalf of her elvish guest, and unable to figure out exactly who the latest spy - witting or unwitting - in the Department of Mysteries was, Emmeline made a decision. They should go out, do something fun, and when she happened upon Regulus on a Saturday evening, she suggested exactly this. With a little finangling, they decided upon a play in which magic is an integral part. She hadn't seen it in at least a decade, but from her vague memory, there was nothing too inflammatory. The last thing they needed tonight was to get gussied up and then be reminded of how magic could go terribly wrong.

The theatre was on the corner, with comically large windows and doors leading into a red carpet and gold lined foyer. It was all a little grandiose, but perhaps not to Regulus. It was rare that Emmeline felt out of her depth in terms of social class, but while she supposed she could have participated in society culture, it had never been much of a priority. It still wasn't. With her arm looped around her - boyfriend? they really needed to have a conversation about appropriate relationship terminology for them - this was pure escapism. Something they could both use about now.

Regulus was eyeing one of the posters on the wall, each bordered with an identical ornate frame: ‘Hamlet’ with its artistically integrated skull, ‘My Fair Lady’ with its puppet strings, ‘Macbeth’ - their Shakespearean adventure for the night - with its crown and dark red coloring, Noel Coward’s ‘Bitter Sweet’ with a finely dressed woman and a grand piano, but his gaze had settled longest on the ‘Camelot’ poster.

"Remus mentioned some time ago that the muggles are familiar with Merlin, strange as it is to see,” Regulus began with a light gesture towards the poster. “I assume it is the same Camelot?’"

"It is," Emmeline confirmed, with a slight nod. "But they tend to favour Arthur, which isn't altogether surprising. There is a romanticisation of magical figures from the past, or even just those supposedly magical. They have reached a point, by and large, where they know the persecution of magic was wrong, and now it's all a great tragedy, which makes for good viewing. They even have people who study magic, even if they aren't magical themselves. Every now and then, they come across something truly dangerous, and one of ours has to intervene."

Regulus lifted an eyebrow. “Muggles studying magic? How so? Even with the Statute aside, it's not as though they can use it.”

Emmeline couldn't help herself; she smiled at that.

"Books," she replied, simply. He would do the same, as had many a squib before him, if he'd been born without it. "You don’t need to be able to do something to study it. Besides that, magic may be required in the creation process, but they can still understand the basis of spellwork, potions, and especially something like herbology. There's plenty of misinformation out there, but there are still experts. Whether it's because they came from a squib line, or perhaps they were the parent or grandparent of a muggleborn, they do get involved. Even Gideon and his brother had a muggle cousin, though I'm unclear whether they were magical and married a muggle or simply a squib, and these sorts of things come into family memory. It's how I know I'm so called 'half-blood' too. The Abbotts have one."

With a pondering expression, he nodded. “Hm. That would make sense.”
A curious thought struck her. "How do you know what you know of muggles?"

“Generally speaking, it has been from other people’s descriptions - admittedly my family’s, more often than not - relevant mentions from History of Magic, or other written references in the library,” he responded, then added with a quip, “and more recently, these outings, of course.”

That was what she'd imagined. "So more or less a similar way to muggle interpretation of magic," Emmeline said.

Pressing his lips wryly, Regulus responded, “I thought that might be the point you were making.”

"Not my most subtle," Emmeline admitted, with a nod. "But I thought you may be even more removed than most. In fact, I'd say their negative connotations of witchcraft come from - well, people who weren't magical at all. Or those who were, but were a little on the sadistic side. I've never done naked dancing under a full moon, but I've also never attempted to use magic to make crops fail or cast a pox or seduce anyone. I imagine they'd find the day to day of magic rather mundane in comparison."

“Those do sound unpleasantly out of the ordinary,” Regulus admitted.

"It's an interesting story regardless," Emmeline said. She handed in her tickets, and let them be directed towards the red, carpeted stairs. "Quite topical. Does knowing a prophecy before it happens make it sure to happen, or can you thwart it? Should you try to thwart it, or make it happen? We had so many people on that, but they're all gone now, every prophecy on record at the Ministry. Someone should really have written them down - or should they have? Perhaps they were never be meant to be heard, but that does seem very bureaucratic of the fates, to make a prophecy, have a Seer speak it, send the Ministry to record it, store it for centuries, only to be smashed."

“The fates are either very bureaucratic or very chaotic,” Regulus said, dryly, as they passed by the first level, up towards their designated section. “I am no expert on prophetic value or their ambiguous nature, but it is an apt subject, indeed.”

"You'd have had fun decoding prophecies," Emmeline said, with a glance and a smile, and Regulus returned it. He enjoyed things that gave him more questions, but enjoyed even more when he thought he was onto something. She felt a stab of sadness no one thought to try and nab him when we was younger, but she supposed they didn't stand a chance if he had been only fifteen. "But it is interesting that, without double, the witches hold the power in it, but they do very little beyond tell a prophecy in a way that could be misinterpreted and watch the ensuing chaos."

Amusement flicked in his expression as they stepped out from the stairway and onto the top balcony, looking out over the sea of dark red seats. “How devious. Multiple meanings do have a certain entertainment value, as inconvenient as it can sometimes be on the interpretive side.”

"Have you ever had a Seer in your line?" Emmeline asked. Despite their name, they were rather down to earth and didn't seem to hold to the more elusive arts.

“I’ve heard that quite a few generations ago, one of the women in our family believed she was a Seer - and might have been,” Regulus responded, “though the tone of the story was not very supportive of the idea.”

“At the risk of sounding rude,” Emmeline began, even though she knew well she was about to be rude, “is there often a supportive tone to something your family has said?”

“They were supportive of me,” Regulus replied. “I do recognise that it is unlikely they would have
remained so, but they were, at the time.”

"How would you categorise supportive?" Emmeline asked. Her own upbringing was relatively quiet, but she had always come to them with ideas once she had thought them through. Their response was always to ask how they could help, or facilitate the ideas with a few notable exceptions, such as ‘no, they could not make sure of her Hogwarts house’ and ‘no, you really shouldn't attempt necromancy, the dead are at rest and it's rude to disturb them.’

Regulus lifted his brow slightly. “Approving of the things I said, did, and otherwise exemplified.”

"No, I don't think I phrased that correctly. Support as in... this is a little difficult to explain, I may not mean the same thing you do." Emmeline had to admit that much, because she had a suspicion that supportive in those terms meant either only having support if it was not his individual thoughts or ideas, or ignoring comments or goals, thus supportive being interpreted by there being no negative reaction. While Sirius was rarely the most reliable witness in these matters, it had always sounded like a very one-sided relationship. "It can't be cursory, or only when you're victorious in a goal. It can't simply be for show or just playing into a social convention because then that is just...performatiive, rather than heartfelt. To be supportive - and supported - is not a passive act, it requires a respect for someone's ideas, thoughts and goals. It has to involve engagement from the person supporting, whether this is done vocally, emotionally, or intellectually. I would consider our relationship to be an example of a supportive one. We engage in topics when frustrated to work them out intellectually, even if we do not always agree; we have both given and received comfort during emotional difficulties; and have discussed, both between us and to others when appropriate, your inputs on my ideas and vice versa, because I believe these have value. We choose to treat each other this way."

Regulus paused for a thoughtful beat, then responded, “That is a very extensive definition.”

"It doesn't have to always be that way, but if you can't name at least an example of each of those, I wouldn't classify it as a supportive relationship." Emmeline said, bluntly. It had to be blunt to sink in, because he didn't deserve to be treated that way at all. Besides that, she could think of all of those three for his relationship with Remus Lupin, someone he is not related to and see's somewhat sporadically, and if he couldn't do that for his parents, then this may be one of those times Sirius was leaning towards truthful about the nature of the relationships. "I know it can feel uncomfortable to think of those not here to defend themselves in a less than flattering light, but I really do think it's important to emphasise the sort of relationship we have is the kind I enjoy."

The tension that had started visibly building up in his shoulders seemed to loosen again, then, and he gave her waist a light squeeze as they came up to their designated row. “I rather enjoy it, too.”

"Reserve judgement until you've seen the show," Emmeline replied, with a smile. She shimmied along as people were beginning to take their seats. "You may think I have no taste if you hate it."

"I will probably still like you, even if you have poor taste,” he said, though a teasing smile had started to tug up at the corner of his mouth.

"How bold of you," Emmeline replied, with what she hoped was a straight face. "Although if you do talk through it, I am going to have to curse you."

“You need not worry. I am practiced at keeping my commentary inside of me until opportune moments arise,” he quipped back, slipping in after her and settling in his own cushioned seat - the same deep red as the carpets and the curtain hung on the stage.

"So in five years, there'll be a lull in conversation and you'll suddenly remember a part of the play
you wanted to discuss and had been biding your time for?” A surprisingly pleasant idea, if she was honest to herself, and feeling all the more unattainable lately. Between the loss of HQ, the increase in attacks, and the difficulty of a house-elf clinging to pureblood exclusivity, it probably didn't do to make plans so far ahead. It would only sting later, if it was all a moot point.

“Me? Withhold a comment for years, long enough to both forget I have not stated it and subsequently remember again?” His mouth flicked up again.

"I don't believe you would forget," Emmeline said, pulling her dress beneath her as she sat down. "I believe you would bide your time."

“Yes… that is a distinct possibility.”

"I should hope so," Emmeline replied. "I like to believe I know you quite well at this point. It's been almost a year."

“Knowing me quite well - clearly I’m not being enigmatic enough” he prodded lightly, reaching out to squeeze her hand once she had settled. “What a year it has been.”

"You're plenty enigmatic," Emmeline said. She tried to give him her besong suffering sigh. "But I enjoy… solving you? That sounded much more endearing and flirtatious in my head, but you know I mean I enjoy trying to figure it all out."

“As do I,” he said, mouth quirking. “You have done a commendable job of it.”

Emmeline squeezed his hand tightly. People were wandering in now, so she leaned over to what she hoped was an appropriate distance for someone with a lot of boundaries they hadn't really talked about yet. "I know things are very intense at the moment - several moments if I'm honest - but at the risk of rushing into things the way people who start relationships in wars tend to, we are approaching three months since our nightly excursion. I have met some of your family, if informally and partially in portrait form; you're about to see another one of mine; and only one major disregard for your health and well being has occurred. I would deem this endeavour relatively successful, but..." It was with a colouring of her cheeks she added, "I have no idea what label you are comfortable with."

A thoughtful expression settled on his face for a moment. “In respect to what we refer to each other as, or in respect to relationship status?”

"Both,” Emmeline replied. Not the best of timing, but in for a knut, in for the whole bank account. “A label implies a certain amount of seriousness, and I'm not sure whether I should be using one. I don't want to be pushy.""I don’t think you are pushy,” he said, thumbing her knuckles. “Truthfully, I already assumed as much.”

"Clarification is helpful," Emmeline said, noting it away. It added a certain amount of accountability to a serious relationship, legitimised her own worries for him, and if she was feeling a little cloud-headed, made the idea of considering a shared future not as flighty. It was a relationship forged in wartime - they tended to be a little speedier than most - but that didn't mean badly, if they were on the same page. "I suppose I'll have to tell all the other men I've been dating I'm off the market now."

“That is for the best. I cannot say I am best known for my capacity to share,” he quipped back.

"That may be the understatement of the year, if not the entire decade," Emmeline said. "Then it
wouldn't be inappropriate of me to say I've been a little worried about you. I'm glad we did this. I do want to continue to explore how we are without certain death breathing down our necks."

"The reprieve is nice," he said. "I will try to avoid inviting certain death into my life at least until that proposed interview plan."

"You have to give me until at least Christmas," Emmeline grumbled. They had many things to address. More vague ones, but spending a holiday together was important somehow. "We have plans - no backing out now."

"Remaining alive until I have meet your grandmother seems like a fair request," he said with a light tone, despite the sharp edges of the words themselves. "I will wait."

"As long as she's not the cause of death. That would be frightfully awkward to explain." Certainly not likely, but Emmeline wasn't ruling out some sort of intense reaction to each other. "Remaining alive a few more decades would be much more preferable."

"There is a queue forming for my cause of death. She cannot simply cut to the front, family or not," he quipped wryly, pressing her fingers lightly with his own. "It should be fine. A few more decades will be my goal."

"I wish that were inaccurate, but I suppose I have a decent queue of my own." Emmeline returned the squeeze in a way she hoped was reassuring. "I've made our date a little maudlin again. I'll have to work on that. It's one thing in a Muggle area, but at some point, I imagine we'll go out in a magical one and have to keep our wits about us a little more."

"Yes… There are certain topics that could cause far more concern if overheard by a witch or wizard, rather than a muggle," Regulus agreed, tipping his head.

"As well as provide a brand new reason for people to get in line for wanting us both dead," Emmeline said. It was a good thing they chose a play about lineage and betrayal. What a welcome change of place. "It’ll happen eventually, but this is fun for now."

"It certainly is," Regulus agreed.

With that, Emmeline hushed herself. Of her terrible and illegal activities over the years, she had to draw the line at being someone who talked during a performance. There would be time afterwards, she thought, even if her stomach jittered unpleasantly at the thought that she always believed there'd be more time, and it had wasn't always true.

During his first week or so at the new safe house in Peckham, Sirius had thrown himself into getting things done. While unable to go incognito even a little bit these days when it came to surveillance, he had come to the conclusion that they would never have enough people monitoring all of the areas that needed it. The easiest one was Hogwarts, with Tonks being up there as often as not. Not an easy feat since the new Minister and Dumbledore had already gotten on each other’s nerves, and he was her former boss. Then Hogsmeade, another often used target. Diagon Alley was already getting wrecked. Tinworth was almost a joke in the last war. Godric's Hollow had taken a beating. St. Mungo's would be an easy spot to get to someone while they were vulnerable. High profile events, which they couldn't really do much about but would still need to cover.

It was at this point Sirius remembered that he had seen an alarm system that, if modified, could be the solution in at least a few of these places. They knew some of the Death Eaters by name, if not most of them. If it were possible to rig up some of the Hogwarts passageways, they may be able to
monitor their use. If he could remember some of the spellwork on the map, they may even be able to use some identification markers so someone could check the spot being passed by. If it was a known or suspected Death Eater, they could sound the alarm. This would give the option of monitoring all of the entrances to one place (or even multiple places) at once. It wouldn't be feasible in every place, but enough that it could be useful.

So he got to work, doing what he could remember by hand, waking Remus up at dawn to try and remember the specific marker spells they used, asking Kingsley for up to date lists of the suspected and realising that this is probably something Regulus would know more of. He had meant to go and see him days ago, but despite the injury, he felt energised and had thrown himself into a project with such intensity that it had taken him over a week to decide to go catch up with his brother. Regulus had needed some cooling off time, and given that he was now once again living with his girlfriend, probably that sort of time too. However, if he had learned nothing else about him, Sirius knew that leaving his brother to his own devices for too long when he was in a funny mood led to him making interesting and terrible decisions.

Besides which, he needed his help with the alarms. It was his initial work, after all.

After checking with Vance that she would both be at work and that his brother hadn't run off somewhere again, Sirius sought him out at her place. He'd retrieved the work parchment he'd been sketching it out on, some of the planning map excerpts he'd requested from Dedalus to look over the other buildings and potential entrances, then headed over.

"Is there somewhere I should put all of this?" Sirius asked him.

"That depends on what it is and how long it will be there," Regulus said, closing the front door behind him and eyeing the bundle in his arms. "Order plans?"

"If it works," Sirius had to allow for the possibility he was smarter at sixteen than he was now. "Preliminary charm work on some new alarms, which I want to incorporate some of your - what do you call them, the ones that let you know if people pass by it?"

"I did not assign a special name to them. They are essentially alarms, just modified to be more tactile," Regulus responded. "Are you considering protections for the safe house, or larger scale than that?"

"Smaller area than a house, but larger geographical areas between alarms." Sirius decided enough wait was enough on where to put things, walking into Emmeline's front room and half dumping out the scrolls of parchment. "I think if you modified it to make a noise and placed it above labeled areas, you could monitor the activity of places. The secret tunnels at Hogwarts, for example. If we could use an identification charm, we might be able to attune them to specific people, or at least show a label the way the map does. It could make surveillance to response times quicker."

"That sounds achievable," Regulus said, interest lifting his expression, "and very useful. I will start working on a modification."

"I thought we'd start with the Hogwarts tunnels, then try larger. I can at least check the accuracy at Hogwarts." Sirius said. "Before I forget, are you doing the holiday with Vance?"

"I expect as much. Her grandmother will be visiting, so that, at least, is an established plan. Beyond that, I don't particularly know what to do with Christmas, these days," he said, glancing around, though it was hard to tell if he was actually looking at anything in particular. "She has not mentioned anything else yet, and this year is a little different than the last."
"As the resident adult thinker, I thought you'd have sorted out by now." Sirius used his wand to stick the corners of the parchment down over the coffee table, tapping each of the sketches in turn. He'd have to ask Remus to redo those. Artistic talent had never been much of his pursuit. "I know family isn't your favourite subject at the minute. Assuming you survive Vance's grandmother, it'd be nice to do - I don't know, something."

“I'm an adult thinker, but that doesn't make me a social planner,” he responded, dryly, and the air around him was starting to dull into something more withdrawn.

Sirius spared a look at him, hoping the glare would be sufficient to convey the fact it clearly did. It could speak to a deeper problem: Regulus was the first person to always want to play at happy families, so his general indifference to what was arguably the most family-based holiday either meant he was just wrapped up in a new relationship (he wouldn't be the first) or he was still stinging over the loss of the HQ. "You're right," Sirius said. "I can't expect you to be the responsible one. We'll just have to be a loose coalition of occasionally responsible people when it comes to planning for the future, assuming there is one."

“Responsibility involves more than party-planning,” Regulus said, a frown tugging downwards.

Sirius ran his hand down his face, just to take a minute not to bite his head off.

What exactly did Regulus want from him at this point? Was he supposed to treat him as the responsible little swot he had always been on one level or respect the newfound (or newly surfaced for all to see) poor impulse control and desire to upset a status quo? Was he supposed to try and act like the family herder now, because that would not work at all. For a start, their definitions would cause problems; they didn't currently have a place of residence that everyone would settle on without a fight; and despite everything else, he was sure Narcissa was still ticked on Regulus's list, and he was not dealing with her wailing into her Christmas pudding over the fact her husband was sloppy and her sister was crazy.

Even if they couldn't agree what family was, they were both in agreement that being one was important, weren't they? Was he going to make him actually say it? By past experience, Sirius being blunt had skewed towards a bad response. Sometimes a bad response was required so they could move forwards, but he was starting to get confused as to who's rules they were keeping to at this point. He was fully capable of being subtle and considerate when situation demanded or if he really tried hard, but Regulus was clearly stuck in a pedantic loop. He knew enough by now to know this was a symptom of something else being wrong, the 'if I focus really hard on something inconsequential, reality won't get me' approach which had managed to screw his life up enough by now.

Yes, he'd lost the family heirloom of a house, but he could have it back soon enough. There was also the fact Bellatrix had sought him out deliberately to hurt him, which he couldn't be surprised by at this point. Though not being surprised didn't take the sting out. Without knowing what the biggest problem was, he couldn't navigate a single conversation because it was like talking to a depressed brick wall.

Finally, Sirius settled on just asking him. "Is there something you need to get off your chest?"

Regulus's brow pinched as he started picking up sheets of parchment, and he paused for just a moment before responding, “Not anything you are likely to think is a problem.”

"Didn't we agree not to put words into each others mouths before the person has actually said them?" Sirius tapped the side of his head. "Memory might not be what it used to be, but I do vaguely recall something along those lines."
“My expectation is based on a very consistent history of responding, unless you have suddenly developed a respectful appreciation for the tapestry,” Regulus said, though the tone was more dull than cutting, and he was looking very intently interested in the parchment in his hands. “Bellatrix has taken it upon herself to prune the tree in our mother's stead - as if she has any right to do so. I am not trying to start a fight; I simply don't feel like hearing that I ought to say 'good riddance' and move on, which is the usual course of this subject.”

Sirius looked around the room, wondering which wall would be the most comfortable to bang his head into repeatedly because it would be much, much more pleasant than this was going to be. Alas, Emmeline had enough junk on it that he'd have to do it on the glass, and then there'd be a bloody mess to deal with there too.

"You always manage to somehow either overestimate or underestimate my reactions. So rarely do you hit the mark." Sirius said, a comment comparison with his relationship with James already on his tongue when he managed to choke it down.

Instead, he sat down on the couch and tried to formulate a decent rebuke. Nothing came. Just confusion. "That response makes no sense! Good riddance to what? She walked into your house, tore a hole in something I may hate, but I - and she - know you love, and you think my reaction is 'move on'? You'll put it back, because it's what you've been doing for people who didn't have a say in the matter anyway, and because her opinion doesn't matter. It's not her choice to make. I told you when we talked about my own burn mark - I don't forgive our parents for what they did. Why would I not be angry with her for it? How the hell did you translate it to 'good riddance' and 'move on'?"

“Clearly, I just shouldn't say anything,” Regulus said with a flattening tone, still looking at the parchment, “because of course it gets turned into a fight anyway.”

"We're not fighting!" Sirius insisted. "We can fight if you want to, but I'm trying to tell you that I understand. I know it's terrifying, that she had no right, and I'm angry with her about it! I think she should get bollocked for it, if you'd let me get the words out before you decide I'm going to act like sanctimonious pillock about it."

“You are acting like you have never said 'good riddance' about Bellatrix drawing her lines in the sand, have never told me to move on,” Regulus said, flashing a look back at him before returning his eyes to the parchment that he probably wasn't even looking at, just fidgeting with the edges. “I know you're angry with her too. I'm not completely thick. But you always go on about how glad you are to have been burned off, so pardon me preferring to avoid the subject. It's not quite the same if you want it.”

"Of course I've said good riddance about Bellatrix, but as crazy as I think half the House is, they're not all her. She dragged them into this war, whether they thought Voldemort had the right idea or not; she's wrecked every life she's ever touched; and as long as you love her, the more she can hurt you like this." Sirius huffed a long sigh, looking away from him to Vance's fireplace. "Loving someone when they hate you is a terrible fate. I wanted to spare your heart getting broken, if I could but. I know it's not the same, all right? It's been twenty years for me. I choose to be glad. You can choose to feel whatever you like about it in twenty years too."

Regulus opened his mouth as if he was going to say something, then closed it again to a thin line and nodded.

"If your poking about has taught us nothing more, it's that it was always the decision of whoever had the damn thing at the time. Do you need the reminder that she's desecrating the traditions of something she claims to revere?" Sirius huffed, which was as close to a laugh as he could manage.
"Whatever the caster thought, it wasn't always what people wanted, or Callidora wouldn't have wanted that picture. Phineas even had enough whatever-it-was in him that could be considered close to remorse to openly tell you about his child and his sister. Alphard must've disagreed enough to make that will. It's hard enough when it's the opinion of one person, so don't add people onto that without knowing how they feel. It was my mistake with you."

Flicking his eyes over, Regulus nodded, then looked back to the parchment after another beat. “I am not trying to make assumptions. Though I suppose it must have sounded bad, I was not thinking ill of you, just that the subject is exhausting. You needn’t jump to conclusions with what I am saying, either.” Crinkling his mouth a little, he added, “All of these things are all too familiar now - it just gets in my head sometimes, I suppose.”

"Though I appreciate the affirmation, I didn't mean me either, that time." Even if the thought of it made his skin crawl, he supposed he had to be fair. "You didn't even say Bellatrix did it, just that she did it in Mum's place. She might have been a stubborn old cow enough to do it, but you'll never know for sure because you made sure she believed that you were everything she wanted to the end, at great cost to yourself. She can never think any differently of you than she did then. She'll always be your mother."

Leveling a lingering look, Regulus paused for a beat before speaking. “Perhaps. At the time, I wondered what she might have done, but part of me didn't want to put her through that, and part of me worried that I wouldn't like the answer.” With a flat, humourless smile, he shook his head. “Ambiguity can be helpful sometimes, I suppose.”

"No," Sirius said. There could be no ambiguity here. Either you love someone and you at least try to take care of them, or you don't. "You loved her and you wanted to keep her. You’ll get that, because she'll never know anything else. Do you really need more that, now?"

Regulus shook his head. "No. There isn't much more to it, as things are. That's what I meant, really - that there is no way to know, now, and that maybe it isn't all bad, not knowing. The lack of resolution does bother me, but it could be worse.”

"I don't think anyone knows what kind of person they really are until they're pushed into having to make a decision that defines them. Grandfather, for example, will always be remembered for being weak when his moment came." As far as Regulus was concerned, people hadn't been tested until now. But now, they were. "You chose a new path, and you don't have to give up one life for another completely if some part of it makes you happy. You don't have to let go of the people who loved who you were then, either, but if someone is trying to hack their arm loose from who you are now, don't lose a limb over it. You still have a family. It's weird and disjointed and filled with truly strange people, but it's not worth any less because not everyone in it has an ancestral home or an almost thousand-year-old tapestry - or any more because some people do. It's just different, and so are you. You'll figure it out."

The corner of Regulus's mouth flicked up, and he tipped his head in a little nod. “Thank you. I am certainly trying.”

"It takes practice," Sirius said, simply. "And defeating dark lords so they're don't end up destroying the world first. Shall we get back on that?"

“We shall.”

Throwing himself into a project with Sirius had been oddly refreshing - a break from the towers of books he had buried himself in, following their horcrux rabbit trails and plans for ending the war.
for good this time. All in all, inaction had shackled Regulus in place since his eldest cousin had broken into his home, surrounded by a storm of anger, guilt, and careful-footedness. Just short of two weeks had passed, and he had buried himself dutifully in those books and plans and distractions from what remained a miserable train of thought.

"I am going to lock Bellatrix out of the house," he had told Emmeline that morning before she had left for the Ministry, and not for the first time, since Bellatrix had forcibly ousted him. After all, that had been the intention, even before she made herself unwelcome.

Convincing an Auror of the value of trespassing onto the property of known criminals to obtain materials necessary to perform highly specific blood magic was probably a steeper task than running the thought by Emme, but if he had hope for any Auror’s buy-in, his confidence held firm that it was probably Tonks.

He could still remember how horrifically awkward it had been to talk to Tonks in her mother’s garden, even knowing the time-loop’s end would wipe away every word, and it was not significantly less awkward now, but at least he had something resembling a plan, this time.

“Recently, I spoke to you about wards rooted in blood magic,” he began, once again surrounded by Andromeda’s lush garden, though it was late evening, this time, and much colder, despite their heating charms. Tonks was also significantly more cheerful, these days, both in appearance and in mood. “Now that things have settled, I would like to follow through with that plan - but it involves… briefly inviting myself into the Lestrange Manor, and I have reason to suspect that there are plenty of scenarios in which that could spiral in an undesirable direction.” He lifted his brow, just slightly. “Would you be able to assist with that in any capacity?”

"You want to nip into the home of the Ministry's most wanted Death Eaters?" Tonks asked. "Yeah, that could be a bit suspicious. What's there?"

“Blood,” he answered, “for the spell. The blood that was on the floor of my house was indistinguishable from Sirius’s, so I did not wish to risk it.”

"Would she have vials of her own blood around?" Tonks asked.

He shook his head. “Not vials, but there is a small room in the manor that requires blood magic to enter. I have not tested the premise, of course, but I suspect that I can extract remnants of the blood used for entry in the past. That is likely to include others, such as the Lestranges, but I do not particularly want them to have entry to the house, either.”

“Would there be a way of identifying whose blood is whose?” Tonks asked. “They don’t seem the label everything type, and it’ll be a right pain if it's some person they just sucked the blood out of.”

“Their organisational habits don't matter, in this case, because I would be extracting it from a wall, not anything that can be labeled,” Regulus responded. “In the past, I have witnessed her entering the room, so there ought to be at least a trace,”

That seemed to engage her attention. "I'll give you a hand if you'll let me watch your back," Tonks replied.

His mouth flicked up. “I can agree to that.”

Once the decision was made, Regulus and Tonks did not linger long at the house. On their way out, Andromeda had urged them to ‘try not to get killed’ - a rather dry and pointed request, given that they had not said anything of their intentions. He suspected she did not need any context to deduce
that a spontaneous outing without details probably was something to be at least mildly concerned about.

The sun was already half-set when they appeared just outside the Lestrange Manor with a pop. It looked very much the same - large and old and grey with a wind of untamed ivy. Much like his time-loop visit, he made rather quick work of the protective wards, as familiar to his wand as they had been so long ago when he used to visit under very different circumstances.

“Even in light of the Ministry raid at the end of the first war, it goes without saying that you still should not touch anything without asking me first,” he said as they were stepping through the large front doors just a moment later. The foyer was dark and dusty and notably uncared for. The elder Lestrange patriarch had sidestepped the law last time, but perhaps he was avoiding the responsibility that came with associating yourself with imprisoned Death Eaters, even if it was family property. They were not exactly short on residences, either.

"Do you reckon they changed much after you scarpered?" Tonks asked. She was rubbing some dust between her fingers thoughtfully, but had touched nothing else.

“Around the manor?” Regulus clarified, but he did not wait before continuing, “I doubt they would. New objects, perhaps, but neither of them gave much weight to decor.”

"Spellwork," Tonks specified, hurrying along after a beat. "Looks like no one's been here in years."

“I doubt they have been.” Regulus glanced at her, then forward again. “I did wonder about that, but if the Ministry was watching it, the risk probably wasn’t worth the potential trouble.”

"There's a lot of pressure for a win in the Ministry, mate," Tonks said, her tone unsure. "Then and now. I hope the list is up to date, or I'm going to wish I'd asked Mad-Eye for his cloak."

“Do we need to circle back for it, or do you think you would be able to maneuver a passable explanation?” he asked, lifting his brow slightly.

"I don't think anyone would be all that surprised I'd go looking for trouble." Tonks cracked a grin. "Since the Department of Mysteries, I reckon everyone knows I want to have a go at Bellatrix."

“Good. I was counting on that,” he said, mouth tilting up in return as they turned towards the hall with the painting.

"No screaming portraits yet," Tonks said, barely a whisper. "Are you going to be back to the house after this?"

For a beat, Regulus fell quiet as he pictured the dark halls lined with portraits - set with one portrait in particular. He pictured the rooms full of books and the cabinets brimming with magical artifacts collected throughout his family's history. Regulus was determined to reclaim his home and restore his family tapestry, but remaining there through the holidays felt suddenly uncertain.

Locking himself away in the house had always felt safe and secure, long before he had a reason to feel unsafe, but even with Bellatrix blocked from entry, the house was a target. Regulus was not sure he could bring himself to lock out Narcissa or Draco preemptively, but he was not so foolish as to think Bellatrix would never consider using either of them as a weapon.

“Perhaps not immediately,” he said with a slightly dampened tone. “I am still thinking through the possibilities and precautions. For the moment, my main concern is that Bellatrix cannot directly get to it anymore, at the very least.”
"I'd worry more about what she might take from it," Tonks said. "You should bring Phineas with you. An insight to Hogwarts would be dead handy."

“Yes… Sirius had me a little bit nervous about her burning the place down, right after the attack, but I do worry more about her nosing around or taking things than I do about the likelihood of her setting it aflame,” he agreed with a little nod. “As for Phineas… he's unlikely to enjoy the displacement, but having him around does have notable benefits.”

"The most notable being that there's one less benefit for the Death Eaters," Tonks said, bumping into the cabinet but managing not to knock anything over. "They could nick the one at St. Mungo's, but she's unlikely to be helpful, even accidentally."

“True enough,” Regulus agreed, trying not to react to the bump. At least they didn't have to worry about stealth here - just avoiding brushes with anything dangerous.

Coming up to the portrait, Regulus paused to pull out a vial and draw his wand.

"Coast looks clear," Tonks said, from behind him. "Nothing triggered yet."

“Assuming our exploration is limited to this task, I expected we are more likely to come across a Ministry trigger than a Lestrange one that I’m not aware of. Most would have been tripped during the raid in the 80s,” Regulus said, deciding against a mention that he had made it as far as the hidden room itself before he found himself in that exact situation, faced with an unpleasant Mad-Eye Moody… one who remembered nothing now, with the time-loop wiping the day clean. Even now, it felt like a lucky dodge.

Waving his wand and muttering an extraction spell, he could see scarlet droplets oozing out of the painting to pool and hover in the air: Lestrange blood mixed with his cousin’s. That would bar at least 3 Death Eaters, if his deductions were correct, and most of the other Death Eaters would be covered by the heavy reinforcements that his ancestors - and more recently his father - had layered onto Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. The spell would not require much of the vial’s contents, but a larger amount meant more opportunities to use it if needed, in the future. He waited until the vial was full before corking it again.

"Was that it?" Tonks asked, her nose wrinkling at the vial.

Regulus nodded. “Anticlimactic, I suppose, but the extraction itself isn't particularly dangerous. The contents of the room are probably more interesting, but I mostly did not want to walk into the Lestrange Manor without Auror supervision, all things considered.”

"I'll take it over climactic," Tonks replied. "There's still so much stuff here. I really thought the raids would have taken everything just to be sure something important isn't transfigured into something else."

Regulus's own explorations had come to nothing, so speculation might suggest they had done at least a surface level investigation before assuming the ornate candle holders were just that.

Alternatively, the Ministry simply wasn't all that thorough, once they were ‘winning.’

“I would have thought so,” Regulus said instead. “But I cannot claim insight into their thought process.”

"Let's get out of here before you end up having a chance to ask them yourself from inside a Ministry holding cell," Tonks said. "Lingering about here is going to look really shifty."
With a thin smile, Regulus nodded and stuck the vial in his pocket. “Yes - let's.”

There was a soft, melodic tune reaching through from what sounded like Andromeda's back garden. Despite the creeping December frost, Sirius could guess that Andromeda herself was likely in the garden again. Instead of going in the front door, Sirius side stepped to the wall with a door into it and opened it to enter the back garden. Almost as soon as he did so, there was the fwit sound, and something went over his head. A look upwards saw some kind of knife embedded into a wooden garden plaque above the doorway which proclaimed 'trespassers will be composted'.

“You missed,” Sirius said, flatly.

Andromeda herself was standing hands to hips, her face caught somewhere between worry and exasperation. “Knock,” she said, emphatically. “If someone is going to walk in unannounced, I'm going to assume it's not friendly and react accordingly.”

“If you think throwing things at me is more likely to make me well-mannered, I regrettfully inform you Mum already tried it,” Sirius told her, reaching to remove what looked more like some sort of shear on closer inspection. “I'm not dead yet.”

“Not for lack of trying,” Andromeda said. She held out her hand. ”Accio!”

It flew out of his hand, and to her credit, she did manage to catch it. “That was rude.”

“As are you,” Andromeda said, placing it down in a wheelbarrow off to the side. She beckoned him over to the patio area, which felt as if it had steam rising from the ground. He leaned on the chair, while she took a seat and removed her gloves.

He couldn't fault her desire for precaution. “You could use some practice. If I had been an intruder, you just handed me a weapon.”

“I'd be happier with my wand any day of the week,” Andromeda said. Her wand was sticking unceremoniously out of her robes. There had to be something funny about their generation’s first ‘traitor’ being more comfortable with her wand than any other weapon than half of the rest of them. He had been known to get in a few punch ups with Death Eaters because it was much more unexpected, and he could brawl when he wanted to. “But resourcefulness does catch people off guard when need be.”

On this, Sirius wouldn't argue. He opted for a subject change. “Ted at work?”

Andromeda nodded. “They're run off their feet. Did you see that mess in Praze-an-Beeble?”

“The drownings?” Sirius asked. He could vaguely remember hearing about it while the WWN played in the background. It was getting harder to distinguish legitimate attacks from Death Eaters throwing their weight around. It was even worse when the Ministry was, as usual, barking up all the wrong trees looking for them.

“Except they were all sat at the dinner table,” Andromeda replied. “Someone was having fun.”

“Why not?” Sirius struggled to keep the bitterness out of his tone. “Most people don't know how to fight them. They got complacent.”

“Everyone believed it was over,” Andromeda said. “You're judging them harshly for that.”

“They had a year to wise up,” Sirius replied. “But they stuck their heads in the sand, now they're
floundering.”

“People cannot spend their entire lives ready for battle. It's no way to live.” Andromeda sighed, low and heavy. “They don't deserve to die for that.”

“I didn't say they did,” Sirius said, indignantly. “Just that if they'd had some common sense with Harry, they'd be more prepared instead of ripping into him all year.”

Andromeda bobbed her head. “How is your godson?”

“He's alright,” Sirius said. “Nothing's tried to kill him yet, which he thinks is some sort of record. Unless you count his N.E.W.T.s.”

“What's he taking?” Andromeda asked.

“Charms, Defense, Herbology, Potions, and Transfiguration,” Sirius said.

Andromeda smiled. “Auror programme, or vigilantism? Or both?”

“Yes,” Sirius said, but the confusion in his tone must have been evident.

“What is my daughter’s occupation, again?” Andromeda reminded him. “Though that was very much a touch and go, trying not to get arrested with some of her teenage exuberance.”

“Is that what you're calling it?” Sirius asked. “I might think the Ministry's useless, but a few more people who believe in the job the way he does, it might begin to be competent. Why did Tonks go for it?”

“Honestly, I believe she had no idea what she wanted to do.” Andromeda replied. “She bores easily. I think it was meeting Mad-Eye Moody that clinched it. I suppose Harry is simply looking to make stopping Dark Lords and the like a lifelong occupation?”

“You'd have to ask him,” Sirius said. He didn’t particularly think that was fair to Harry, even if it was something he was choosing.

“I will if I meet him,” Andromeda replied.

For a moment, Sirius had forgotten that the two had never crossed paths. That seemed wrong, somehow. When would they have? While he had frequented the house much more recently with Harry at school, it hadn't occurred to him yet. “Maybe in the holidays,” Sirius offered. “If I can pry him loose from Molly Weasley long enough.”

“The infamous mothering of Molly Prewett,” Andromeda lifted her hand. “Weasley, now. She was a few years above me at school.”

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Sirius rattled the memory loose that Andromeda had Molly's brothers in the year below her at school. They'd been seventh years when Sirius had been there, though he hadn't known them that well then. Fabian had been in Gryffindor with him, along with Benjy Fenwick, who he really only met as an Order member. No eighteen-year-old talks to an eleven-year-old for extended periods without good reason to.

Andromeda broke him out of the thoughts of the old Order. “I'm surprised you're not insisting on having Christmas together. You've been quite intense about spending a lot of time with him this summer.”
“Where would we go?” Sirius shrugged. It stung a little, because it was true, but he knew he ought to be glad he was having a family Christmas, even if it wasn't with him. Harry liked that sort of thing. “The safe house is no place for it. He should be with his friends.”

“Are you going with yours?” Andromeda asked.

“I don't know yet,” Sirius said. “I was checking with Regulus what he wanted to do. Did you here he joined the scorch mark club?”

Andromeda pressed her lips together hard. “I did. A difficult thing to cope with.”

“So I didn't want to push him too hard,” Sirius said. “He might do it with his girlfriend and her grandmother.”

Andromeda raised her eyebrows at that. “That's quite a serious move for a new relationship.”

Sirius waved her off. “They say it's new, but they've been getting on like that since June. I don't think Regulus knows how to date. He went straight from a jittery mess to behaving like an old married man.”

“This may be the time to push,” Andromeda said. “I know neither of you like to be the one extending the offer, but it's an isolating experience. You know that.”

“He's not isolated,” Sirius argued. He was the very opposite of it. He seemed to have slipped into the group as if he'd simply always been there, quiet and in the corner where no one had paid him any mind.

Andromeda hung her head, breathing out low and slow. “Sometimes I forget you're still both young.”

“We're not that young,” Sirius said. He definitely wasn't young at all.

“Yet you're arguing for the sake of it, or you're posturing, which is pointless with me. I can see through it.” Andromeda indicated her house. “You can gather up and come over if you like. I'll extend invitations since Nymphadora is bound to want to bring her boyfriend, regardless, and apparently no one else can organise their own social calendar.”

“You're better at it,” Sirius said.

“Due to the fact my mother never treated visitors as if she could kill them with a look,” Andromeda replied. “It takes practice, and I've been putting together family gatherings for a long time. Even when it was just trying to keep Ted awake long enough and Nymphadora from sabotage.”

“She seems like she would have raised hell as a teenager,” Sirius said. There was a pang of regret dropping like a stone in his gut that he'd never seen that.

“She did,” Andromeda replied. “But I've never feared a little chaos. You could have asked me in the first place.”

“I didn't want to put that on you,” Sirius said. “You're a big enough target without us lot crowding about the house.”

“We'll take extra precautions. I wouldn't stay here myself if I felt it was too dangerous. We have good defenses.” Andromeda replied. “If they decide to come for a fight, we're no slouches at that either.”
“Yeah, alright. As long as you don’t try to throw things without improving your aim first,” Sirius told her.

To her credit, her glove did hit him square on the jaw. There was some hope for her yet.

Night had fallen over England by the time Regulus returned to Emmeline’s home with a vial of Lestrange blood tucked in his pocket. He found Kreacher in the guest room, straightening the already-straight bedspread, and Regulus felt a pang in his chest when he thought back to what Emmeline had said about Kreacher’s enduring discomfort. Staying busy in her new, clean home was more difficult than the large and dusty halls of his own, but he could not begrudge Kreacher the distraction. Yet even with the suspicion that Kreacher would not suddenly accept such an upset in the surroundings - or more so, the expectations - some part of him had hoped that Kreacher might relax, even a little.

As it turned out, Regulus’s presence could only balm so many burns. Uncomfortable as the thought might be, perhaps a break would do Kreacher some good.

“I am going to the house,” Regulus announced as Kreacher was turning towards him. Not wanting to wrinkle the bed Kreacher had just straightened, Regulus instead sat in a chair by the window. Leaning forward a little, he was closer to the elf’s height, if not quite. “Bellatrix intends to harm us. You saw that, right?”

Kreacher looked exceptionally uncomfortable, then, cringing with a distaste that made Regulus wonder if he was reliving it, or whether he was assuming that he would be left here at Emmeline’s again.

“Kreacher saw Miss Bella’s attack…” A tense shift. “Saw her miss-”

“She hit exactly who she meant to,” Regulus interrupted, watching Kreacher’s face grow more troubled. “We are not safe - and the house is not safe. She tore apart the drawing room, and I have no doubt she would destroy everything in that house if she was struck by another foul mood.” The expression grew more stricken still. “We cannot trust her - or anyone she might rope in to do her dirty work, family or not… At least not until we can establish some degree of safety from those who were once on our side. I will be sealing her and the other Lestranges out of the house.”

'Some degree of safety from the ones we once sided with’ rang uncomfortably in his ears, but he did not voice it, and he was glad Kreacher did not voice it, either.

“Does Master Regulus require anything of Kreacher?”

In the back of his mind, he thought about how much he wanted to foster some tentative acceptance between elf and girlfriend - but maybe a little distance might be good, might take off the pressure…

“How would you feel about keeping watch at the house?” he asked, and Kreacher looked up with some interest. “Protecting my mother’s portrait, the books, the artifacts, the other portraits… There are those who wish me harm, and those who would wish you and the house harm, by extension. Your life is more important than the objects in the house, but there could be some benefit to a watch from within the walls. I trust you to do that more than anyone.”

In truth, it was probably similarly beneficial to retrieve and refine the rings he had charmed to monitor the entrances and exits, but it was worth the pride he saw on the house-elf’s face.

“Kreacher accepts this honour.” He glanced briefly at the door, then back to Regulus again with a slightly shifty look. “Will Master Regulus be staying with the half-blood woman?”
“Yes,” Regulus responded and watch Kreacher trying not to cringe. “She is very important to me. We look out for each other, just as you and I are looking out for each other.” That was understating it, of course, but the cringe started to look more skeptical than appalled, at least.

From the desk, Regulus sought out a copied page of the spell, and less than a minute later, Kreacher had apparated them back into the house, met with the dim gas lights and low mumbles rippling down the hall. Crouching down, Regulus rested his arms on his knees and said, “I intend to find a better means of communication.” He thought of the project with Sirius, and how surveillance could continue to build out of pulled their previous creations together. “But in the meantime, I will put some protective spells wherever you would like to sleep. Should anyone come into the house - no matter who it is - you should avoid discovery and return to Emmeline’s to wait for me and report on what you saw.” More earnestly, he added, “Even if it is Narcissa or Draco. I still love them very much, but we must take caution until we fully understand the situation.”

Kreacher did not look very happy, but he had not been very happy about the damage done by Bellatrix, either, and he spoke his agreement with a nod, it rang sincere.

Regulus could see a sense of relaxation settle over the elf as he wandered off into the house - a certain purpose to his step - and Regulus tried to ignore the temptation to take it all back and bring Kreacher home with him, anyway.

When he was alone, Regulus pulled the page and his wand from his pocket, temporarily stuck the page to the wall for ease of reading, then pulled out the vial of blood. Uncorking the top, he drew out a small amount and swished it against the front door, leaving a small red blotch. Checking his hands for open wounds (and finding none), he pressed a hand to smear it over the wood, catching the drips mid-slide.

With his hand still pressed to the door, he flicked his eyes over to the page again for one last glance, then began:

“Sanguinem Obstructionum,” he murmured, waving his wand in two connected loops, watching a thin black mist trail after until he flicked it towards the door. For only a second, the door glowed red, flashed outward, then went dark again.

Pulling his hand back into a fist, Regulus stared at the door, looking as normal as it ever had with no sign of a blood smear - and inside, hopefully a the spell was taking hold. Perhaps there was no way to know without taunting her into testing it, but he had done what he could for now.

Removing the page from the wall again, he folded it into his pocket with the vial and looked upwards towards the nursery where Phineas’s portrait still remained - towards the rings in his room and the scorch mark blotting out his name on the tapestry.

Steeling himself with a little edge of defiance, he admitted that he had not yet done everything he could - or intended to - do, but it was a start.
Chapter 25

It was the week before Christmas, and all through the house, Emmeline Vance found herself fidgeting with photographs, dallying with the curtains, and dallying with rugs. She was not a woman prone to nerves, but to look presentable was an important first step in not getting the proceedings going on the wrong foot. It was already on tenuous ground, with gale force winds and smattering rain outside. Not exactly a warm welcome for her grandmother, but she could take it.

Nana looked rather like a bat materialising under an umbrella when she finally did arrive. Popping up her own sturdy brolly, she offered a wordless refuge to her grandmother as they stepped into the hallway.

“I think you've brought the coastal weather with you,” Emmeline said, as her grandmother began to divulge herself of her long, black overcoat.

“Ghastly out there,” Nana replied.

With a flick of her wand, the coat squeezed and dried itself as she walked up and down the hall. Small puddles formed and evaporated as she did so. It was a fluidity that Emmeline had found only in older witches, wizards, and otherwise inclined magical people. Perhaps if she lived long enough to achieve it, she would be less jealous of it.

“Interesting looking place,” Nana said. Was that a dig at the new place or a note of its rather unusual shaped wainscoting? Ah yes, her favourite game. Was that an insult in disguise or genuine? So difficult to tell.

Still, sincerity seemed the most polite. “I like it,” Emmeline said, with what she hoped was firmness and not defensiveness.

“Yes, I imagine you do.” Nana turned her attention on her, placing her hands upon Emmeline's shoulders. “You look less like you may shatter if someone looks at you, Lina.”

“Thank you?” Emmeline asked. Really, what was an appropriate response to that? “I don't feel particularly like I may shatter; perhaps a little broken off here and there.”

“You should work on the smile,” Nana told her, walking past her into the front room. “It wouldn't fool a crup.”

“I'll attempt to fit some smiling practice into my rather busy schedule,” Emmeline replied, following her in to find her perusing over the walls.

“You put up pictures of them,” Nana replied, placing a finger barely above a moving portrait of her daughter and husband.

“Well, yes.” Emmeline said, simply. “So do you.”

“It's not a criticism. You're very sensitive.” Nana looked back to her, a little pinched herself around the eyes. “It wasn't too difficult to put them up?”

A good sticking charm did the trick, Emmeline wanted to say but it seemed rude, so she attempted to refrain. “It can be painful,” she admitted. “But not so painful that I want them to stop being part of my life, especially at this time of the year.”
“Some pain is worth it, yes.” Nana nodded. She waved her hands in a beckoning motion. “We'll hug now.”

Despite the discomfort of scrutiny, Emmeline could not deny the healing power of a hug from one's grandmother. Especially when she smelt vaguely of vanilla and lavender, as she always had. “That's the tea,” Emmeline said, hearing the kettle whistle. “Shall we sit here?”

“Yes,” Nana said, smoothing out her dress to sit down. The skirt of her robes spread out like the old ones did, even though as she understood it, her grandmother had considered herself a very modern woman for her time. As Emmeline went in to make sure the teapot was all present and correct, her grandmother called back in. “Is he hiding?”

“No,” Emmeline said, though she wasn't sure if that was true or not. She set down the tray, letting the teapot do its business. “He's just giving us a little space. It's been a few months. I wasn't sure if you'd come at all.”

Not that she looked ill, but Alexandrina Henley would have covered even the vaguest hint of ill health so well that you would need years to find it. At ninety-two, all of her previously blonde hair had turned to thin grey curls, but she refused to wear her glasses because she thought it made her look old. She still wore her wedding band, even if her husband had died over sixty years before as a casualty of the last, last war.

“I'll move as I can for as long as I can,” Nana said. “Though why do you have three sofas for only one person?”

“That one is warm from the fire, that one has a nice breeze from the doorway, and one is for guests,” Emmeline rattled off. “I try to be accommodating. How's the Savoy?”

“In need of renovation,” Nana replied. “It's not like it was.”

“I imagine not,” Emmeline said. The place had been popular in the ‘20s and ‘30s, when her grandmother was young, but it was stuffy now, by Emmeline’s reckoning, and it wasn’t entirely deserved. Still, her grandmother had spent her honeymoon at it and loved it enough to pay the exorbitant rates rather than simply apparate.

“How is your department?” Nana asked, blowing on her tea.

“Unspeakable,” Emmeline said, promptly.

“That was awful,” Nana replied, but if Emmeline wasn’t mistaken, trying to hide a smirk by still blowing on her tea. “Have you decided on whether to sell the house or not?”

“Not yet,” Emmeline replied. It did seem silly, to leave it there empty when people could make new and happy memories in it, but the Death Eaters had targeted it. She couldn't merely let someone move in; what if they came back? “You're quite sure you don't want it?”

“At home, I have beaches and sea to comfort me when it's like this.” Nana shook her head, jostling a necklace hidden below her collar and causing it to spark in the light. “I don't think I'd like to live here again. It's not where I belong.”

“No,” Emmeline said, looking at the place she'd now been almost two months. The place shared, the place where the Order congregated, the place acting as a safe haven but with a lot more books. “I don't know if I belong here yet, but it certainly has the potential to be something very special indeed if I keep working at it.”
When Regulus had offered to give space to Emmeline and her grandmother - 'Nana,' she was called - Emmeline had requested he leave them to it for no more than an hour at most before he ought to pop in to assess the situation as it was. Her grandmother was a formidable woman with a sharp tongue, she had said, and a manner that could be difficult to read.

As the forty-five minute mark rolled around, Regulus felt the itch of curiosity prickling more aggressively. He had thrown himself into modifications for the alarm spell and its sensors as a part of the ‘new map’ project Sirius had proposed, yet his mind kept creeping back downstairs. Emmeline did not speak of her family very much, though when she did, she spoke highly of her upbringing. To see her fussing about the house over the visit was unusual, but it piqued no small amount of interest. The loss of Emmeline’s parents had struck grandmother and grandchild alike, and months of distance had stretched between them in that time, but he had seen a subtle anticipation in Emmeline’s manner, and for that reason, he was glad her grandmother had come.

Only a few more moments of distraction had passed before Regulus at last stirred himself to descend the stairs. At the bottom, he spotted the two women seated on the nearest sofa with cups of tea - a head of grey curls, and a head of brown. For an odd moment, he had considered knocking on the wall in some play at politeness that, for all its absurdity, felt more comfortable than logical.

In the end, he did not have to knock. Though he had started for the kitchen, Emmeline promptly took notice of his entry and turned to look at him. Meeting her eyes, he kept the question off of his face and instead offered a little flick of a smile. Her expression was neutral, with perhaps a bit of amusement - it was to be expected, when discussing Ministry issues of late, and that did seem to be the current topic of conversation.

Regulus had been preparing to make some contrived excuse about tea when Emmeline’s grandmother turned to look at him with far more scrutiny.

"Pardon the interruption," he began with a tone that was more polite than apologetic.

"I see now. No denying you’re a Black, I see. It's like a replication charm!" Emmeline's grandmother exclaimed.

"That was rude," Emmeline said mildly. She made a patting motion next to her on the sofa. “Nana, boyfriend, boyfriend, Nana. Or I suppose a less rude approach would be Alexandrina Emma Henley, this is Regulus Arcturus Black and vice versa.”

Regulus tipped a slight nod at Emmeline's grandmother. It took only a passing second to catch on that the elder woman had no intention of standing - not strictly required, but certainly polite in this scenario, as far as social rules went. Perhaps it was intentional, or perhaps she was merely tired. Either way, making a fuss over what was probably arbitrary at this point seemed less important than making the interaction go as smoothly as it could. Etiquette didn’t seem to matter very much, as his life currently was, and it hadn’t for rather a long time.

Scarcely missing a beat, Regulus took a seat on Emmeline's other side. “It is a pleasure to finally meet you.”

"Is it really?" Emmeline's grandmother replied. “Why is that?”

"Can you not attempt to make him squirm?" Emmeline asked.

"I could," she said, looking back to Regulus himself. "But I expect you're made of stronger stuff than you look, aren't you? If you're a purist dating my granddaughter, the muggle-born rights protestor."
Regulus held her look, thinking that it did sound a little bit like a trap, the way she emphasised purism in one of her first remarks. Doing so in the same breath as she mentioned Emmeline framed it more like an indirect question than it did a compliment.

"Acting against purist traditions does tend to attract critical attention," he responded, meeting the comment firmly but as evenly as ever. "Upon reflection, I've found I am more of a traditionalist."

"Does that go over any better?" her grandmother asked.

"Not in my experiences thus far," Regulus responded, carefully keeping the sting off of his face.

Emmeline reached for his hand, taking it between hers lightly. “We’re both consenting adults. We’re fine.”

There was a beat of silence, but Emmeline’s grandmother addressed him, not her. “There was a Regulus Black in the year below me at school. Your grandfather?”

"My great uncle," Regulus corrected, lightly squeezing Emmeline's hand, though he kept his attention on her grandmother. "My grandfather was Arcturus, but Regulus was his younger brother."

"I can't picture him," Emmeline's grandmother replied. "No, perhaps I can, but the younger one I remember. Always afluttering. You're very still. I expected someone will a little more...gumption."

"He has plenty of gumption," Emmeline said. "You don't need to be loud about it, just strong-willed in your stance."

"No, but are you being discreet by nature or is this just," - her grandmother made a vague gesture with her fingers - "a practice, a dalliance?"

For a moment, Regulus stared at her, stunned at the blatant implication. He flicked a glance over to Emmeline, then back to her grandmother before responding.

"No," he said firmly. "I don't dally, certainly not in this."

"I don't either!" Emmeline exclaimed. "You're making me out to be some sort of -” she lowered her voice - "slag. Do you really think I would jump into something without thoroughly thinking it through and having an in depth discussion about the matter?"

"I don't mean it that way," her grandmother said. "But you are still young, and being functionally the last person of a famous name tends to effect these things."

"Which we've already discussed." Emmeline sighed. "Look, it may have been a crush, but it is considerably something quite else now, and if it ends, it will be because we didn't work as people. Not because of blood. Frankly, it's going quite well, all things considered."

"This will be a lot of trouble, a lifetime of trouble, perhaps," said her grandmother, looking them over. "It will only get more troublesome."

"A troublesome existence," Emmeline replied. "I wonder what that would be like. I would quite certainly have no idea."

"It can strain even the strongest of relationships," her grandmother said. "War making it more so. This is something you don't mind fighting for?"
"I would do so happily," Emmeline replied. "Often the most troublesome people can be the most rewarding company."

His mouth flicked up a little. Although 'troublesome' still did not feel like a descriptor he would apply to himself, he had long accepted that perhaps there was some weight to the perception, even if it was simply because trouble kept following him around, these days. "Trouble is part of the current reality, and it is not exactly surprising, at this point, when troublesome situations arise. One can try to compromise, but as it turns out, compromise can only go so far when you settle on a point that no one is keen to bend on."

"So you are being young and stubborn," Emmeline's grandmother said.


The elderly woman leaned forward. "Are there going to be children?"

Regulus could feel his own embarrassment starting to prickle, though he was glad when Emmeline took it upon herself to snip back:

"It's been six months, give us a chance."

"You're already living together," Emmeline's grandmother replied. "It is not an unreasonable assumption. I am not upset, Lina. I'd like to see another generation before the grave takes me."

"You'll put me in an early grave from embarrassment in a moment," Emmeline grumbled. "Can we move on to talking about the last war? We're doing a little research, side project, you know but we found what looked like some significant looking jewelry and wanted to pick your brain over what you might know about the use of the symbol."

Regulus nodded, mind switching back to the ring he had given to Dumbledore months before - the Gaunt ring with Grindelwald’s symbol. As relieved as he was that her manner had loosened somewhat from the initial distrust, it was a welcome shift from a conversation that had started taking an embarrassing turn when speaking to a grandmother, even if she wasn't his own. "A triangle with a circle inside, and a line down the middle. Grindelwald’s, I believe?"

“I am familiar with it.” Her grandmother nodded slowly. “It was never well publicised here. We travelled when it was just hitting the papers, my late husband and I. He was a translator, and we had only my boys then, so we went too. It was big stunts, designed to out magic to the muggle population and force them to react in a way he was sure would be violent and force the ICW to remove the Statute and issue a call to arms. This symbol cropped up a few times - at events, drawn on napkins - but it’s not like these looming clouds this monster leaves hanging over houses. I think it was said to be a family coat of arms, perhaps a sword, a shield, and cloak for battle, but I don’t know the family well enough to know for sure."

“Unsurprisingly, the Grindelwald family isn’t included in any records I’ve seen for Britain, though I would guess a wand before a sword for a wizarding family, and a shield would be equally strange. Nonetheless, it is a curious train of thought,” Regulus remarked.

"Wands aren't as impressive looking." Emmeline's grandmother made the slightest shrug. "But they wouldn't be the first wizards to prefer a blade to a wand. Shield does sound like tosh, I shall grant you."

“An enchanted blade, perhaps,” he said - that, at least, granted something vaguely interesting to the
visceral nature of a sword - but even as the words passed his lips, he had to admit to himself that
his own cousin Bellatrix rather liked her daggers, and she was sufficiently fanatical, as far as
purebloods went. "Circles also represent completion, timelessness… or protection that encloses."
He could feel his mind starting to run away with him, which was not exactly ideal for a
conversation with Emmeline’s grandmother, rather than just Emmeline herself, but the line of
thought was intriguing. “In truth, the details have always been a bit scarce - and it sounds as though
they were scarce, even then.”

"Find yourself a Durmstrang graduate. He was a bigger influence there,” Emmeline's grandmother
replied.

"Thank you for the advice," Emmeline said, with a nod. She looked to Regulus. "Something came
for you in the post. Nothing malicious according to detectors, but it's there when you're not busy."

Curiosity flickered as he glanced over at their mail, then back to Emmeline and her grandmother
again. The only people who usually sent him letters were Harry and Narcissa - and the former
would return from school within a few days, while the other had not spoken to him since she and
Draco had come to Grimmauld Place some time ago, certainly not since Bellatrix's attack.

A little sting prickled again, but Emmeline did not appear bothered by the letter's arrival, so it was
unlikely to be from Narcissa. He could not fully decide if that was a relief or a disappointment, but
he supposed it was probably best as a relief.

"I will look," he said after a brief beat. "Thank you."

"On that note, you can give me that tour now. I am fortified enough that if your giant book
collection falls on me, I may survive." With an unsteady push, Emmeline's grandmother came to
her feet. "It was interesting to meet you, Regulus Arcturus Black. Perhaps next time, we'll be
familiar enough to use only our fore and surnames when greeting."

Moving to behind her, Emmeline made a visible cringe. She mouthed 'sorry', before moving to the
front to play house guide to her grandmother and leave Regulus to his post.

Shaking his head, Regulus wandered over to retrieve his letter, thinking that the interaction had not
gone as terribly as it could have. Emmeline’s grandmother was a stressful, but not unfamiliar,
variety of passive aggressive - rife with that sort of politely rude commentary that communicated
distrust, skepticism, and other concerns that were easy enough to say without saying… or to say
bluntly while acting as though it was a perfectly normal point to make, in some cases. Even so, she
did not seem to outright dislike him, which was more than he could assume for most of the chilly
societal interactions ahead of him. The loss of her daughter to the Death Eaters was unlikely to
paint his family’s known connections in a positive light, and where his name used to be
exceptionally helpful, it was not without its troubles, beyond his former social circles.

Brushing away the melancholy lapping at the back of his mind, Regulus picked up the envelope.
The writing was neither Narcissa’s nor Harry’s - it wasn’t immediately recognisable at all, for that
matter - but when he carefully pulled out the letter, he felt a bittersweet pang to see it was
Andromeda, extending an official invitation to her home for Christmas.

Sirius had mentioned the idea when he had last come by. Such a family gathering promised to be
very different from the normal sort of family holidays that peppered their youth. He scarcely knew
Andromeda these days, but there was a small comfort in feeling like they could bridge some family
gap again, odd and mismatched as everything felt now.

Folding up the letter and sticking it in his pocket, he resolved to ask Emmeline if she would like to
come along - once her grandmother left on her way, as he did not feel in the mood to tangle up in another conversation. An official invitation called for an official response, but for now, alarms and maps and perhaps some horcrux theories were calling.

"Come in before you catch your death!"

Sirius allowed Molly to usher him into the Burrow. It was only three days before Christmas, but the fluttering of snow they had in London was nothing on the snowy blizzard they had going on down here, and he could feel the water flakes on his hair and eyelashes. He gave his hair a shake with his hand to try and rid himself of the offending snowflakes, then wondered if perhaps he'd shaken his head too hard. If the Burrow had felt cramped before, having a tree and enough garlands that he was about to smack into them with every step no matter what direction he went made it bordering on suffocating. He liked Christmas too, but he wasn't about to go mental about it.

“If you ask that once more, I'm going to stick this sprout-”

With his lack of ginger mane, Harry was easy to identify over by the sink. By the looks of it, he'd already been up to no good because he was hand-peeling the veg with Ron.

“What's wrong?” Sirius asked, in lieu of greeting his godson.

“Nothing!” Harry said, placing the bane of every child's Christmas dinner down by the sink. “I wasn't actually going to do anything with it.”

Why would he care if he was? A little sniping between best mates was normal. Harry didn't have to defend that. Molly wasn't even looking, she'd gone over to faff with some laundry. She looked a little stressed, which was probably about the wedding preparations for Bill, but nevertheless, it made Sirius feel a little guilty about his grumpiness over them picking up Harry. Harry should get to spend his time with his friends, regardless of whether or not he wanted to shove vegetables in them.

Then it hit him, a thought he would never consider if it didn't make so much sense. Harry thought he was in trouble with him because he was the godparenting adult and as such, should probably look down on threatening one’s mates, even if they definitely have it coming. He barely contain the laughter that arose at the thought; he'd never been one for enforcing any sort of authority. Even at the beach, it'd been more of a courtesy.

“Brilliant news, you probably shouldn't shove your greens anywhere on another person without their consent,” Sirius said. “But I meant why have you been banished to peeling by hand?”

“Who'd want a sprout shoved in them?” Harry asked, at the same time Ron said, “Because we're not seventeen yet.”

“So?” Sirius asked, because that wasn’t a conversation to be had in public.

“So ickle Ronniekins can't use magic outside of school,” Fred informed them – at least, he was pretty sure it was Fred. He sat down at the table, lifting his feet onto it. “Till then, they have to do it all by hand.”

“What-” Use of magic before your seventeenth birthday wasn't allowed, but the Weasleys were an old magical family. Did they really keep to that? He thought that was only for people who lived with muggles, he'd certainly never stopped using magic from the moment he'd had his own wand (and several other moments beforehand). “You lot used magic at Grimmauld Place, I saw you.”
“Yeah,” Harry said. “But isn't that blocked from Ministry view?”

“Not to mention we didn't do it in front of Mum,” Ron added.

Ah, teenage rebellion was alive and well. “Dunno about blocked,” Sirius said, though he supposed it was possible. “But last I checked, they weren't fussed on all magical areas. Left it to the parents.”

“Mum won't let them,” said George, joining his brother. “We had to do it once, now so do you.”

“If you'd help, we'd be done by now.” Ron said.

“If if if,” Fred added. “You'll wish your life away.”

“Besides,” George said. “We're heading down to the corner shop, lovely girl in there, and if you can find some poor, deluded girl to go out with you, there's hope for anyone.”

On the one hand, he wasn't keen on Molly telling Harry when he could or couldn't use magic. On the other, he'd done it by hand a few times with Mrs. Potter, even though they knew full well he and James would use magic whenever they pleased and it'd never done him any harm. Harry didn't seem half as put out by the task as his friend was.

“Will you two shut that door? You're letting the cold in!” Molly said, as the twins disappeared out into the snow. She padded into the kitchen. “Do you know when is Remus coming back?”

“He is back,” Sirius said, hoping he hadn't just landed Remus in it. “He's just been busy with Tonks.”

“I wasn't sure if he was going somewhere, or if we should have invited him here,” Molly said, a fretful and frazzled tone to her voice.

“I'm sure he'd appreciate the kind offer,” Sirius said, because fuck what anyone said, he could be well mannered when he so chose, and he didn't think Molly deserved his cheek right now. “But I think he's going to Tonks's. I've already promised Andromeda a shot at poisoning me with her cooking, if only to get a front row at watching her make him squirm a little.”

“Oh, I was going to invite you here,” and to his surprise, she deflated a little. Probably because she thought he was about to yank Harry out of their celebrations, which he would, but not completely.

“I appreciate that,” Sirius said. “We've got the new safe house set up; we were going to see about having a knees up on Christmas night, if you fancy it.”

“Well, Arthur is still very busy, but if there's no important business, of course!”

Sirius had to think she'd mentioned Arthur doing well a hundred times or more in the last few months, but he couldn't really begrudge it. She was clearly proud of him. “You'll pass the message on to Hermione?”

Something in the quality of the air shifted, but Harry nodded. He clearly stepped in something. They weren't still fighting, were they?

“Can I have a word?” Harry asked.

Sirius nodded, and let him lead the way upstairs. It wasn't something Harry did much, asked to talk in private away from his friends, but judging by the look of utter betrayal on Ron's face, it could also be he wanted to get away from sprout shelling duty.
Even Harry was getting a little too tall for what he suspected was Ron's room, so Sirius sat down and ignored an ache in his knees because he was not going to turn into one of those blokes who made noises when they stood up or down. He didn't have long to wait in suspense. As soon as the door shut, Harry launched into it.

“Have you heard about what's happening at the Ministry?” Harry said it fast enough that it took an extra moment to register. He was absolutely his father's son in moments like this, mind moving too quickly for his mouth.

“What about it?” Sirius asked.

“The arrests,” Harry said. “One of them's the knight bus conductor and Ron's more likely to be a Death Eater than he is.”

Sirius let the sour thought overtake him. Same shit, different year. How the Minstry could be screwing up this badly, he had no idea. The ICW should give them a special medal for fucking up so completely that they couldn't arrest a Death Eater when half the culprits were blatant about it.

“The Ministry's always been thick. Why do you think we have Aurors in the Order?”

“I don't understand,” Harry said, crouching down onto the other bed. “Mr. Weasley did a raid on the Malfoys’ and found nothing.”

“They're not going to have it all sitting out where it can be found, are they?” Sirius guessed. Maybe under Lucius, but say what you want about Narcissa, she had half a brain every Tuesday and Friday, and it was just enough that they wouldn't have things on show.

“Grimmauld Place did,” Harry said.

“Do you really think the Ministry ever marched into Number Twelve looking for evidence?” Sirius shook his head. “They never knew about Regulus, and no one else has ever screwed up so badly they went looking for evidence until me. It was too old, too well known, and had too much gold for there to ever be someone coming along poking it.”

Something went out of Harry; his fight, his indignation at the Ministry, Sirius couldn't say exactly but he his shoulders sagged and his glasses made their way towards a grasp for freedom without being pushing back in place. “Something weird is going on,” Harry insisted. “Malfy is up to something. I saw him skulking around outside Dumbledore's office and Slughorn's!”

“Was this while you were also skulking outside said offices?” Sirius asked, trying not to sound too amused. A little plotting and scheming between Gryffindors and Slytherins sounded like the normal fare.

“No!” Harry said. “Not exactly. Slughorn invited me to his Christmas party, and Filch brought him in because he was trying to gatecrash it.”

Sirius snorted, both at the image and the need for it. There'd been a time, not too long ago, he was sure the younger Malfoy would have been invited, but with the arrest of Lucius Malfoy and the reacting Ministry, being dark was once again out of fashion, and Slughorn had always been a fairweather sort. As Slytherins went, not among the worst of people, but out of the Slytherins Sirius could say he liked, it was an understanding of what loyalty meant that clinched it.

“Do you like him, Slughorn?” Sirius asked.

“He's alright,” Harry said. His sentiments were closer to Sirius's (and James's) own on the man than Lily's, which did make the whole thing easier. “He's better than Snape.”
“That's not a high bar,” Sirius replied. “What about Dumbledore's? What were you up to?”

“That was Hermione,” Harry said. “She saw something was going on and came up to get me.”

He didn't sound put out with her. “I'm surprised she's not here,” Sirius said, treading waters as carefully as he could.

Harry went into a flop, with his head going forwards into his hands and slouching until he was almost off of the bed and hovering about the floor. “They're driving me crazy,” Harry said, with the long-suffering tone he knew very well.

“They'll figure it out eventually,” Sirius said. Hopefully before their seventh year; that had been painful with James and Lily.

“Between that and the mistletoe, I'd almost welcome someone trying to kill me,” Harry said, lowering his hands. “I'd rather face Death Eaters than that.”

Sirius couldn't help the laughter that escaped that time. “Sorry,” he said, since Harry looked a little like a sulk was threatening. “It's just so normal.”

“I think I'd rather be abnormal then,” Harry said.

“That's the spirit,” Sirius agreed.

“Do you at least believe me about Malfoy?” Harry asked.

“I believe you,” Sirius said. “Death Eaters are usually up to something, why would he be any different? It doesn't mean it's something you need to worry about. You can handle yourself.”

To his surprise, Harry just shrugged. “I don't know about that. Even Snape seemed uneasy around him.”

“Snape is uneasy about a lot of things,” Sirius replied. “The grooming supply aisle, for example. Doesn't mean you're going to get attacked by a bottle of conditioner.”

It got a hint of a smile at least.

“Do you trust him?” Harry asked.

“Don't ask me that,” Sirius countered. The easy answer was no, of course not, he was a total git who joined the Death Eaters with his creepy mates even though they were espousing that half-bloods were less than them (but some half-bloods were okay, politics clearly impacted their blood) but he also didn't trust many people as he once did. He was still feeling burnt around the edges from Halloween. Still a little from fifteen years ago, if he was true to himself. It had been his opinions that had led to the death of two of the people he loved most in the world. He'd learned to keep his mouth shut.

“Why?” Harry asked. “Everyone always says to trust Dumbledore's judgement – but he can be wrong sometimes too.”

“I'm not going to tell you what to believe, Harry,” Sirius said, firmly. “It doesn't matter what I think. What do you think?”

“I don't know,” Harry replied, tightly.

“Until you do know, just be careful.” Sirius told him.”With Malfoy too, even if he you can handle
“I am,” Harry insisted. “I always check where he is on the map first.”


“Sure,” Harry said, though he frowned slightly.

“You can have it back before school. It's just easier to remember the charms for it if I have them right in front of me,” Sirius assured him. In no way should Hogwarts be robbed of its newest marauder, nor Harry a chance at stalking Narcissa's son. “Sixteen was a long time ago for me.”

Harry took a dive under the bed, pulling out some chocolate frogs, a pair of gloves they'd picked up in the shops over the summer, and then his bag. He fished into it, looking around. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to watch multiple places at once,” Sirius said. He was tired of acting defensively, too late. “Diagon, maybe Hogsmeade. If Tinworth doesn't get hit, I'll be surprised.”

Harry forked over the parchment. “I still want to help.”

“You're helping by staying safe, at least for now. Are you practicing wandless dueling?” Sirius asked.

“As much as I can,” Harry said. “There's so much NEWT work.”

“I remember,” Sirius grimaced. “Even if you decide you'd rather stay here for Christmas than deal with the latest safe house, I know Regulus wants to talk to you about the soul fragment hunt.”

Harry nodded; as Sirius suspected, Harry must have assumed he already knew. Harry was deeply underestimating he and his brother’s inability to communicate effectively.

“I'll drop you off at Vance's,” Sirius said. “They've shacked up. It's safe for now, but between the attacks, probably not for long.”

“What are you doing?” Harry asked.

“I'm going to brave Tonks's mum's cooking,” Sirius said. “Besides, between Remus going with Tonks and Regulus having his first girlfriend, it's worth it just to watch them squirm. You're invited too, obviously, but I know Molly's already asked. Maybe that night? If I can ply Remus with enough wine at dinner, some embarrassing stories might come out.”

“You don't mind me staying here?” Harry asked, tentatively.

“They're your friends,” Sirius said. “They're important to you. I can share.”

(In theory.)

“Who all's going?” Harry asked.

“That I know of?” Sirius listed them off on his fingers. “You heard me invite Molly and Arthur; Bill might go, but I won't be surprised if he's busy. Weddings are insane to plan. Your parents had a very quiet one, raucous party later though; but looking at them, I'd guess it'll be more like Narcissa's. That took about a year and a half; it was mental.”

“Narcissa Malfoy?” Harry said.
“Yes,” Sirius said. “Bigotted old codger that he was, my grandfather was right about one thing: Malfoys are peacocks, they like to show off. Ice sculptures, unicorn driven carriages, fairies everywhere, full orchestra.”

“You were at her wedding?” Harry asked.

“It was the winter before I left,” Sirius said. “Everyone and their mother went. Somewhere there’s a picture of Bellatrix Lestrange in the froofiest of stupid dresses, and I’m only sorry I can’t put it on posters for all to see.”

Harry cracked a grin at that, as he was meant to. “I can't believe you were at the Malfoys’ wedding.”

“Don't ask me what happened at it,” Sirius said, taking a conspiratorial whisper. “I drank way too much, heaved my guts up over Edie Rowle, and fell asleep under a table.”

“How old were you?” Harry asked.

“Same age as you,” Sirius said. “If you're planning to get that plastered, I recommend doing it somewhere safer and nowhere some good for nothing mate will write unseemly gossip on your forehead.”

Harry flushed, “I've never – er - ”

“You've been too busy with a dark lord and his followers to get into the usual teenage trouble,” Sirius said. “I didn't really have much to do with it till I was at your grandparents’. There was a bloody massacre there, summer after my sixth year. I never liked any of it, but that's really when we started getting involved. Besides, you probably like Bill enough not to want to get drunk at his wedding.”

Harry nodded, but he still looked a little red. Maybe he was embarrassed, but there was nothing embarrassing about it. Harry and he had different childhoods, even if they had both been with people they hated being in a room with.

“Are we going now?” Harry asked.

“To Vance’s?” Sirius clarified. “No, I just wanted to see you. I can piss off if you want some privacy.”

“You don't have to,” Harry said.

Sirius felt his heart rate go back to something akin to normal. “Talk to me about school, then. What's going on when you're not stalking Draco Malfoy?”

The morning before Christmas Eve, Sirius showed up at the Burrow.

At first, Harry thought he may have rethought the idea of Harry staying there, but despite his forcibly pleasant agreement with Mrs. Weasley that it's better there than at a safe house right now, he made no mention of it. Instead, he said that Harry had an invitation to be the special guest at a “Ravenclaw Rebellion” get together. Harry had heard the term used now and then around the house. Even if no one would tell him much about the Order directly, he'd gathered it was some kind of research thing. It was Mrs. Weasley's reaction that puzzled him; normally, when Sirius talked about Order things around Harry, Ron, and Ginny, she'd get cross with him. This had simply made her smile sadly, then busy herself away.
Harry was still pondering this when they arrived in front of a red-orange house he'd never been to before. Sirius seemed to know where he was going, pressing onto the doorknob then sharply pulling away as if he'd been burned. Harry took a step towards him, but Sirius didn't seem upset about it. He was grinning.

The door opened to reveal Emmeline Vance, who was also smiling. “Testing my defenses?” she asked.

“You've updated,” Sirius said, walking in.

Harry wasn't sure if he was meant to follow, but Vance must have noticed his predicament because she waved him in. “Hello, Harry.” Vance shut the door behind him as she spoke. “You're looking well.”

“Er, thanks.” Harry wasn't sure how to respond to that.

Vance turned her attention to Sirius. “Are you staying?”

“Am I invited?” Sirius asked.

“Has that ever stopped you before?” Vance replied.

“Only when it was Meadowes,” Sirius said. The two shared a look, maybe a joke he didn't understand. He knew from the old photograph Mad-Eye Moody had that there used to be someone in the Order called that and that Voldemort had killed her personally. It felt rude to ask anything in light of that. “Besides, I think Harry can handle a couple of swots. He'd best friends with one of the biggest.”

Hermione was at home with her parents, but Harry thought for a moment she'd be sad not to be part of a group researching things for the Order. Even if the idea of research didn't thrill Harry, doing something that mattered for the Order did.

“Are you coming back?” Harry asked, instead.

“In a bit,” Sirius said. “I'm going to grab Remus and have a nostalgic cartography session.”

“The infamous map,” Vance said, rolling her eyes.

“You know about the Marauder’s Map?” Harry blurted out.

“Only after the fact,” Vance replied. “As a prefect for a different house, I don't believe I was allowed on such confidences, just in case.”

“Marlene didn't know either,” Sirius replied. “Evans - Lily only knew for a bit before we lost it. Remus was the only prefect we were sure wouldn't dob us in because he'd helped make it.”

It was hard to imagine Lupin in the same vein as his father and Sirius, given how much more adult he always seemed to be, but he had a sense of humour. Harry had seen that in the pensieve. Come to think of it, he'd seen it with what happened with Neville too. Maybe it wasn't that far fetched.

With Sirius absconded, Harry was led into the front room. His first thought was that Hermione would like it there; it seemed like every spare space had a book or some strange artefact with patterns on it. On one of the three settees in front of the fire was another familiar face, Regulus Black.
“Hello,” Harry said.

"Good morning," Regulus greeted back. "I'm glad to see you made it through the first half of the school year unscathed."

"Anything for a quiet life," Harry said. He hadn't been told to bring anything in particular with him, so he assumed whatever he was supposed to be doing would have some sort of supply there. "Though dueling Death Eaters might be easier than dealing with Quidditch tryouts, love potions, and Slug Club, so maybe I can look forward to that."

"Slug Club is not so bad," he remarked, lightly. "The love potions, I can agree on - I've never cared for the idea of them, myself - but what has you bothered about Quidditch? Poor player pool to choose from?"

"It was a disaster," Harry complained, sitting himself down on the sofa opposite. "It's only me and Katie Bell left from the old team. We had first years who'd never even flown before trying out, a few people lost their teeth, even a couple of Ravenclaws showed up. Choosing Ron and Ginny caused a few tantrums, but Ginny can outfly anyone and Ron saved the most, so he got keeper. He just needs time to get over his nerves and wrench his girlfriend off long enough to practice."

"Why such terrible options this year?" Regulus quirked an eyebrow.

"They're not terrible," Harry protested. The new beaters didn't have the zeal of Fred and George, but the new chasers were good. "It's just the Prophet reporting on the Department of Mysteries. Remember when we went to Diagon Alley and everyone kept staring? It's like that all the time at school. People just want to stare at me. I've started using the map to avoid people so I can get to class on time. Half the reason I've been wandering about the castle at night is to get five minutes to myself."

"Staring aside, you can't complain that it was a disaster, speak of only the first years and Ravenclaws showing up for the Gryffindor tryouts, then get defensive about how it wasn't terrible," Regulus said dryly, eyebrow still lifted.

"The try outs were terrible," Harry clarified, understanding now. "The team's not. We did win the first match, but Slytherin wasn't at their best, so it's not much of a victory. Malfoy's blagged his way off, and Vaisey got smacked with a bludger and couldn't play."

"Draco isn't playing this year?" Both eyebrows had lifted now.

"No," Harry said. "I thought it was weird too. He's played through every other injury, and he didn't look sick."

Frowning, Regulus nodded, but didn't say anything else about it. "Still no luck with the Founders?"

Harry shook his head. "No," he said. "But I've been looking at some of Voldemort's history through pensieve memories. You were right about the trophies. He had some even before Hogwarts."

"What have you seen?" Regulus asked, more curiosity in his tone.

"It was just ordinary things," Harry said. He supposed they must have been important to the person he took them from, but to him, they looked random. "A yo-yo, a thimble, some kind of mouth organ. Dumbledore seemed to think he stole them."

Interest lifted Regulus's expression a little more, pausing for a beat before responding, "I discovered a box with similar contents in the Lestrange Manor, but I did not have time to look very
closely. Perhaps the orphanage trophies were stored there." He turned slightly to look at Vance, who was coming towards them now. "You have put some research into the orphanage, correct?"

"Some," Vance nodded. "It was torn down some years ago, but it may be possible to find former residents through other methods. But I suspect if Dumbledore has gone through the memories with you, he's already looked into anything of consequence from the era."

"What about later on?" Harry asked. "I know Dumbledore was suspicious of him at school."

"We have already destroyed the locket and ring, and you took care of the diary, all of which would have occurred at Hogwarts or later. Our best hypotheses remain our pursuit of the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff artifacts. That is still only five, however, so there are other alternatives under consideration," Regulus noted, a little shifty before he added, "Have any of the memories taken place after he started at Hogwarts, or have they all been from his time at the orphanage?"

"I think he's going in order." Harry thought back to the memories he'd seen. "First, a Ministry official went to the Gaunts’ because one of them, the son Morfin, had jinxed Tom Riddle, Voldemort's father. It came out that his sister liked him, and their father tried to strangle her in front of the official." If anyone was going to have a decent idea of how badly purist wizards could take going away from that, he had a feeling Regulus did. Harry had seen - and heard - his mother's portrait.

"Both the father and brother went to Azkaban; she used magic to have Riddle fall in love with her; but after a while, she stopped, and he left her. She ran off to London, but she died giving birth. Then to Dumbledore at the orphanage; he was the one who told Riddle he had magic and that he was going to Hogwarts. One of the people there said even then, he had a feeling Regulus did. Harry had seen - and heard - his mother's portrait.

"The locket was in a cave, rather than the school, but that doesn't mean he hid them all in the same way," Regulus granted with a nod. "Keep an eye out for Hufflepuff's cup and Ravenclaw's diadem, just in case. You know a Smith, right? They descended from Hufflepuff. It might be worth asking if they know where the cup went, just in case."

"If by know you mean he thought I was soft in the head, yeah, I know a Smith," Harry replied, moodily. "I wouldn't expect much help from him. He reckons I killed Cedric, and Ginny hexed him for badgering her about the real story of what happened at the Ministry."

Regulus lifted an eyebrow. "Cedric was the other Hogwarts champion, wasn't he? You don't strike me as the sort to murder your own classmate," he said, dryly, but there was a sympathetic pang to the tone. "Unfortunate that he sounds so unpleasant, but we will keep looking into it, regardless."

"It's the parseltongue." Harry said, with a barely suppressed shudder at the idea of actually trying to kill off his classmates. It was too close to what he’d felt last year in Voldemort's mind for comfort. "Back when the basilisk started attacking people, everyone thought it was me. Then when my name got pulled, they thought I didn't want to share the spotlight or something stupid like that."

"That would be an awfully extreme solution to a spotlight problem," Regulus remarked, flatly.
"I'm not a killer," Harry said. It was a laughable idea, him being able to frighten anyone. "All anyone would have to do is summon my glasses and I wouldn't know which blob was which. Smith just thinks he knows better than everyone at everything. He's a snob."

"So am I," Vance chimed in. "I don't go about telling everyone what's what or accusing people of murder without just cause. You might have a better idea of tracking things if you go through the auction houses. People do love to have things owned by famous witches and wizards."

Harry thought of Borgin & Burkes, not an auction house, but they had said they got things in there all the time that supposedly belonged to famous people. "Burke, from the shop in Knockturn, Merope Gaunt sold the Slytherin locket to him. He might know something."

"I've looked in the past without much luck, but it is worth checking with more specific aims - even if I suspect they are less fond of me than they once were." Regulus shook his head. "They are not Death Eaters, to my knowledge, but I also don't particularly trust their customer confidentiality policy, were the Death Eaters to ask. In light of that, if we were to investigate there, we would have to be subtle. The Burkes and the Death Eaters are unlikely to understand the significance of the Founders' objects, but if it got back to-" - a brief pause, then firmly, "Voldemort himself, he would catch on in an instant."

"They stored things for the Malfoys when they were raided before," Harry thought aloud. "They might do it for others, but it wouldn't be an easy place to check. Where did Voldemort go between when the war started and when he finished school?"

"That is a good question," Regulus said with a little nod. "Suffice to say he was not forthcoming with those details."

"What about the first attack?" Harry asked. Surely someone would know that in the Order.

"Not an easy question to answer," Vance replied, immediately. "There were earlier signs, but nothing solid until the appearance of the dark mark in 1970."

"But he had to have recruited people before that, right?" Harry asked. "I know there was supposed to be a gang of them at school, but where does it go from that to Death Eaters? It seems like it might be a significant enough moment."

"At first, probably through families and like-minded friendships," Regulus said with a speculative tone. "The Lestranges, the Averys, the Mulcibers - they would have had a fair bit of reach on their own. Beyond that, I suppose recruitment amongst those who were sympathetic to the rhetoric or who revel in chaos, whatever the reason. They have never been one for rallies, but there are a lot of channels to go through when you know how to navigate them. I will admit he made very beneficial allies in the original Death Eaters."

"They were all old, pureblood families, right?" Harry asked. "Maybe that's where he got the idea, or maybe not. He can't have found out about who his parents were until around the time the Chamber was opened because when he was young, he thought Riddle was the wizard, not his mother. So he killed Myrtle and put himself into the diary. Did something happen around the time of the locket, some big moment?"

Knitting his brow in thought, Regulus paused for a moment before responding, "Perhaps, though I cannot recall anything in particular. My father was caught in their crossfire a couple of months prior, which was significant to me, of course, but nothing of consequence to the cause itself. I was still in school, most of the time, so perhaps I was not privy, if it did."
"I'm starting to think both Harry and myself may have more Death Eater experience than you do, which is a thoroughly disturbing line of thought." Vance interjected, to which Regulus made a face. "But there is a timeline - the Chamber was opened in 1943, which makes the diary the earliest known example. There's the ring, but we can't be sure of that timing. The locket in '79. That's over thirty years for a potential further three to four from the '40s to '81. I suppose he could have tried tracking through lineages, but the diadem went missing a thousand years ago, and I don't believe anyone has a full lineage of older families. Even the one in Grimmauld Place is missing many names who could have ended up with things, such as Sirius inheriting from his uncle."

"So someone could just have it in their attic somewhere?" Harry asked.

"Or it was tracked down from someone’s attic," Vance said. "But he'd need to know it was authentic; that requires some training. He had to do his homework. That has to leave a trail somewhere, it’s just a matter of where to start."

"You mentioned the auction house," Regulus said to Vance. "I do agree that the authenticator circle is a good next step. It's still a matter of finding the right one - assuming such a person is even still alive - but the cup would be something a buyer would want to authenticate if they purchased it. Alternately, if it stayed within the family, lineage lines may not be thoroughly tracked, but it's a starting place." He looked to Harry, then. "Were you able to speak to the Hogwarts ghosts at all? Old as many of them are, there may have been at least rumours of the diadem."

"I asked Nick, but he said that it's not something they talk about." Harry didn't know how to take that at the time, but there seemed to be some sort of council for the ghosts of Hogwarts, so they had to know something about each other.

"Sir Nicholas is the youngest of the ghosts," Vance added. "I don't think he'd remember. The Baron, Friar, and Helena were all students when the founders taught there. You may have more luck with them, though the Baron is not known for his co-operative nature, and Helena has staunchly never spoken of it."

"Helena?" Harry asked.

"There is a severe lack of Ravenclaws in your life," Vance said. "The Grey Lady. The ghost of Ravenclaw. She's quite private, and the rumours of the diadem being stolen away were harshly put down by Rowena Ravenclaw herself. If you want a straight answer, you'd have better luck having someone from her own house ask her."

Harry filed the thought away. This would have been more helpful last year with Cho. He could ask Luna, but wasn't sure whether or not a stubborn ghost would talk to her.

"I'll check with Montague & Cadwallader's," Vance said. The name sounded familiar, but Harry couldn't place it. "I'm not sure if I'll be allowed, but no one ever got somewhere by not trying. Is there anything else of note?"

Nothing Harry could think of. They knew of the Malfoy suspicions, but given the connection, probably didn't want to be reminded of it. "Not unless you think Slughorn is secretly evil or you've found some magical royalty."

"No, I highly doubt Slughorn is 'secretly evil,'" Regulus said, mouth quirking. "Socially opportunistic, yes, but not evil. As for your magical royalty curiosities - no, I'm afraid it's only as we discussed before, which did not seem to solve your conundrum. Unless it is figurative royalty, medieval in timing, or related a decidedly non-royal pureblood family name, there isn't any magical royalty in Britain."
"It's Hermione overreacting," Harry said. It was just a nickname or something, like the marauders used. "I'll see what I can do about the ghosts, but if you find something out, just ask Sirius for his mirror. It's more secure than the owls."

Regulus nodded. "We will. Your assistance is appreciated."

"Slughorn also said to give his best," Harry added, suddenly remembering the party a few days before. He’d been distracted by Malfoy attempting to gatecrash it. "He got interrupted by Malfoy, since he wasn’t invited."

Mouth flicking up into a little smile, Regulus responded, "Thank you. I will be certain to return the sentiment."

"Cool," Harry said. Was he allowed to just get up and leave? Was someone supposed to show up and take him somewhere? Going by himself for a bit sounded pretty great, but the Order had been intense about him not doing that.

"I'll drop you off at Molly and Arthur's," Vance volunteered. Harry went a little red at the idea she saw him looking at the door. "There's nothing adventurous around here, I'm afraid, and timekeeping has never been Sirius's strong point."

"No, certainly not," Regulus agreed, wryly. "Enjoy your holiday."

"Cheers," Harry said. When Emmeline Vance stood up, he followed out into the hallway. Maybe he would write to Luna anyway. She always seemed happy to enough to talk to him at school, she'd been great at Slughorn's party. Maybe they'd get lucky and the Ravenclaw ghost knew something.
Chapter 26

As a warning, this chapter ended up much longer than usual - around 20,900 words. For people who like to read chapters in one sitting, it'll take a bit more time, but we hope you all enjoy the double-feature Christmas (in August) Special!

Hours before, the Christmas Eve sun had set without ceremony. Warmth was spreading from the hearth as Regulus steeped in his thoughts, settled securely in Emmeline’s living room this year, rather than his own.

Nostalgia was a melancholy beast, lingering in his mind with claws poised to thrash, if not for the softening novelty of a new environment. His memories had felt strangely distant that night, like glancing through a clouded window. Nonetheless, flicking embers roused up an image of the drawing room at his own house, with its hearth just off-set from the piano and within a comfortable distance of several bookshelves. What Emmeline’s home lacked in grand pianos, it made up for in bookshelves and comforting company, but distance and a new room did little to curb the part of him that wondered if Narcissa still played the piano for holiday audiences, or if the interest - or at least the annual habit - had fallen away with every other resemblance to their childhood holidays.

If the previous Christmas had felt like a departure, with the Order bustling around in place of the large family of his childhood, this Christmas was a further departure still: Emmeline’s quiet presence, which threaded through his thoughts even when she was not around, and perhaps more jarringly, the severance of what felt like the last threads holding up the way things had once been. Last winter, he was still pretending to be dead, as far as the official story went. This winter, his eldest cousin was trying to make it a reality, as if the year had not been dramatic enough already.

Emmeline, too, was facing a departure from her past holidays. The feeling of loss was difficult to pin down, but however different their circumstances might have been - his flight from England and father’s death, rejections both spoken and lethal, the brutal murder of her parents in her own home - he could still feel the echoes of everything that would never happen again, and he suspected she must, too. Some part of him knew he ought to be grateful he had some semblance of family that did not want him dead or disowned or distant, or that were not dead themselves. After all, he still had Sirius, as well as Andromeda and her family. Regulus wanted that to be enough, to just forget about Narcissa and stop wondering what was going to happen to Draco, but it was no easier to fill in that gaping hole now than it had been when Andromeda and Sirius had left him so many years before.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Emmeline approaching with two mugs of hot cocoa. Bittersweet nostalgia had prodded at her, too, especially surrounding her grandmother’s visit, but if it was bothering her now, it did not show on her face as she settled next to him.

"It's become rather stereotypical to be melancholy during the season," Emmeline said, though her voice remained even. She placed the mugs on the coffee table, smoothing her skirt behind her as she sat down. "If we must be stereotypes, let us do it with the utmost comfort of the things I'm still grateful for."

His mouth pulled up into a small, subdued smile, and he nodded. "I can agree to that."
Emmeline smiled back at him. "Do you do the present at midnight, or is that just my tradition?"

"We always waited until morning, but that is not a tradition I am particularly attached to," he admitted.

"Are there holiday traditions you are attached to?" Emmeline asked.

"Not anything replicable," he responded, pausing for a moment to try to form the feeling into words. "We did not celebrate with particular activities or festivities, beyond a family gathering and societal events."

"Nothing is ever truly replicable, but there will be new traditions." Emmeline gave a sad smile. "You'll have your gathering tomorrow, for what that's worth, and I suppose it leaves room for some of my own if it's not too difficult."

He nodded as he leaned forward for his mug. "Do you have any traditions that you are attached to?"

"I'll be very put out if I don't get my little present at midnight," Emmeline admitted. "I'll do what we always do other than that: have tea with Nana, oh...I suppose I don't have to listen to the Queen's speech, but maybe I still shall. Mum liked to have it on. I think I can spare fifteen minutes for that to keep going. We went carolling when I was young, but I'm tone deaf. I don't think that should be repeated. The Order always got together for a bit, toasted the losses, tried to remain hopeful for the future, and played the horrible modern Christmas music till Edgar would attempt to find and destroy the wireless. It feels very strange for it to be the old Christmas to the newer Order members, even you."

"I suppose it would." Regulus tipped a nod. Suffice to say the Death Eaters as an entity had not celebrated the holidays together, though he supposed there were many who frequented the same parties, in the end. Although many on her list sounded familiar enough, he was not certain what speech Emmeline was referring to - beyond the fact that it must be the muggle queen. What relevance such a speech would have to any witch or wizard, he wasn't sure, but it sounded harmless enough. Glancing at the clock, then, he saw it was a quarter till midnight. "We will be cutting your midnight tradition close, but I do think we can manage it."

"Will you be participating?" Emmeline asked.

"If it is important to you, I am interested in participating," he said, punctuating with a little nod.

"It's important to me that I do it not just because I always have, but because it helps me remember my father and his family. And I'm not crazy; I like presents. Participation is voluntary," Emmeline replied. "Though I fear if I give you mine, it will make you feel worse. Perhaps that's better done in the relative privacy we have here?"

Curiosity piqued, he tipped his head with a light smile. "I prefer privacy, anyway."

"You surprise me," Emmeline deadpanned. "Besides which, I don't have many of your gifts here, since you're not staying, so it'll have to do. You're awful to buy for, by the way. If this is going to be a continuous thing, we may need to discuss present strategies to give me a fighting chance next year."

"Not to say we can't discuss it, but your gift-giving strategies have been fine," he responded, privately thinking that access to time-loops and rare tomes was actually rather more than 'fine'.

"Okay," Emmeline said, putting her hands on her knees as she stood. "I shall retrieve your gift from
its hiding place and be back in a moment!"

Regulus nodded, and once she was out of the room, he apparated to the guest room where he had been staying, sounding the telltale crack. Within the drawer beside the bed, there was a small bag of black velvet, and once he had retrieved it, apparated back down to the sofa, settling in to await her return. After placing the little bag on the table before him, he lifted his mug for a sip.

"That was very sly," Emmeline said, upon reappearing with two wax sealed envelopes in tow. "I would think you hadn't moved if I didn't know better."

"A skill well-honed." He shifted on the sofa, gesturing for her to rejoin him.

With the briefest smile, Emmeline moved around the table to sit next to him. "At the risk of sounding thirty years younger than I am, open at the same time?"

Nodding, he picked up the small bag and handed it over to her at the same time she was hiding out the envelopes. When it seemed they were both poised, he began: "3…2…"

Together, they said "1," and as Emmeline owned the velvet pouch, Regulus carefully opened his pair of envelopes. Inside were letters and what looked to be a plastic ID card - which indicated membership to national archives and a genealogical society he had not heard of. Unfamiliar though they might be, he felt a fond pang in his chest. He suspected it was to support the search for missing family members on the tree, now that he at least has names through the generation prior to Phineas… Entire branches that could be dead - or could be anywhere. They were not reliably recorded in anything he had come across, but...

"Thank you," he said, with another bittersweet tugging in his chest. "I don't recognise the organisations, but I expect you are familiar?"

Emmeline was staring at her own gift, turning the brooch slightly to catch the lamps of the room. "Um, yes, the births, deaths, marriages, occupations and children going back to before the statute. I thought if you could look for new people in the area popping up out of nowhere in the muggle registries - especially if they married muggles or muggleborns - you might be able to add to your list." Emmeline took it out, a little silver star, and smiled widely. "Birth of a star, just like the observatory. It's very thoughtful, in addition to being beautiful."

"I'm glad you like it. Given the current social and political climate, hopefully it will be useful, too," he said, carefully consolidating the two envelopes into one and making a mental note to set aside time to look more closely at how to use them. He hadn't realised the muggles even had registries of the sort, much less had he thought to use them to seek out wizards, but she made a good point. Looking back to the brooch, he added, "It has a variation on the disillusionment charm cast on it. Nothing as effective as an invisibility cloak, of course, but enough to allow the wearer to go mostly unnoticed to those who are not hyperfocused."

"So it would never work on you," Emmeline said, carefully pinning it onto her cardigan. "Beautiful, with a secret function and some sentimentality. I think you've won this round. Thank you."

With the brooch clipped on, it was jarring, the way she suddenly seemed to blend into the surroundings. Though could still see her, it probably would be easy to miss her, had he not been actively having a conversation, or perhaps even if he were distracted, or focused on something else… Truthfully, he was relieved it worked, even if it was odd to converse with a disillusioned person.
"Yours was touchingly useful and sentimental as well - but I will accept your conclusion," he said, his tone a bit more teasing, despite a well-maintained neutral expression. "I do like winning."

"There'll be a rematch in July," Emmeline promised, touching the edges of the pin. "I think it suits me, despite my less than celestial name."

"I think it does, too," he said.

"I'll keep it in mind for tomorrow - today, for the dinner." Emmeline said, dropping her hands into her lap. "If it's all horribly embarrassing and I want to hide, you've given me the means."

"At least one of us will be spared," he said, wryly.

"Family is supposed to be embarrassing," Emmeline said, reaching over for his hand. "At least you know everyone there, and I'm the cradle robber in this relationship, not you. That should clear up a great deal of it. We don't have to go if you truly don't want to."

He shook his head, taking her hand with a light squeeze. "I want to go. I meant spared of embarrassment, not attendance. So long as I continue to interact with my brother, shades of embarrassment and annoyance are a distinct possibility, so better to accept it as it comes."

"Never have I been so thrilled as to be an only child." Emmeline nodded. "I believe I requested a sibling for my sixth birthday, but despite searching under many cabbage leaves - I was under the impression this is where babies were found - I never did find one. I don't suppose you ever believed anything so impractical."

"I knew it must involve blood in some way, but I did not seek out the subject. I think everyone in our house agreed that Sirius and I had sufficient siblings."

"I can't decide if that's better or worse than mixing up babies and mandrakes," Emmeline replied. "The ominous blood, not the sufficient siblings. You had access to a lot more in depth materials at a younger age, so you'll have to forgive me my youthful ignorance."

"Well, I was immune to youthful ignorance, as you know, but I will forgive it." He sipped his cocoa.

"I'm afraid your teenage indiscretions mean you can't claim that one," Emmeline said with a shrug. "But if you're being so kind as to forgive my indiscretions, I can forgive yours too."

"I do believe I am reaping more benefit from this forgiveness agreement," he remarked, flicking away the related thoughts with a little more ease than normal as he slanted his mouth wryly.

"You know what they say, love makes people do all sorts of ridiculous things," Emmeline said. "Like brooding on a cold winter's night in front of the fire instead of getting some much needed rest."

"Much like that." He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "It is a comfortable fire with welcome company, but I suppose I have reached my brooding quota for the night."

"You can try it again tomorrow night, should we survive the Order party in one piece." Emmeline squeezed his hand back. "I make no guarantees, if only because Severus and Sirius will have to remain in the same room for a prolonged period where there is usually alcohol."

"No amount of sleep can prepare for that. The two of them in the same room is an exceptionally exhausting experience." Regulus shook his head.
"We can just take a corner and talk about our projects. The true reason for the existence of the RR is to get away from the petty drama in the ranks." Emmeline let go of his hand, sitting back. "Do you know it's been a year since we first interacted, beyond the guise of prefect and potentially vigilantism?"

A subtle smile lightened his expressed as he thought back to the previous Christmas - hidden behind books in the drawing room as the majority of the Order roamed freely about his house. He had not even joined yet, but the Order had made themselves comfortable enough for the holidays. "What a year, it has been."

"On that note, I'm going to retire and suggest you do the same." Emmeline stood, but stopped, looking down at her chest. "It really is a beautiful gift. Thank you."

"I'm pleased that you like it. I look forward to investigating my own gift when I am more alert." He stood up beside her, then tipped his head. "I shall see you in the morning."

With mugs returned to the kitchen and the two of them back in their rooms just a few minutes later, Regulus slipped the envelopes in with his belongings and settled into bed. Staring up at the ceiling, his mind wandered from thought to thought - flittering from the curiosities of what old records might say of his more wayward family members, to the light in Emmeline's smile as she admired her brooch, then sideways towards the next day's social obligations, and back to the comfort of Emmeline's presence. The heavy melancholy had lifted from his shoulders, at least for the moment, filtering out the bitter and leaving more of the sweet.

If someone had tried to explain his present situation to him a year ago, he would have struggled to believe it. How strict life had felt, not so long ago - encased in a role he had feared was obsolete, yet he had not wanted to believe it to be so.

Her grandmother had not been wrong, of course, blunt as she had been. Pursuing a relationship was asking for trouble. Regulus knew it well, just as he had known long before he had ever considered such a thing - not because he had difficulty enjoying the company of someone who enjoyed his book collection and spoke of spies in the Department of Mysteries, but because there was an excess of dangerous people who would not care about her lovely mind or her lovely smile or how secure life felt when he thought of tackling it together. Emmeline's resolve was quick to tear down any suggestion that she was a victim of her non-pureblood blood status, but that particular chain of his past was one he wished he could release them from more easily.

Rolling onto his side, he looked out the window tucked between two packed bookshelves. Clouds covered the stars and the moon, pulling a dark, hazy grey blanket over London. The patch of sky was not as scenic as he might have liked, but stars were better for gazing than for sleeping, and it was time to sleep.

Sleep came sporadically for Emmeline, despite the warm cocoa and fluttery feeling every time she looked at her brand new gift. Perhaps a little because of it. It was a strange combination, a sadness of not being in her (old) house and it being the first Christmas without her parents, then a giddiness of something new, of hope for the future, and perhaps even survival. She was not prone to fits of unwarranted sadness, but their odds had felt significantly downward turned lately. Even a year and a half in, the Order still felt the fractures from the last war keenly, and it was harder to get a foothold.

At the first patches of light, Emmeline decided that if sleep was going to remain elusive, then she would not just sit there. Things would be difficult and different this year, but there were sparks of joy, and she did look forward to an Order party. They had to remember to take these moments with
each other, just in case. Something caught her eye, movement skyward. Her stomach jolted, then relaxed; it was a snow flurry! Then another! There was always something about the idea of a white Christmas that made everything seem a little better.

Before she even thought too much about what she was doing, she threw a jumper over her nightie and scrambled across the hall. She rapped three times, hoping to catch Regulus's attention; he was a light sleeper, after all.

A few beats of silence passed, then a muffled response: "Come in." When she opened the door, Regulus was sitting up, the heel of his hand pressed to rub the sleep from one of his eyes. He was still dressed in his pajamas, not yet put together for the day, so it seemed he had still been sleeping - or at least not stirred from bed yet.

"Good morning," he greeted with one last slow blink, but by the time he looked over at her, he had settled into his typical upright posture, even if his legs were still tucked under the covers.

"Put your shoes on," Emmeline said, bouncing from ball to toe. "We're going into the garden."

She, of course, also didn't have shoes on, but she could easily rectify that by heading down to the hall - and she did just that. Emmeline didn't think they were quite at the stage of the relationship where states of undress were casually done, and it would be rude to push such a thing right now. There was a gloomy hint of light on the walls in the hallway when she got down there: it was from the sun attempting to show itself through the bulbous clouds and failing miserably. A peek through the upper door pane confirmed her suspicions of small, white specks falling onto the wet ground.

No more than a minute later, Regulus had padded down the stairs in shoes and a black cloak pulled over his pajamas - or at least it looked like it might be his dark-toned pajamas peeking out around his ankles when he walked. More alert now, his gaze shifted over to the window, then back to her as he approached, and a little smile was forming on his face.

"A snowy morning, I see."

"You like snow," Emmeline said, more statement than question. "You got into a snowball fight earlier in the year, which I'm sorely sorry to have not seen."

"It was quite a snowy skirmish," he said, nodding. "Years of dodging things hurtling at me prepared me for that moment."

For the briefest moment, Emmeline wondered if that was due to the fractious parent-children relationship, but then she remembered he played Quidditch. "If I promise not to hurtle anything at you, shall we go outside?"

"We shall." With a smile, he offered an arm.

Looping his arm, Emmeline pushed down the door handle of the back door and went outside. She could instantly feel goosebumps, but it was worth it to look up at the blanket of dark blue and grey frittering snowflakes down.

"I think it's a good omen," she said, softly. "If you were to believe in such things."

"I am willing to accept such a thing, regardless of belief," he said, pressing gently into her side. "Omen or not, it sets up the day to be beautiful." Turning his own eyes to the sky, he blinked as a snowflake landed on his eyelash.

"Perhaps we could beg off a little bit later," Emmeline suggested, blinking too. Her eyes stung
from the sudden iciness, but it was worth it. It had snowed after Christmas last year, which had come as more of a nuisance than the enchantment of Christmas day. "It seems like it would be a welcome reprieve from what is undoubtedly going to be a very sociable day. Or we could sit now, if you're not inclined to go back to bed?"

"I think now is a lovely time," he said, looking around at the thin layer of snow that was already coating the ground and surrounding surfaces. "Should it become even more beautiful later, we can always slip away then, too. Our sociable surroundings don't have to know we already admired the snow."

Leading them over to the bench, he unhooked their arms to sweep snow from the seat of it and cast a drying spell on the wood.

"Have you used Impervious on the necessary articles of clothing?" he asked as he offered his hand again, allowing her to sit first before following suit.

"No," Emmeline said. "Have you already done so?" Of course he had! He always managed to be prepared for almost anything - yet struggled so much when things were outside of his preparation or control. Meanwhile, she was stumbling onwards with a jumper over a nightie and a pair of slippers.

"That is going to get very cold very fast," he remarked, pulling out his wand from his cloak, waving it vaguely towards her feet. "Do you mind?"

"I trust you not to do anything untoward to my slippers." Emmeline nodded.

Nodding back, he cast the Impervious Charm on her slippers, then a warming charm, and followed up with the same to her jumper. "The snow may stick a little at first, but once it starts to melt, at least it won't soak in."

"That certainly beats a hot water bottle," Emmeline commented, shuffling in place. "Thank you. Your ability to be prepared for everything never ceases to amaze me."

"My pleasure. Dry clothes improve the snow experience greatly," he responded, taking the hand nearest to him between his own hands and rubbing some of the cold out of her fingers. They had only been outside for a few minutes, but already the snowy chill was assaulting any part of them that wasn't covered up. "If you don't mind speaking on it - did you always celebrate primarily with your parents and grandparents? Prior to the Order, of course."

"You don't have to ask a question before you ask me the question you'd like to ask. I think we're quite past that level of formality, don't you?" Emmeline chided gently, hoping it would come out more teasing than critical. It was a difficult balancing act. "To answer your actual question, it truly depended who was either around or would travel. My maternal aunt and cousin both died when I was still in school, and while I do have some distant cousins, we're not on 'spend the holidays together' terms so much as 'will say hello if I see them' terms. My paternal grandmother was German - well, Prussian, but let's not get into all of that. She went back there when I was very young to be with her sister, so most frequently, it was Nana Henley, Mum, Dad, Aunt Millie if she didn't go to her husband's family, and her son. I think when it comes to large family gatherings, I suspect you have me beat."

"That seems so," he agreed. "I did not wish to extend last night's melancholy, but if that is not a concern... then what happened to your aunt and cousin? Did you know them well when they were alive?"
That once again bordered on asking formally, didn't it? Despite there still being something of a consistent pang, amusement helped cut through it. "I knew them a little. Christmas, birthdays, occasional visit, but not enough that I miss them in any strong way. Millie was my mother's older sister; Mum was the youngest of four, but it was just them by the time I came along. Nothing war-related. She died from a potions accident. Sol somewhat was; he was a decade my senior and worked for the Beast office. He was killed along with his case partner and an Auror during one of the early dark army attacks when I was...fourteen, maybe fifteen. Given it was werewolves, I suspect some people were relieved he died, I'm sad to say."

Regulus nodded pensively. "Hopefully 'nothing war related' will be a more common expectation, soon enough," he said, switching to thumb warmth into the other hand.

"What about you?" Emmeline said, to change the subject. Given that there had been too many wars in the last few years as it was, she hoped he was right, but these things lingered and twisted and revived themselves in unexpected ways. "Did people come to you, as the ancestral holding?"

"Usually," he responded. "My father's parents hosted one year in Guernsey, and another year, my parents, Sirius, and I stayed at the property in Paris through the duration of the holidays... but most gatherings were hosted at our house."

"Were you close to any of them?" Emmeline asked. "Your grandparents?"

"That depends on how you would define 'close'," Regulus responded. "I was more similar in temperament to my father’s side of the family, but I did not have a poor relationship with any of them."

"Close is someone you would owl if something was bothering you," Emmeline said, automatically. Regulus made a slight face. "No, I did not owl them, certainly not about things that were bothering me. With that being said, I don't tend to owl anyone about my problems, so that may not be a fair standard."

Oh, if he was going to be difficult about it. "Talk to, then. Someone you're not afraid to show vulnerability to."

He blinked at her a couple of times, then shook his head. "No, we didn't do that. Talking, yes, but I wouldn't call it 'vulnerable'."

How was this that difficult? It was extraordinarily hard to define what made people family and close friends when you couldn't use the usual descriptors. Someone you would have given you a hug when you need one? Oh, that could open up a whole new level of lack of affection.

"Someone you can be...real with," she tried again, for lack of a better term. "No pretenses. Someone you can cry in front of, or throw up when you're sick or hungover; someone you know will listen to you, and you would also listen to them. Someone who makes you feel safe, happy, heard, loved without filtering."

"I understand the point, but we weren't really a 'cry in front of each other' sort of family. Or an 'admit that you are capable of producing tears' sort of family," he said, then briefly pressed his mouth before adding. "They listened when I spoke of school or Quidditch, things of that nature, but truthfully, I did avoid undesired subjects. It never seemed to go well for Sirius, after all." He shook his head. "I wasn't unhappy - I don't wish to imply that - but an element of pretense was necessary, at least sometimes."
"Pretense sometimes is a normal part of the relationship when you're a teenager, or an adult, because you're adjusting to them not as parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, but as people with their own beliefs and quirks. That's quite usual. But..." Emmeline scrunched up her nose, trying to imagine the politest way to explain that it sounded like a lot of pressure to put on a child on top of the pressures such as good marks, social acceptability, and in his case, the weight of lineage. Whether he was happy or not didn't really seem the thing in question. That he wasn't unhappy was a testament to his own resilience, not to his relationships. "I say this from a place of utmost caring for you, so please don't take offense when I say that sounds frightening to me as an adult, let alone as a child."

For a moment, he was silent, watching as snow steadily covered the dead winter grass. It was falling heavier now, but as advertised, still hadn’t dampened either of them. When he spoke just a beat later - a vague “I know” - it remained unclear which part he was responding to.

"I'm afraid I'm about to be rude, but do you?" Emmeline moved her hand to clasp his, as tightly as she could. "There's being reserved, and then there's living with the threat of something terrible happening hanging over every thought, action, spoken word, or emotion, and I do worry this is much more the latter. I may have gotten a few lectures about crying in public, but in the privacy of one's own home, there should be sanctuary. I know you dislike to speak ill of them - family is everything to you, and I know that - but you deserved more than 'not being unhappy'. You still do. You deserve to feel, well, actually, you deserve to openly feel whatever you do feel at any given moment without trying to make whatever it is more palatable to given company. Especially as a child. That is never the responsibility a child should have. You are a highly empathetic person; you feel very deeply, and while I must respect that you love them and don't like to speak ill of them, the idea that you grew up unable to express that even during childhood, that you felt threatened into batten"ning down all of this sweetness, and the cheekiness, and heart that you have into whatever I suppose you thought they would find an appropriate response makes my heart ache. I know it's probably not something you wanted to hear. I'm sorry but I felt I ought to be honest."

Cupping a hand over her knuckles to cover their clasped hands, he squeezed back.

"I value your honesty," he replied, meeting her eyes, flicking them down to the snow for a beat, then looking back up again. "Functionally, I don’t know what to do with any of that, but… whatever they should or shouldn’t have done, I feel glad to have the opportunity to spend my time with you now." A tiny twitch at the corner of his mouth. "At the risk of sentimentality."

"Sentimentality is encouraged at Christmas," Emmeline decided. Nervousness she hadn't fully realised was there drained out of her bones. "For you, I'd say it's encouraged any such time you please. I want you to feel comfortable enough here that there is little need for any pretense."

"I do feel comfortable here - more so than anywhere else I can think of, at the moment," he said, though the awkward shift suggested he might have been a little embarrassed to say it.

"I'm feeling pretty comfortable right now myself," Emmeline said, shuffling as close as possible without breaking the hold or crushing her arm. "That could be your spellwork, but I don't think so."

Shifting in turn, he moved one hand from her knuckles to hook around her shoulders, untangling his posture as they settled in closer. A little smile had tugged at his mouth when he replied, "Hm. Are you certain it's not? My spellwork is situationally appropriate..."

"See?" Emmeline snorted. "Cheeky. Not sure I'd refer to anything I'm thinking of at the moment as situationally appropriate, regardless."

He met her eyes again, a flash of grey before he leaned in, close enough for their noses to brush.
For a lingering beat, he rested his hand behind her neck, fingers threading loosely in her sleep-
mussed hair - then pressed a soft kiss to her lips.

"Not a single thought?" he said, still leaned in closer than usual.

Heat spread across her nose, and she suppressed an entirely age inappropriate giggle. “Keep
trying,” she said. “I’m sure something will come to me.”

With a thoughtful - or maybe 'thoughtful' - expression, he kissed her again. "What about now?"

Emmeline nodded, but she could barely contain the smile that followed. "I think that I will be able
to think more when I'm not behaving like a giddy schoolgirl," Emmeline whispered. "But between
you and I, it's fun to do so for a little while."

"Your secret is safe with me," he whispered back, hooking his arm around her shoulders again,
then rested his head against hers.

"I like to think of it as I'm safe with you no matter what," Emmeline said. Highly sentimental, but it
seemed the time for such declarations.

Squeezing her shoulder lightly, he replied, “That is the plan.”

"Plan?" Emmeline had to laugh at that. "I don't think either of us planned this. More like a happy
accident."

“That is a fair point,” he began. “I will rephrase: maintaining both your safety and your proximity
was not the original plan, but it is the new plan.”

"What is the new plan?" Emmeline asked. Did he plan for them, the idea of a future? If so, they
should really consolidate. She had done ideas of her own.

Shifting slightly, he repeated, “Safety and proximity.”

"Then yours is much less detailed than my own," Emmeline said. They were taking things slowly,
after all. Thinking everything through. "That may be a first for us."

For a moment, he was quiet, head still settled against hers. Then, when he spoke again: "It's not for
a lack of consideration. That question can be simple or complex, depending on the scope of it."

“Nothing about either of our lives is simple, Regulus. You have a history of unsavoury association
and activity; I may one day end the world by messing up at work. You are - essentially, but not
actually - the last named of an old ‘pure’ house; I am most definitely not. We're both vigilantes,
which could result in death, imprisonment, or something worse at any moment. " It really did stack
up when put that way. "But these things are ultimately not why I like you quite so much. They are
important, as choices that have led us to where we are, but I want to focus on having a future too.
It's far too easy to give up if you don't have a plan or a checklist, and when things are troubled,
having something you can focus on living for is a far more motivating thought to keep going than
whether or not you have something you're willing to die for."

“My intention was not to say our lives or situations are simple - merely that the same question can
be answered simply or complexly, depending on the intended or interpreted scope of the question
itself,“ he began, matter-of-factly. “But to your other point… I would not linger in a relationship in
which I do not envision a future - and let it be said that I can be exceptionally stubborn, however
terrible other people’s terrible attitudes may be. I don’t make a habit of giving up.” He squeezed
her shoulder. “I am, however, admittedly uncertain of how to conceptualise a timeline for such
"I understood what you meant. I just wanted to show that I do think of the potential future and that I do factor you in, even if I'm not exactly sure what it is you want. I understand you're still trying to decide what you want your life to be, and that this is more complex for you than most." That would be the understatement. To walk away from a life at eighteen, then come back and try to pick up the parts you want to keep and decide what parts to let go of, or what you want your life to be now, sounded like an uphill struggle. "So you don't need to feel any hesitation doing the same. It's a little embarrassing to admit it. I'm not doodling hearts with our names with a number four and ‘eva’ on my work parchment, but I do dwell on it."

Rubbing a small circle into her shoulder with the pad of his thumb, Regulus nodded. “I dwell on it too… It is a question I don't think I could ever truly avoid, but although there are a number of things in life that I still count as uncertain - people, traditions, expectations - I do not feel uncertain about you, for what that is worth."

"I'm glad to hear it," Emmeline ducked her head in acknowledgement. "But I think of those things too, for me and you, so while I know it's not the same, we can talk about it when you have trouble with it. What sort of progression are you experienced in?"

“Progression?” he asked, glancing at her, then to a bird who had landed on one of her potted plants, brushing off the light coat of snow from the rim of the pot. Maybe ‘plant’ wasn’t really the right word for it at this point, with only the deadened stem sticking out from the soil, but the bird didn’t seem too bothered about it. “Do you mean relationship progression?”

“Yes,” Emmeline confirmed. “Unless there's another kind you’d like to talk about? Whatever keeps us here, honestly. I’m quite comfy.”

"Not that I am aware of… but… to answer your question, I cannot say I am experienced in this particular area, progression included."

"I'm not especially so," Emmeline said, because regardless of any other personal factors, dating an unspeakable and a vigilante was a lot of secrets to keep. "A large intimacy barrier is secrets, and I have little need to worry about them with you, so I suppose I think about the little things now and then. Like this place is mine, but I have no problems sharing it, though I think if we were ever to cohabit purposefully, we would find somewhere that you can have your own space in. I don't know if you require a separate room for sleeping or not. I know you don't enjoy feeling overcrowded, and it's just things like that."

Regulus nodded his head, at first, rubbing the backs of his fingers along the arm of her jumper - maybe to combat the chill, though he hadn't said. "I don't know what I do or don't require, either. I haven’t shared a room since Hogwarts, and even that, of course, is quite different. Growing up, my parents… They were not exactly paragons of affection, but I cannot remember a time when they shared a room. Though it seems normal enough, I’ve gathered that the typical experience assumes otherwise.” He shook his head. “The considerations often feel cyclical, one feeding into another.”

"Well," Emmeline said, thinking about it. "May I ask something that could potentially be a little...prying, if not rude?"

“Yes, you may,” he replied, fingertips lightly drumming on her arm.

"While I admit marriage can happen for a multitude of reasons, such as friendship, romantic intentions, or a hen night gone horribly wrong, would you consider them in love?" Emmeline asked.
Regulus was quiet for a beat before he responded. “I don’t think that was considered a priority.”

"Then that would explain that." Emmeline nodded. "There is an intimacy to sharing sleeping space that does require trust and being alright with someone else there when you want to rest. That's a little easier if you have romantic feelings towards them."

“A sensible conclusion,” he said as he squeezed her shoulder again. "How nice it would be if my mind could cooperate with at least one concern being as simple as it sounds, hm?"

"Simple isn't the same as easy," Emmeline replied. She didn't want him to believe she was dismissing the point. "If you'll excuse me again, that kind of comfortable feeling often requires consistency, and if I cannot keep up with the rules even sporadically now, how can you have been expected to?"

"Now who is preceding questions with preparatory questions?" he said, though he might've had a smile in his voice.

"I know, I know." Emmeline grimaced at herself, but it was short lived. It was an easy trap when trying to be polite. "But there seems to be a lot of layers to purist interpersonal relations that don't make much sense to me, from what defines someone as ‘half-blood but fine’ while other half-bloods elicit an intense unclean reaction, to what exactly the definition of ‘traitor’ is, because plenty of purist families are half-blood or have half-blood lines. Then you have acceptable conversational topics, what is considered proper and what isn't, because it definitely is not the same as an upper class upbringing. I truly don't understand how a person is supposed to feel secure in themselves, let alone feel secure enough to share social spaces, if their social, political, and belief system seems to be determined differently by every family, possibly multiple ways per family, but is all referred to as if it's the same thing. It would be difficult enough for dorm mates, let alone romantic cohabitation."

"It is extraordinarily stressful," he granted quietly, punctuating with a little nod against her head.

"Whatever you need to feel comfortable is fine by me," Emmeline said, quietly. "We'll run into considerations I need too. This is a collaborative process."

"Collaborative is good." Turning his head, he pressed a kiss to her temple, this time, then looked forward again. "Life feels exhaustingly complicated sometimes, but I'm grateful to be able to navigate it with you."

"I am too," Emmeline agreed. There are more things they could speak on, of course but for now, she was content to sit in the snow together.

Remus arrived at the Tonks household feeling a bit like he was attending a job interview. Rarely did his applications get so far as to get job interviews, but between the new robes and the fact he'd never actually done a 'meet the parents' sort of thing (especially when he already had met them), he could feel nerves bubbling up behind his stomach. The robes were from Sirius; at least, he was the only person he knew who never wrapped their gifts so much as just put them in packaging and had been commenting that he thought he needed to take care of himself more. Perhaps he thought Remus would tell him not to go spending his gold on him, but Sirius took as much notice of that as James used to.

(He was taking adequate care of himself, thanks. He wasn't the one moping because he was having to share the time with Harry with someone else.)
They arrived a little early by virtue of Sirius losing patience with the nervous energy Remus was apparently emoting, overtaking his natural desire against punctuality.

“She's alright with it,” Tonks said, perhaps noticing Remus making furtive looks towards her mother. Andromeda Tonks was, at a glance, only a smidge smaller than her older sister, with similar features, but she did look considerably less deranged. At least, right now. “She wouldn't have asked otherwise. Cheer up!”

Easier said than done. Sirius perched himself on the stool of the kitchen island, just far enough away that unless he was trying, Remus only caught the odd word. They seemed to be talking about some sort of childhood Christmas, amusement obvious in the tone of their voices. That was new, at least to him. Whenever Sirius's childhood had come up when they were younger, it was always regaling them with some horror story of muggle hunting or a manic escape from some relative's house after pissing them all off. He laughed it off, but it was a different tone of laughter; like he knew it was a very dark humour he was getting a kick out of. This didn't sound like that. This sounded –

“Is he going to stand five steps by the door the entire time?” Mrs. Tonks's voice was louder than it had been a moment ago, causing Remus to look around with a bit of a flush.

Tonks said, “Give him a minute, Mum. He doesn't know what the two of you are having a good cackle about over there, does he?”

“You are a brandishing a large knife,” Sirius pointed out. “But I wouldn't worry. She's got rubbish aim.”

“I also don't go about stabbing people,” Mrs. Tonks said, though she put the knife down regardless. “If I were about to do anything, it would be poison.”

“She's winding you up,” Tonks said.

“I know,” Remus said, and he did. He just couldn't help the blush or awkwardness that was coming over him.

“Just sit down.” Sirius pointed his foot vaguely towards the sitting area. “If you're going to get embarrassed, you can at least talk about something embarrassing. How'd you two get over yourselves?”

“Don't look at me,” Tonks said, putting up her hands. “I told him I fancied him ages ago.”

Remus tried not to look too betrayed by that, but he supposed he deserved it. He was still sure she would wake up one day and want someone who was human and whole. “It was – is – a complex situation.”

“Not that complex. You were moping, she was moping, you were pining, she was pining.” Sirius held his fingers about an inch apart. “You were this close from becoming one of those terrible romance books you love to complain about.”

“There are considerations,” Remus argued, as he had many times before. “I'm dangerous–”

“Oh yeah, you're terrifying right now,” Sirius said, rolling his eyes. “I'm all aquiver in my boots.”

“That sounds like a line from one of those books.” Tonks laughed. “Probably not their feet that's quivering, if you know what I mean.”
"We all know what you mean, Nymphadora!" Mrs. Tonks squeaked, almost dropping a tray of something when the door knocked. "Thank Merlin. Someone can get that, and we can redirect this conversation from terrible tastes in literature to something a little more civilised."

"Probably the wrong crowd for any of that," Sirius said. "Besides, you used to like those romance books. I remember you reading some with shirtless blokes on the front at Iago."

"You were reading dirty books?" Tonks looked caught between laughter and embarrassment.

"Muggle dirty books," Sirius added. "Very scandalous."

"Mum," Tonks said, putting on a mockery of shock.

"I've been scandalous longer than any of you lot have been alive," Mrs. Tonks replied. "Answer the door. If it's Death Eaters, tell them it's a holiday and to come back tomorrow."

"Alright, alright," Tonks said. As she slipped by, she gave his shoulder a quick squeeze in what Remus thought may be some kind of support. She dropped her wand as she took it out of her pocket, the clattering causing her mother’s chiding voice to call her name from the kitchen as she finally opened the door.

"Wotcher!" she said, cheerfully. Probably not a Death Eater, at least not a current one. "We're all 'round here."

Around the corner, Regulus appeared, offering a mild greeting in return as Emmeline stepped up beside him. Regulus’s attention seemed to jump to the decor, at first, flicking around to both Christmas and non-Christmas features alike, but the distraction was short-lived before he looked to the rest of them.

"Sirius arrived before we did?" was the first thing he said, checking his pocket watch, then looking back to Sirius again.

Emmeline removed her cardigan, revealing she had dressed a little more formally than he would have expected. It seems he wasn't the only one feeling a little nervous. "Has someone checked for polyjuice?"

"I think I can vouch for him," Remus said. "Merry Christmas. Did you see the snow showers?"

"We did. It was a beautiful morning," Regulus replied. "What about yourself?"

"It was slush on the ground by the time we got out," Remus replied. He had been woken rudely at some point in the night when a certain someone climbed over him, but he supposed that gave a decent bit of nostalgia for dormitory living. "I'll see more of it when I go to Wales this evening."

"Are you having dinner up there too?" Sirius asked.

Remus shook his head. He didn't like to bother his father too much, when it was so obviously difficult for his father to look at him. "Just the usual visit."

"Dora, will you set the table?" Mrs. Tonks called from the kitchen area. "If everyone is done arranging other plans, I'd say we're all ready to sit down and pull the crackers."

"Yeah," Tonks said, waving her wand. It was obvious what would happen: salt met pepper and snowed over the table. The candles must have been charmed to stay still. A wise precaution, given Tonks could trip over her own feet. "Whoops…"
“It looks more festive now,” Remus told her. She returned the smile, but it felt very public, as if they were on display, so he ducked his head away.

As they were sitting down, Regulus had started eyeing the crackers with some suspicion, or maybe just puzzlement. "What are they, and why do we pull them?" he asked, picking up the wrapped green cylinder from the plate in front of him.

"I haven't the foggiest," Mrs. Tonks replied.

Emmeline merely shrugged.

"They make a bang when you pull them," Sirius interjected.

"Whoever gets the piece with the bit inside can keep the prize," Remus added. "There's usually also a terrible joke and a silly hat, if I remember them correctly."

"It doesn't answer why though," Emmeline said, examining it as if it may explode at any moment.

"You can ask Ted if he ever comes down," Mrs. Tonks said. "Ted!"

There was a hustle and bustle from upstairs, before Mr. Tonks plopped down on the stairs with an enormous yawn. As a healer, Remus supposed he spent half of his life working long and heavy hours. Especially now. "What?" he said, barely containing another yawn.

"Why do people pull crackers?" Tonks asked.

"Good marketing," her father replied. "The crowns are supposed to be the kings in the nativity story, but I don't know why there's a toy."

"Probably to distract children from making a mess at a big party," Mrs. Tonks replied, flicking her wrist so a large turkey floated over to the table. "Just pull the one with the person next to you, read out the joke and put on the stupid hat before all of this gets cold."

Beside him, Regulus was shaking the cracker next to his ear a few times, but when the others started taking hold of the bunched paper on the ends, he held his out to Remus, then took hold of Emmeline's on the other side.

"You do one at a time," Remus said, lightly. It was a little funny to watch the duck out of water routine, but he felt he shouldn't be cruel. He took the other end. "Just pull hard, there will be a small crack. Okay?"

Regulus made a slight face but nodded and yanked the cracker. With a pop, the cylinder split at Remus's seam, deciding Regulus as the 'winner' of their round, though he still looked a little uncertain as he peeked inside his half.

"There's a paper with a terrible joke, a crown and - what prizes did you put in these ones?" Mrs. Tonks explained, before yanking her own cracker with a loud crack.

"Open them and find out," Mr. Tonks replied, taking his cracker with his daughter. It cracked too, but Tonks being Tonks, a bright purple paper folded up, a piece of paper with something written on it, and a small remembrall spilled out onto the table, narrowly missing the gravy.

Remus pulled one with Sirius, who was barely holding onto his. He probably just wanted to see Remus in a stupid hat. Remus unfolded the yellow hat and plopped it on his ears. "Happy?"
"Ecstatic," Sirius replied, fishing for the joke. "What sends secret messages to bakers at Christmas?" There was a beat of silence. "Mince spies."

Remus groaned aloud, along with Mr. Tonks. Tonks herself laughed loudly, while her mother placed her hands over her face.

Emmeline read hers aloud in response. "So why couldn't the ghost go to the party?"

"He had no body to go with," came the chorus of responses.

"I think we've all had enough of the jokes," Mrs. Tonks said.

Tonks deflated. "But mine is good!"

"Very well," her mother huffed.

"What has four legs but never walks anywhere?" Tonks said.

"A table," Remus said, quietly. Tonks smiled at him, which made him blush in return.

"I knew that," Emmeline said. Remus looked between she and Regulus. If he wasn't looking down, he likely wouldn't have realised they were holding hands. It was probably different when it wasn't your girlfriend’s mother.

"Let's toast." Mrs. Tonks tipped what smelled like sherry into her glass (further confirmed by Sirius mumbling about her drinking like an old lady now) and then lifted it. "To health and happiness."

"To a swift end to the war." Mr. Tonks clinked his drink.

"And giving Voldemort a miserable new year," Sirius added.

Remus raised his own glass (Buck's Fizz - it was a special occasion). "Hear, hear."

Next to him, Regulus nodded in his direction - or maybe towards Sirius - as they toasted. "May it be his last."

And not the last for any of them, Remus thought, silently. As grateful as he had been to the Order this last year and a half - and for what they did still have in family, friends, even hope - dread set in at the idea of losing anyone else. Since no one else said anything beyond Emmeline insisting that wearing a funny hat at Christmas was tradition, so traditionalists should be respectful of that - an insistence that somehow succeeded in convincing the reticent Regulus to don his own paper crown for a time - Remus guessed that perhaps they were thinking along the same lines.

The meal was substantial, more so than he usually expected of anyone who wasn't Molly. By the time dessert came around, Tonks (who must have noticed his hesitation in giving a rude refusal) offered to box the cake. Things wound down at that point, with Emmeline asking if they listened to the royal Christmas message (they didn't, but put the wireless on, regardless). The topic was of family, the Queen commenting on how she once sat with her parents at the Christmas tree, and how her children and grandchildren now did the same. The importance of tradition, to think of those who came before us, of peace and loving each other through a difficult and violent year. He wondered idly if the new Minister had a chat with her beforehand.

"I should depart," Remus said, standing. He fought the urge to bow. "Thank you for a lovely Christmas."
"You're very welcome," Mrs. Tonks replied, levelly. How someone so difficult to read had a daughter who wore everything on her sleeve was strange, but having been in their ancestral home, not the only strange quirk of the Black family - such as it was, now.

"You're not sticking around for Harry?" Sirius asked. It was different for him. Harry would always be a source of difficulty. For Sirius, things had shifted once his inquiry had come through. He'd more or less disregarded anyone else's opinions and spent time around Harry as he pleased. To Sirius, Remus was supposed to have been a part of his life - family if James had a say in such things, because he insisted they were one - but he couldn't shake the feeling that to Harry, he'd always be the professor and not really family at all.

"I'll see him at the party later," Remus replied.

"I'll walk you out," Tonks offered. When they got onto the porch, she kissed him. "Not so bad, right?"

"Any poison could still be slow acting," Remus suggested.

Tonks hit him on the arm. He liked that she never treated him as fragile, as others tended to take one look at him and think a good gust of wind would do him in.

"I'll come round in a bit," Tonks offered. "You can help me pick out an outfit for tonight."

"I'm not very good at fashion," Remus warned. "If I like it, it's probably a sign it's unfashionable."

"That was code for something else," Tonks replied. "Sometimes, you're terrible at flirting."

"Only sometimes?" Remus asked.

"Yep, I'm feeling generous since I already fancy you," Tonks said. "I'll see you at yours about six."

Remus nodded, then hoped Tonks had been keeping her voice low enough no one else had heard that. It would make seeing her parents the next time even more awkward and Sirius utterly insufferable. On that distressing thought, he apparated. He still had one family member left that was still blood and he hadn't seen him in person in a year. Maybe next year, if it didn't go horribly wrong, or if Tonks didn't wise up to him being a bad bet, he'd take Tonks to meet his Dad and hope she felt at least a little awkward in revenge.

By mid-afternoon, the Tonks household had quieted significantly. Remus had left first for his father's, then Sirius to the Weasleys to see Harry. Andromeda's husband had dozed off in an armchair, and Tonks had wandered off to busy herself somewhere, though Regulus couldn't say if it was around the residence or not. He suspected 'not,' if only because he had not heard a crash in some time.

Emmeline was next, bundling up by the front door, even if apparition meant she would not be in the cold for long. As much as Regulus enjoyed the snowy landscape, any time spent in it without proper preparation was too long.

When her scarf was set securely at her neck, he followed her outside, closing the door behind them with a soft thump.

"Will you be going straight to the party this evening?" he asked.

"I believe so," Emmeline replied, her voice low. "I can come and find you first, if you'd rather not
walk in with the social people."

"That does sound preferable," he admitted.

"I thought so." Emmeline smiled, widely. "It's a bonding experience. I promise not to drink too much, but I can't promise not to drink enough there may be dancing involved. You don't have to dance if you don't want to."

His mouth flicked a little as he shook his head. "Dance as you like, but I do believe I have reached my daily limit on silliness."

"Deep in your soul is a very silly person desperately wanting to emerge," Emmeline said, with a nod. "But I'm fine with dancing by myself. You can laugh at me. Out loud laughing, maybe."

"Maybe." His mouth quirked up a bit more as he took her hands, rubbing at the gloved knuckles. "Enjoy tea with your grandmother. I will see you this evening for what sounds to be a bout of undignified revelry."

"You sound like my grandmother," Emmeline replied, but she was smiling at it. She leaned over to kiss his cheek. "Try not to get into any fights without me."

"I promise to try," he said, resting his hands on her hips. He paused a beat, then added, "Not to get into any fights, if that was ambiguous."

"Didn't want to give yourself a get out clause if you suddenly have Death Eaters to deal with?" Emmeline asked.

"That is where the 'try' comes in," he specified, lightly.

"I knew it had to be there somewhere," Emmeline huffed. "Punctual or fashionably late?"

"I prefer punctuality," he replied.

"Meaning greeting everyone individually," Emmeline said. "I wasn't sure if your politeness would override your desire not to have a social commitment every ten minutes for an hour."

"It is not an ideal scenario, but arriving late also places you at the center of an increased amount of attention as everyone politely greets you, highlighting your lateness. At least if you arrive early, your polite greetings are one of many," he countered with a punctuating nod.

"You've really thought this through," Emmeline nodded. "I imagine it's years of social events having trained you."

"It is exactly that," he replied, wryly.

"Then I suppose I must drag myself away from you and go watch Nana terrify some service staff," Emmeline said, taking a step backwards. "I'll pick you up at seven."

"I will see you then," he said with a nod, waiting until she had apparated from sight before walking back into the house.

In the kitchen, he saw a sliver of Andromeda directing the dishes to wash themselves with a series of wand swishes, and Ted Tonks was still collapsed in a living room armchair, snoring quietly. On the other side of the sleeping man was their staircase, lined with garland and a mixture of muggle and magical photographs alike.
Crossing the room for a closer look, he was surprised to see a few that he recognised - at least in part. There were only three, but much like his own after Sirius had left, they had been torn to remove other members of the family. At shoulder-level, he saw one of Andromeda when she couldn't have been more than eleven. She was seated on a decorative rug, her legs tucked and the skirt of her dark green dressrobes flared out neatly. On her shoulder was a disembodied hand that he knew had once belonged to her mother because he had seen that same photograph plenty of times as a child, before evidence of his cousin was erased. Next to Andromeda would have been Narcissa, still too small for school, dressed in a lighter, lacier shade of green, and on the side opposite, Bellatrix had mirrored Andromeda in dressrobes so dark they were nearly black. He could still picture them clearly, and he wondered then if Andromeda could too.

From behind him, Andromeda cleared her throat. "It's not a commentary on you that you're not there," she said.

Smothering the startle response, Regulus twisted around to look at her. She was leaning on the back of a couch, watching him.

"I appreciate that. It's very familiar commentary," he said, looking back to the photographs.

There was a flicker of a smile; perhaps that had been on purpose. "It's usually the person you're with. Most of what I have seems to consist of you when I could still pick you up without the use of a wand. Harder to amend."

"I supposed it would be," Regulus said. She was young in the pictures she had, and he'd been no more than a toddler at the time, usually nestled in Narcissa's lap, rather than her own. "I must admit I'm surprised you have any of them at all."

"The idealist in me thought I could change their minds," Andromeda replied. "It was their grandchild, after all. Their oh so terribly important blood. Thankfully, the realist in me overrode the idealist enough to pack things I might regret leaving behind."

With a soft sigh, Regulus nodded. "Understandable - in both respects. I didn't have anything with me when I left, though I often wished I did." Folding his arms, he tapped his fingers lightly on the sleeve. "I did, however, hope to change their minds, too. Wishing for that was about as successful as wishing photographs to materialise across the Channel," he said, thinly.

"What we were trying to change their minds about differs slightly," Andromeda said, glancing down then up. "It is our sad state of affairs when tradition overrules sense. I've considered trying once or twice over the years, but I'm a group now. As, I suppose, are you. The group can't be accepted, and I refuse to be accepted without it."

"I didn't understand it at all, back then," he said, eyes continuing to flick along the strand of photographs. There were many, ranging widely in age. Some were still-framed muggle photos with an older couple he did not recognise - her husband's parents, perhaps - but his eyes caught on a wedding photo with Andromeda and Ted. That one was still, too. "I did not expect that particular concern would come up as a problem for me… I suppose it technically hasn't, yet, but I know it's bound to eventually."

"You were very young then," Andromeda replied. "The same reason I try not to be too angry with Narcissa, despite being a bright girl. I'm not always successful. Rejection is difficult, particularly among siblings. I'm a little jealous, if I'm honest."

Regulus nodded, looking past the photographs more so than at them, now. "When you left, I suppose it was mostly confusing, at first, before the reality of it set in. But Sirius - I was so furious
with him for leaving. I have a better understanding now, but at the time, it just felt like the situation was being rubbed in my face constantly at school - and was eerily absent at home.” He frowned, then shifted uncomfortably at what suddenly felt a little too frank. Apparently, today was a day for uncomfortable frankness... "In the end, it has felt like rejection, no matter which side it is coming from. It is as if there is some restriction that you can only get along with one half of the family at a time. Sirius and I have not gotten along so well since before he started at Hogwarts, but I’ve never experienced tension with Narcissa until now - and it is admittedly jarring on both fronts."

"Sirius has always had an ability to make his presence known, no matter the place or how small he was. He's a much more noticeable absence, sibling or not. I am sorry it was confusing. I did not mean to impose that. I worried more of the reactions if I attempted reaching out... not just from those contacted, but those around them - especially the two of you. You were both still very much at the mercy of family, and in my experience, and sadly it seems in yours, mercy has never been a quality valued in the Blacks," Andromeda said, tone heavy. "I have some understanding of the experience - fraught would be an underestimation of Bellatrix and myself - but she had been pulling away for a long time. I could have tried harder with Narcissa, with you, and as such, things could have been better than they are, but I'm not very good at making the first move."

"Truthfully, I doubt I would have listened," Regulus said, solemnly, as he shook his head. "My mother was furious with Sirius for mentioning you at the family party, where everyone was acting like you had never existed. Disownment hadn't felt… real before that, I suppose, when it was just mysterious scorch marks on the tree. Part of me felt unsettled, ignoring your existence when blood was supposed to be important, but... I knew you had broken the rules, so it soon felt easy to be angry with you for throwing us to the side. After all, blood was meant to be important." The sting of his own words jabbed unpleasantly. "I realise now that it is more complicated than that, of course, but at the time, it just felt like you and Sirius were baiting them on purpose. Seeing you both leave was painful, but it wasn't clear what I was meant to do with that whilst trying to pretend you didn't exist like everyone else was,” he finished, flattening his mouth and shaking his head again.

"There's no book telling you how to deal with disowned family members," Andromeda said. "You can't blame yourself for struggling. You couldn't ask what happened to form your own opinion."

Regulus had not wanted his own opinion at the time. ‘Spineless puppet’ had been his brother’s choice insult for most of their late childhood and adolescence, and they had bickered endlessly about it, but snide remarks from Sirius had still felt preferable to the alternative. Having an opinion meant being screamed at, potentially cut off and forgotten, if your opinion was the wrong one.

“I appreciate the graciousness,” he said, eyes focusing again, this time on a magical photograph of a little Tonks dressed in an absurdly festive outfit. Though it was difficult to tell if it was all part of her garb or if she had morphed that beard in place, he would not be surprised by the latter. “Sirius and I mostly just insulted each other on the subject - until recently, I will grant.”

"No grace is required," Andromeda replied. “With the exception of Bella, given her behaviour, I've long since forgiven everyone else their reactions. My parents were your age when I came home, informed them I had no regard for the belief system they'd held their entire lives and had no intention of lying about where my daughter came from, or not keeping her. I know it was difficult for them," Andromeda said. "Good parenting is bringing your children up safely, and within the confines of their beliefs, I know they were trying to do so. I appreciate them for that, and given their passing, it's what I would like to hold onto. They're gone, and I made the right choice for me and my daughter. It's better for me to remember them for that than to hold onto anger or pain I won't find resolution to. Sirius had his way of coping, so do I, and so will you. Life and family go on."
"That, it does," Regulus agreed with a tiny dip of his chin. "Sometimes in strange ways, I suppose."

"Besides which, seeing who can insult the person more without them losing their temper is practically family tradition." Andromeda smiled. "My mother and yours could have completed professionally if the sport were to insult each other without ever saying an explicitly unkind word."

His mouth flicked up at the corner. Their mothers might’ve taken that as a compliment, coming from a source other than their disowned, disgraced daughter and niece, respectively.

"An accurate assessment," Regulus said, shooting a look back at Andromeda in time to see her husband stir slightly in his chair, head flopping to the side. His eyes weren’t blinking open yet, but it probably would not be much longer.

Looking back to the photographs, he gave the line one last glance before stepping away. The stressors of their familial disownments had first sparked over a Christmas holiday, the year Andromeda left. In truth, those stressors were unlikely to go away in their entirety, but perhaps with this Christmas, they could start to turn a corner into something different.

By the time Sirius arrived to the Burrow, everyone was sated after a big meal and listening to the WWN. Once Percy and the new Minister had left, the mood had become sombre and awkward with little conversation to break it up. Between that and Fleur's own attempts at singing, Harry was glad to get out of there earlier than his friends would, even if he wasn't exactly sure where they were going. Sirius had wanted to make a stop before they went to the Christmas gathering at the safe house, so they apparated to what Harry thought was a sparse countryside, from the lights of houses dotted sporadically in the distance. He couldn't really get a good look at the house, but it looked like it may have just sprung up from the ground one day without being built.

“Where are we?” Harry asked.

“My cousin, Andromeda's,” Sirius answered, going not to the front door, but pushing open what must have been a gate embedded into the wall. “Tonks's mum. I just want to pick up a couple of things.”

That was the favourite one he'd mentioned last year, the one with Bellatrix Lestrange and Malfoy's mother as sisters. Harry couldn't imagine either of them being related to Tonks, but it's not as if he was anything like the Dursleys either. He wasn't exactly sure what he could expect, but followed through into the dark garden. It was reminiscent of a garden centre they'd gone to once, with a surprising amount of muggle ornaments strewn around. It was now dark enough he almost stood on a gnome dressed like a Roman centurion.

“I thought you were at a safe house,” Harry said, inching past it. Magical things had a tendency to not be what they seemed if they seemed perfectly normal.

“I am,” Sirius said, glancing back to Harry with a cheeky grin. “So's Dung, so I try not to leave temptation for him lying about.”

Privately, Harry thought that a safe house that you couldn't leave things safely in defeated the point. This place didn't seem all that secure either, given that Sirius could waltz in without any warning.

Once they were inside, the house looked a little like the Weasleys'; decorated to the nines, old family pictures, strands of cards hanging along tinsel vines on the walls. On the couch by the large fireplace was a sandy-haired, pot-bellied man snoring and occasionally whinnying in his sleep. At
a guess, he was Tonks's dad.

“That was faster than I thought you'd be.”

Suddenly, the light went on, and Harry startled.

Sirius didn't. “Were you sitting there in the dark just so you could do that?”

On a chair near what he thought was the front door was an older woman. Harry's stomach flipped, the resemblance to Bellatrix Lestrange undeniable at first glance - even at second, noting her hair was a little lighter and she didn't smile like she was about to cut out several internal organs from where she was sitting. “I didn't want to wake Ted,” Mrs. Tonks said. “It was also fun. You only make a first impression once.”

Sirius huffed. “You wanted your first impression to be that you're a creepy lady who sits in the dark?”

“As opposed to the first impression of murderous Death Eater stalking him?” Mrs. Tonks looked over him. “I think he's made of sturdier stuff than that. But I'm being rude. I am, as you have quite likely gathered, Andromeda Tonks. It's nice to meet you.”

“Hi,” Harry said, wondering if he was supposed to introduce himself too. “Er, Harry. Thank you for having me.”

“Oh, manners too?” Mrs. Tonks stood up. “Are you sure he's James Potter's?”

Harry felt himself bristle, but Sirius seemed to only snort.

“Oh, you think I'm being unkind about him,” Mrs. Tonks said, after staring at him for a moment. “I'm not. James – what I saw of him – was a very charming, confident, and bright person, and I'm very sorry I didn't get to know him better.”

“Sometimes it's just a visceral thing,” Sirius said. “Between a Gryffindor and Slytherin.”

“You're a Slytherin?” To Harry, this wasn't the house of someone in Slytherin.

“I'm the only one that isn't,” Sirius said.

“Except Nymphadora,” Mrs. Tonks said. “She was in Hufflepuff. Roll your eyes at me, and I'm waking Ted to give you a long list of reasons why Hufflepuffs are exceptional people of integrity with a ferocious devotion to doing the right thing.” For a moment, Harry thought she was talking to him, but she glanced to the side at the last moment.

“When you know what the right thing is,” Sirius said.

“Ask a Hufflepuff,” Mrs. Tonks replied. “They usually know far more than most. Though every house has its exceptions.”

“Like her,” Sirius said.

“Excuse me, but I am very proud of my house.” In that moment, it was possible to hear a haughtiness to her voice. “We're a complex bunch, but someone has to remind you of the importance of taking care of yourself and looking before you leap. However, sooner or later, we'll have to all grow up and stop judging people by what a mindreading antique item of clothing thought of us at eleven. You were very well spoken when you were eleven.”
“I was not,” Sirius replied. He reappeared from behind the pillars with an envelope.

“He was,” Mrs. Tonks replied. “I have pictures somewhere.”

“No, you don't,” Sirius replied. “They were at Grimmauld Place.”

“And I suppose that means they went up in flame in some rage of your mother's?” Mrs. Tonks said.

“In the attic,” Siruis replied. “I know, I'm surprised too.”

“What happened to Grimmauld Place?” Harry blurted out. He knew it’d been where the attack had happened, but the details were sketchy at best. One problem with staying with Ron is that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley never seemed to want to tell him anything important about the Order or the war.

“It's still standing,” Sirius told him. “Just a little scorched and bloody, but it won't be the first time. It's just not a safe place right now.”

“Is there a safe place?” Harry asked.

Sirius smiled wanly. “Such as it is, here. If something happens, you have options of where to go.”

“Do you think something will happen?” Harry had been waiting for something to happen again ever since Sirius's house got attacked, but it had been bordering on quiet.

“Yes,” Sirius said. “And when it does, do you think you could not be on the front lines of it this time?”

“You know me,” Harry replied. “Anything for a quiet life.”

“Tonight promises to be anything but,” Sirius said. He turned to Mrs. Tonks. “Sure I can't tempt you?”

“It's a night for fighters,” Mrs. Tonks replied. “I'm here when you need me, but the last thing Nymphadora wants is her mother hanging around when she's out with her boyfriend.”

“Tonks has a boyfriend?” Harry asked.

Sirius cocked his head, “She's going out with Remus.”

“Professor Lupin?” Harry blurted out. Now he thought about it, they did seem to be around each other a lot.

“Professor?” Mrs. Tonks inquired.

“He taught Defense for a year,” Sirius replied.

“That was brave. How long did he last?” Mrs. Tonks asked.

“Whole year,” Sirius said. “Not many did that.”

“No, no one ever stays more than a year in Defense,” Mrs. Tonks said. “Not even when I was there.”

“Really?” Harry asked. He had thought it was a bit odd for his school years that every year, there was a new one, but Mrs. Tonks had to be in her forties.
“Oh yes,” Mrs. Tonks replied. “My second year teacher only lasted until December. A miscast sleeping spell turned into a sleeping curse.”

“We had one like that,” Sirius said. “Whitfield. Got dumped just before Christmas and kept breaking into sobs all through class. Never came back.”

“How long has it been like that?” Harry asked. It was probably in *Hogwarts, A History*. He'd get around to reading it some day, but he could ask Hermione.

“No idea,” Sirius shrugged.

“It was old news in the sixties,” Mrs. Tonks said.

“Anyway, are we going to stand here talking about school all night?” Sirius said, indicating the door to the garden. “Because we have a party to get to.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Tonks said. “It was lovely to meet you at last, Harry.”

“You too,” Harry said.

Harry made a note to ask Hermione about the Defense teachers when he saw her, but by the time they'd arrived at the safe house, the party was in full swing. He stopped by the makeshift dance floor, wireless belting out old classic dance songs while people danced.

After Sirius bumped into him, his godfather took one look at Ginny dancing, rolled his eyes, and declared a need for a stronger drink if he was going to have to deal with any more pining. Harry wasn't pining! It wasn't pining to watch people (who included Ginny), but he still felt a little embarrassed about it. He'd half hoped Hermione would be there, but she must have decided to stay home with her parents. He couldn't blame her. There'd been a few muggleborn families attacked in the paper, and her parents still didn’t fully understand what was going on.

As the song on the wireless changed, Mrs. Weasley perked. “We used to dance to this one when we were young,” she said, giving Mr. Weasley a nudge to the shoulder. “Do you remember?”

“We can still dance,” Mr. Weasley said.

As the two took the dance floor, Fred gave them a wolf whistle. “

“Oh, behave yourself,” Mrs. Weasley said, even as her cheeks were heating.

“If you’d said that to Dad then, we wouldn’t be here.”

Mrs. Weasley went a deep beetroot colour, but let the comment slide. There’d been a shift between them, even Harry had noticed that much over the last week or so. Ever since their work had been going well, and even the Ministry was using their things, she seemed to let them get on with it more.

“I’m going to get more butterbeer,” Ron said, poking him. “Do you want one?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, moving away to go sit on some of the bunk beds.

He caught a brief glimpse of Snape, who was attempting to glower them all out of existence. Snape was topping the short list of people he never wanted to spend a holiday with, but he seemed so irate about it that it almost cheered Harry up.
When they had returned to the safe house, Harry had escaped off to talk to Ron. Sirius figured he was glad to see that his friend was there, despite his lack of membership to the Order, but technically Harry wasn't a member either. Allowances were made.

It wasn't unexpected that almost everyone had beaten them here: Emmeline had picked his brother up before he'd left (with flowers, no less, as if they were going on a ridiculously poncey date and not an Order piss up), and Tonks had disappeared back to Remus's after tea time. Sirius had needed a minute to grab his presents – he'd addressed his to Harry from Remus as well, because he tended to, and he seemed to like watching the pictures move into the fancier defensive patterns. He was a defensive fighter; Sirius would have to make his peace with that, but if he was going to be, he'd be the best damn defensive fighter there'd ever been. The book was designed for people taking the hitwizards exams, but Harry was brighter than most Ministry officials. He'd get it down.

The place was strung up for merriment with ribbons, paper loops, tinsel, and enchanted snow. In fact, the only thing that made seeing Snape there any less than disgusting is that he was scowling up a storm and that he had obviously been standing under the tinsel at one point because he had several strands sparkling in his hair. It's probably the only time it ever has.

He was more surprised and relieved to see Dumbledore talking in the corner with Kingsley, who looked a little woozy. Maybe he had some of Arabella's punch; he should warn Harry off that. Pretty embarrassing to have his first booze screw up in front of the whole Order. Though it hadn't been his first, James did first see the Order while stumbling drunk through the wrong fireplace and had never lived it down.

Still, a chance to talk to Dumbledore was in short supply these days. He had to take that chance and talk to him.

Regulus felt that his first Christmas as a proper member of the Order of the Phoenix was going well enough, all things considered. Their festive gathering was as active and overwhelming as it had been the previous year, just spread out differently across the current safe house.

He had spoken first with Sturgis, Emmeline, and Bill, but it had not taken long to take note of Severus, very clearly separated from the rest of the group and looking as though he preferred it that way.

Months had passed since Regulus had last seen Severus. For all the chaos (and dare he say it, drama) Regulus had personally experienced with the Death Eaters as of late, the Order had not met in its entirety since the summer, instead forming in small groups, usually in response to some crisis or another. That was logical, he supposed, with how absent Dumbledore had been. When a group propped up a central leader and that leader vanished from sight, organisational structure was likely to suffer to some extent. Even so, they had been holding up fine without him. For all Regulus knew, this had been the norm before, too; there was little to compare it with.

For Severus’s part, specifically, he was most needed at the school, especially with Draco’s present situation. Scattered attendance was a factor in the present distance, but perhaps more notably, Regulus had found himself hesitant to reach out, even if he knew Severus's school positioning was prime for information. Severus had not reached out either, of course, but neither of them had ever been particularly social, and Severus's demeanour was even less so, more often than not.

Regulus had not wanted it to be so, but he could feel the tangible distance, which time had shoved into the cracks of what had been their adolescent camaraderie. His old friend’s continued alliance with the Death Eaters had been a point of hesitance from the start - a useful position for the Order, but a limiting factor for any horcrux confidences. Whatever wall was necessary for success in their
own aims, it remained a small comfort, at least, to know there was another who understood some part of what it meant to be wrapped up in the Death Eaters - whether one was still tangled or detangled from it all. Regulus wondered how he felt about their other friends now but hardly knew what to say when even their shared nostalgia felt like something Regulus had lost his right to.

In the eyes of Society, at least, Regulus had certainly lost that right, and though he doubted Severus Snape would ever truly be accepted as one of the purebloods, he had earned respect as a useful half-blood among them. As intelligent as the man was - as the boy had always been - Regulus wondered if Severus had allowed himself to realise that distinction. Membership in the Order suggested he might have accepted it, but Severus was nothing if not inscrutable.

Sipping his drink in the way one might lean upon a crutch, Regulus spotted Emmeline chattering with Hestia out of the corner of his eye. Not yet dancing, he observed with a mouth half-quirked, but her manner did not seem too far from it. In a different corner - the corner furthest from the Weasley children - Severus was looking sour, and it was that corner he opted to approach for now.

Stepping up to him, Regulus waited for his mouth to settle again before dropping his cup and focusing on Severus. What a strange comfort it was to not be the only one in the room with a deficit in revelrous behaviour. Strange, and welcome.

"It's good to see you, Severus," he said, tapping a finger lightly on the side of his cup. "You are looking mildly coerced this evening."

Severus spared him a glance. "If I had realised it would be rife with children, I would have thought of a better excuse."

"I suppose you don't get away from children very often," Regulus said, feeling some of the tension loosen.

"Surprisingly, being a professor and head of house tends to put me in proximity to multiple children," Severus replied, drly. "Now it seems I have to endure it during my usual reprieves."

"At least they are keeping a relatively wide berth." Regulus tipped his head. "Has the term been as uneventful as it seems?" he asked, nearly remarking on Harry's previous report but thinking better of it.

"Is it the term you want to discuss or someone in particular?" Severus said. "A second social occasion in one day has exhausted my small talk."

"I meant in terms of attempted murder within the school, if that is directed enough," Regulus replied, feeling a little twinge as he added, "As far as individuals go, my primary concern is Draco. As you might guess, the majority of sources are either biased or presently angry with me."

"There has been no murder, attempted or otherwise," Severus said. "Draco is well at present, but stubbornly trying to find some way to get his family back in good graces with little success."

With a pensive frown, Regulus nodded, struck by a little stab of jealousy that Severus could so easily watch over Narcissa's son when his own attempts to reach out had gone so terribly. Carefully, he filtered that feeling from his face and tone to reply.

"A dangerous but unsurprising venture. I had wanted better for him, yet here we are, with history repeating itself in more ways than one. I don't care for it," he added, dryly but far more mildly than he felt. "At least the walls of Hogwarts isolate the children from the worst of the war. I recall holidays being far more demanding."
"Yet he has decided to forgo the endless parties and social engagements," Severus replied. "And you have not. I don't see a wand to your head."

Wryly, Regulus shook his head. He had meant participation in the Death Eaters, but the social obligations were notable too. "No wand to my head, no. With that being said, the social engagements are far more finite, these days."

"I hope you're not expecting me to have sympathy for that," Severus said. "I am here only until Dumbledore is done."

Fighting a bristle, Regulus eyed him. "I expect no such thing. My expectations of old friends and family have lowered significantly, as a rule, but you have never struck me as sympathetic in nature, nor do I expect you would want to be mistaken as such," he replied, then sipped his drink.

"About as much as you'd like to be known as brash and impulsive," Severus replied, evenly.

Fighting to keep the tension out of the muscles around his mouth, Regulus nodded. "I do not care for the classification at all, no."

Glancing around, Regulus briefly surveyed the room - met eyes with Emmeline, who was still talking with Hestia, and now Sturgis again, too. When she smiled, he flicked a little smile in return, then turned a sobered expression back to Severus. "Have you come for something in particular, if not for the illuminating company? I would expect you to have more access to Dumbledore at your leisure, given your set up."

"It's not my access to him, but his to me that is required," Severus said. "Something is wrong. There's too much restlessness. When it decides to announce itself, he'd like to know."

Regulus nodded, though he privately thought that Dumbledore ought to have been able to find Severus easily enough in the castle. Holiday merrymaking did not seem like a requirement, but Dumbledore had always been a bit odd. Perhaps it was not such a stretch to make interaction contingent on attending the Order gathering.

"Certainly. The war never stays quiet for long," Regulus agreed. He paused only a beat before waving off the prior hesitation to add, "How is his hand? I've only managed scattered looks, but it looks progressively worse."

"Do you believe he would tell anyone if it was worse? He likes to seem inscrutable," Severus replied.

"I am asking more after your observations than his frankness," Regulus said, "but I gather there is nothing confirmed beyond what is immediately observable?"

"He's not a young man," Severus responded, flatly. "So it is likely worse."

“I suspected that much from the increasingly dark colouring,” Regulus replied. Severus’s manner did not seem to suggest that he’d had very much luck in determining an effective countercurse, even now, but Regulus didn’t dare say it here, even if no one seemed to be paying attention to them. If there wasn’t an effective countercurse…

"Most people would think him almost invulnerable," Severus said. "Excellent news that Bellatrix didn't destroy yours wits."

“No, just my drawing room,” Regulus responded, sourly. “Though I would not say it was for a lack of effort.”

"How disappointing for her," Severus replied. "Another failure."
Subtly, Regulus quirked an eyebrow and bit back the first prickly response that teetered on the tip of his tongue. Ambiguity bred defensiveness, and he thought, then, about Emmeline. She had recommended on more than one occasion that he ask before assuming a person’s intent - even if the final word punctuated like a punch to the gut. After all, Bellatrix undoubtedly did consider Regulus to be another disappointment, but he steeled himself before responding.

“Failure,” he echoed, threading confidence into his tone to smother the part of him that still stung. “A failure to follow through, yes?”

“Of course, what else?” Severus asked.

Obvious though the ambiguity might seem, Regulus steadied his mind. Pushing the semantics was not beneficial if that was the end of it. "Has she indicated any further retaliation yet?"

"No. There are people displeased with her failures, so she will obviously act on them to prove herself soon enough," Severus replied. "She doesn't like to appear weak or out of favour."

"No one likes it," Regulus began, dryly, "but she did express that particular point rather… emphatically. I intend to continue waiting for some nebulous inevitability, regardless - but to ask more directly, has she mentioned anything specific?"

"Bellatrix does not like to talk to me," Severus replied, coolly. "It appears that if you didn't spend time in Azkaban, you no longer get to ask her questions."

“Ah.” Inconvenient, but not surprising, Regulus had to admit. “That does sound consistent with her disposition. The Dark Lord has never been worth going to Azkaban for, but I suppose that attitude is one way to cope with having suffered a decade and a half there."

"Undue devotion tends toward people believing delusional things or believing they are somehow special for suffering." Severus sighed, low. "She's treated no differently, yet imagines she is somehow a key part of the cause."

Suddenly, a memory of Bellatrix falling to the Ministry floor in sobs flashed through his mind, and Regulus frowned. Truthfully, it had made him unexpectedly, jarringly sad to see his cousin crumble like that, and though months had passed, he could still imagine it clearly. However furious he might be with her behaviour, on some level, he still wished she could just snap out of this fixation and focus her energy on something that actually deserved that level of devotion. He wished it, but what he knew is that the longer it went on, the less likely such a thing became.

Regulus was familiar enough with his audience to recognise that Severus was not the sentimental sort, more likely to roll his eyes at such a thing than to sympathise with it, so he felt the pang and let it pass.

“Manipulating people into a varied set of misinformed tools does seem to be a preferred strategy, be it a misjudging of their situation, their role, or their importance,” Regulus agreed, tipping his head in a little nod. “That much does not seem to have changed.”

"Or simply those with something to prove," Severus said. "Which is more familiar than I would like."

“Far too familiar, yes.” Regulus shook his head. Severus against his blood status - Barty against his father - Regulus himself... “As things are presently, it is frustrating to see history repeat itself, and perhaps even more frustrating to understand it completely. Looking back, it seems foolish to have believed so thoroughly that joining the Death Eaters could prove or solve anything of actual
practical value, but I must admit it seemed very plausible at the time.”

"Many things are plausible at fifteen that you come to find out are ridiculous with time," Severus replied. "But it's too late by then, for most."

“The consequences alone are unpleasant enough. To be fully mired in that situation and regretting it all would have surely been worse,” Regulus said, flattening his mouth a little. “I've found that fifteen-year-old mistakes are best left at fifteen, when possible.”

"Devotion blinds that," Severus responded. "Many are too invested now and will see it to the end."

"It deafens, too," Regulus added, dryly.

Severus gave what could generously be called a smile. "The louder they declare their loyalty, the bigger the hole they dig for themselves, and they will have to pay for that later. But no fifteen-year-old thinks of that, no matter what you tell them."

Regulus returned a thin smile, then let loose a soft sigh. He had wanted so badly for Draco to avoid all of this, but Draco scarcely knew him and did not like him - and even if Draco had known or liked him, he may have ignored the advice, with his father and name on the line. A stab of jealousy reminded him that Draco both knew and liked Severus, and Regulus wondered - not for the first time - whether Severus had tried to talk him out of it. The question stuck in his throat, jammed up against an expression of gratitude that at least someone could watch over Draco, but neither would move past his lips.

Instead, he said, “No, certainly not.”

"Whether Bellatrix will decide to kill him for his father or his own failures remains to be seen,” Severus responded. "It seems she has made up her mind on you."

"It does seem that way," Regulus said, flatly. "I would prefer she did not kill either of us, but Bellatrix is not one to be burdened by familial sentiment, nor to forgive." A brief pause, and then, "Has Draco failed at anything in particular that might be cause for concern?"

"He's no killer," Severus said, simply.

Regulus pressed his lips to a line and nodded. "Her approval does seem to… correspond with a willingness to do so, but I, for one, am glad to hear it."

"Her approval may not be what he wants," Severus replied. "But a means an end. I doubt she likes that either, but the easiest way to make his parents suffer is to watch his attempts to fix their current disgrace."

For a beat, it seemed strange to think Draco would not want his aunt's approval, but it took no longer to remember that Draco had not known her at all, either. Though Regulus doubted the boy was half as rude to Bellatrix as he had been in Grimmauld Place, it was some small consolation.

"Effective," Regulus admitted, "but terribly unfair to drag him and Narcissa into it. That has never stopped the Dark Lord, but it frustrates me, nonetheless."

"He only does favours when it suits his needs," Severus replied. "With Bellatrix out and their name disgraced, he has very little need of Lucius or his family."

“I've suspected as much, but that does not seem to be a popular opinion. Who would have thought?” Regulus said, wryly. The burn of jealousy was starting to cool, as the subject settled.
However much Regulus might wish for Draco to accept him and allow him to help, on another level, he knew it was enough to see him alive, at least… Swallowing the knotted pride in his throat, he added, “I know your position has its own risks, so… thank you for watching out for Draco.”

Severus dipped his head. “Something I'd prefer to return to if Dumbledore has had enough merriment for the evening.”

“I will leave you to it, then.” Regulus mirrored the dip of Severus’s head, then stepped away and turned back to the party. Dumbledore was still nowhere to be seen, nor was Sirius, but everyone else seemed to be having a lovely time. When he met Emmeline’s eyes again - currently twirling in some fashion with both Hestia and Tonks now - his smile was warmer, and his mood lighter.

He crossed the room towards her and saw that Remus was standing near them, too, though it was difficult to tell if the slight flush was from the beverage options or from the grins Tonks kept flashing.

When Regulus got close enough to reach, he took her hands and gave them an affectionate squeeze. “I see your unsupervised frivolity is going well?”

"It's not unsupervised." Emmeline smiled in return, still tapping her heels. "I'm the oldest person in this corner. I am the supervisor."

With a huff of amusement, he replied. “Flawless logic, as ever.”

"Always. Do you want to dance?" Emmeline asked. "You can say no, and I won't be offended."

“Hm,” he began, lifting her arm over her head and around in a slow, brief twirl until she was facing him again. “Drunk dancing is not my forte. It’s a bit energetic, isn’t it?”

"Good thing I'm not drunk, then. You're not going out with some lightweight," Emmeline said, not letting go of his hand. "If I was, I would definitely have stumbled over that and probably brought you down with me for company. I'm at 'everything is warm and wavy.' I need two more glasses before I start to outdo Tonks."

“Ah, well, that is a relief. Not that I don’t enjoy your company, but I prefer it up here,” he said, pressing a kiss to her knuckles, then tapped them lightly with a finger. Some part of him felt the press of self-consciousness as others moved around the safe house and around the room, but he kept his focus on Emmeline. “It has been a very long time, but I can spare a non-drunk dance, if you would like one. I believe the day’s ridiculousness quota still has some wiggle room if you are only a bit wavy around the edges.”

"I'll let you know when we're close to meeting it then," Emmeline said. "Slow dance?"

Regulus glanced at the wireless, playing an upbeat song, then turned back to Emmeline with a smile that reached his eyes. The pacing was not exactly what he would call 'slow,' but her expression suggested that was the point.

"Interesting song choice for it," he said lightly as he rested a hand on her waist. "There is probably a rule against slow dancing to upbeat songs."

"Us both being prefects cancels out most rules," Emmeline declared. "It was in the footnotes when we got the badge."

"I recall that well," he said with a punctuating nod. “With our combined level of responsibility, certainly that is sufficient to disregard rules as we deem appropriate.”
"I deem a little slow dancing as very welcome regardless of if there is music at all, let alone what it is." Emmeline swayed entirely out of tune with the music, as if to illustrate her point.

With an amused huff, he leaned in and around the sway, their still-clasped hands leading the turn. Pattering steps were out of sync, and unapologetically out of time, but it bothered him less than he thought it might. There was often an invasiveness to another person’s face in his face, to hooked arms or pressed chests, but when she sidled closer, he didn’t mind that either, moving his hand to rest on the small of her back.

In that moment, he thought he probably loved her - loved every word from her mouth, be it silly or serious or sentimental. The feeling was mildly terrifying, something soft and vulnerable and rearing to thrash at the inevitable criticism, but in that moment, even the criticism wouldn’t stick. The morning’s conversation had turned over in his mind, settling and solidifying - with some questions unanswered, but others fortified with confidence of a path forward.

However jumbled the feeling might be, a closeness that ought to feel invasive made him feel more secure than anything, and that in itself was pleasantly strange (or perhaps strangely pleasant). Perhaps it seemed more secure than was entirely reasonable when fumbling feet with a non-drunk person, but they had not disturbed any of the tables or decor.

Surely, that counted for something.

“Hello, Headmaster,” Sirius said, once in front of the elderly wizard. Both he and Kingsley turned to look at him.

“I haven’t been your headmaster in many years,” Dumbledore said, but he seemed tired, even in good spirits.

“Something the current Gryffindors' attempts at winning a house cup must be thrilled about,” Sirius said. “How many points do you lose for an arrest?” Someone should probably let Narcissa know that one too.

“It depends on the arrest. Excuse me,” Kingsley said, giving an undignified yawn. Is it possible to look dignified while yawning?

"You done your family dinner yet, Kingsley?" Sirius asked. Maybe this was the aftermath of Christmas at the Shacklebolts.

"I had two," he admitted.

Sirius let out a slow whistle. "How are you still standing?"

"Exceptional training," Kingsley said. "But I think I'll go find a vacant bed."

Looking like that, he doubted that would be difficult. Someone would get up.

As he wandered off, Dumbledore turned to Sirius again. "I believe he wanted to give us some privacy," Dumbledore said. Possible, but he was looking tired, overall. Living in the muggle world seemed tiring, especially among politicians. “You wanted to talk to me?”

Come to think of it, even Dumbledore looked a bit peaky. It was a little unusual to find him sitting, but given that Snape seemed to be glaring at him, maybe they’d had a to-do at some point. Sirius hoped it was negligence in teaching Harry like he said he would. “You haven't been around much.”
“The Order is full of capable people who don't need to be hovered over,” Dumbledore said. “I go where I'm needed.”

He didn't think he was needed at Hogwarts, given the Death Eaters had set their sights on it? “I heard about the lessons,” Sirius said.

“Oh, you have, have you?” There was no telling if Dumbledore was surprised. He never seemed to be. “Is that what you wanted to talk about?”

“No,” Sirius said, though there wasn't much point. Dumbledore knew what he wanted to talk about. “While there's a few odds and ends, Harry's well-being is what I wanted to talk about.”

Dumbledore's eyes flicked over to where Harry and Ron were speaking animatedly. “He seems in good health.”

“I'd like him to remain in them,” Sirius said. “Is there truly any point in him going back to live in a place that makes him miserable?”

“Inspired by your own circumstances?” Dumbledore asked.

“Inspired by him looking like he'd rather go to the Ministry than go there,” Sirius replied. “He'll be seventeen in seven months.”

“And you are keen that he not spend any of that time in the only home he's ever known?”

Dumbledore asked.

“But not the only one he's ever had,” Sirius argued. “It's not even a home – it's just somewhere he lives.”

“And for the protection to continue, where he must remain.”

“Does it offer that much protection?” Sirius asked. “Harry wanders; he may live in that house, but he's rarely in it. He spends half his time talking with the RR – or some of the people in it – and the rest with his mates, who aren't sedate by any means. Even when he does have a guard, he wanders off.”

“Is that not all the more reason to have a safe house to live in?” Dumbledore asked.

“Not if he's only safe when he's in it,” Sirius said. “He's spent more time around Death Eaters – past or present – lately than I have. Is another month and a week worth the misery it'll cause?”

“The holidays are not the point,” Dumbledore said, quietly. “There is a house that is, as of now, safer than any other for him, where he cannot come to physical harm. If he has to be apparated somewhere where Voldemort will not follow him, he has that option as long as he calls it home.”

“Physical harm isn't the only way to hurt someone,” Sirius said. “Could someone not just be bewitched by a Death Eater to walk in?”

“You're asking Voldemort to think of his followers as competent,” Dumbledore replied. Sirius snorted in response. Of course he didn't. Over a decade ago, he had let a teenager in on his secret through underestimating intelligence versus devotion. "But his Death Eaters carry a mark of his magic on them, so no, the magic would be recognised as his hand.”

Sirius huffed. “Do they have to be there?”
“The enchantment will break the moment they no longer call it home,” Dumbledore said, firmly.

“That's not what I mean,” Sirius said. “They can still call it home, and all for intents and purposes, Harry can too. But he's only there in the summer – for at most six weeks this summer. Do they have to be in the house for it to work?”

Dumbledore actually looked a little inquisitive now. “What are you suggesting?”

“Tonks got them to forget lost with a fake competition winning,” Sirius said. “It shouldn't be too hard to get them to leave on a real holiday.”

“They are very house proud,” Dumbledore said. “I doubt they would leave Harry alone in the house for a prolonged period if prompted to by a magic person.”

“It doesn't have to be a magical person.” Sirius shrugged. “As long as the costs aren't to the person in particular, dropping the idea into the mind of someone they want to impress wouldn't be too difficult.”

“Do you think bewitching a muggle is really the best option?” Dumbledore said.

“They get worse done to them than a bit of suggestion and a free holiday from Obliviators,” Sirius said. “Harry doesn't have to see them more than once; they get to go suck up to some well-to-do's; and the enchantment remains in place. It wouldn't hurt them to decide not to return once Harry becomes seventeen either. I don't think Voldemort's going to be very pleasant to them, is he?”

“No, I don't imagine he will,” Dumbledore replied. “But muggle lives aren't be trifled with either.”

“I know that,” Sirius said. “But if it's the best safe place he's got, he can be marginally less miserable in it if he can instead convince Hermione and Ron to come over for those weeks, and they can have the place to themselves. Provided no one burns it down, it's the safest they can be while we try to figure out what the alternative will be once he turns seventeen.”

“Possibly,” Dumbledore replied. “Let me think on it, but if there is no suitable alternative, it's an option.”

“It's probably nicer than me going back with Harry,” Sirius said. “He hasn't told them about the acquittal, so I suppose I could just try scaring them into being half-way decent people, but lousy as she may be as a person, that's still Lily's sister, and Lily cared for her till the end. I'm trying to honour that too.”

Dumbledore gave a deep nod. “We'll see what we can do.”

It was probably as close to a yes as he was going to get, so Sirius nodded. He needed to go find his brother. Hopefully he'd detached himself from Snape long enough that any lingering aura of unpleasantness he could have picked up through close contact would have dissipated.

Some time later, the party began to wind down after eleven. Dedalus was asleep under his top-hat in the corner, and Tonks had left with Remus on her arm looking like a nervous teenager before a school dance, while Molly and Arthur were huddled listening to the wireless together. Sirius was coming down from the elated parts of having a few more drinks than usual, not quite melancholy but nostalgic. Gently, he reached over to take Harry's glasses off the same way he had done for years with James. He'd been prone to falling asleep with them on too, but it had been a long day for Harry. For all of them, it seemed.
Sirius had also spied his brother, thankfully without the grip of a certain slimy git, sitting off in a corner and scribbling on some parchment with a quill he got who knows where. He had probably used up the quota for talking to other people through till the end of the year and may have taken a vow of silence until New Year's day. Even so, it wouldn't be the first vow of silence Sirius had disrupted, but he didn't fully want to disturb him either. Just long enough to give him something he'd been holding back, unsure of the right moment to hand it over. He wouldn't want it to be done publicly. Regulus never liked to have his emotions on display, even if he was less bothered by it now than he had been as a child.

Sitting down on the bed by his brother, Sirius waited impatiently for a response to his arrival; he could try to be accommodating when it suited him, but he would always be a fidgeter through and through.

Setting down his quill, Regulus finally looked over at him. "All revealed out for the night?"

"You can't talk," Sirius replied. "Good time?"

He nodded. "Busy, but good."

"Listen," Sirius said, but he hesitated before continuing. Regulus was in a good mood, but it wasn't impossible this would be something he didn't want to think about or pursue or even would feel miserable knowing. No, this was Regulus - even if knowledge made him miserable, he still wanted to know everything he could. "I've had something for a few days now, but I wasn't sure when to bring it up. Is now the right moment?"

Lifting his brow, Regulus's expression pulled to a focus. "What is it?"

"I did a little detective work for you," Sirius said. He reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out an envelope. "After Bellatrix's drop in. I thought it was a good idea."

Well, he'd thought it was an idea; time would tell if it was a good one.

If the Malfoy's had off-branches of half-blood relatives they recognised, even Narcissa couldn't get in a snit if Regulus wanted to look to the same forgotten branches of his own tree. There were bound to be others, people like Andromeda who simply chose the 'wrong' person but otherwise led a normal life after leaving. Phineas had even mentioned one himself, his sister running off with someone from their street. It had taken a couple of favours to find out if there were other magical families still in Grimmauld Place, and he supposed he wasn't surprised to find only one listed in Ministry record. It was possible they weren't the same family; he'd never known the man's name, and Phineas hadn't coughed it up. But Regulus had been displaced and miserable, so he had wanted to illustrate that it wasn't the end of the world. He would always have his name and his family, even if it looked a little different. He'd had to try something.

"It's an address," he explained.

“For what?” he asked, accepting the envelope.

"Iola's granddaughter," Sirius replied. "Phineas's sister, the one who ran off with a bloke down the road. Some of the family still lives there, and after assuring them I wasn't just some mental bloke who knocked on the door with a wild claim they might have family in common, she seemed quite happy to talk about her. I said I'd pass it on to the family history swot."

As he spoke, realisation dawned on his little brother's face, who started to open the envelope. "Down the road from the house? In Grimmauld Place?" Regulus said, though he was already
clarifying his own question as he pulled out the address, eyes flicking over the address: Number Three Grimmauld Place. “They really stayed... That is... bold? Unexpected? Mildly disconcerting?” Even as he tried on different descriptors, he didn’t look or sound upset, so that was a good sign.

"I was only half an hour away at most too. Makes you wonder how many people stayed close because it was all of the muggle world they knew." It was far enough away not to hear his mother's screeches but not too far away from the pubs he'd frequented at the time. It was one thing to know something of the muggle world and quite another to live in it. "You know as well as I that before Bellatrix brought murder into the mix, the way of things was just to ignore people. Anyway, that's not the weirdest part by far. She's got a kid that's about your age. I don't recognise the name, but not everyone made the reputation at school that I did."

Eyes widening a little more, Regulus replied, "Who?"

"Hitchins," Sirius replied. It was a very ordinary name, which made the whole idea of an ancestor of his going off with someone ordinary a lot funnier. "Sound familiar?"

Regulus was quiet for a beat, then shook his head. "No, I can't say it is... Did she mention which house at Hogwarts?"

"I only talked to her briefly," Sirius said, hands raised. Seemed a bit weird to go looking for people on a family tree he wasn't on anymore and then linger with their grandchildren. Even stranger still, she had to be around their parents’ age, and that was a whole new level of peculiar he didn't fancy subjecting himself to. "The extent of it was confirmation that her grandmother was disowned from a very strict family, her name - thanks, Phineas, being useful for once - then explaining you were doing some family tree research, and if she'd be willing to talk to you. She said she thinks there's some of her stuff in the attic she'll grab before she does, mentioned she had grandkids at school with Harry, and showed a few pictures. I told her you'd probably bring an entire roll of parchment full of questions, but she laughed, so I think she believed I was joking."

Regulus nodded, though he looked a bit dazed. "Right there in Grimmauld Place, the whole time..."

Sirius had to laugh at him. "You're already amassing a list in your head aren't you? Like 'did they live there or did their in-laws' to how many kids, what years, what houses, and wondering if they look anything like you or I?"

Looking back to Sirius, Regulus quipped, “Those are on the list, yes.” He paused just a beat, then added, “This is quite shocking, I must admit... Thank you for telling me - though I'm afraid I did not bring any gifts with me to the party to reciprocate.”

"It's not why I potentially made an idiot out of myself with your former neighbours." Sirius waved him off. "I know you were upset about me not wanting my name on the tapestry and about what Bellatrix did, but I wanted to show you that the tapestry, while an heirloom, isn't an accurate family tree. From the age of her, that woman could have been in Mum and Lucretia's dorm room, and they would have had no idea who she was."

Eyes once again widening slightly, Regulus looked to the side again, though it was hard to tell if he was actually looking at anything or just giving the wheels in his head a jarring. “That is both a true point and a mildly unsettling one.”

"Then my work here is done," Sirius grinned. "They don't seem evil, either."
“Your commentary is invaluable, as ever,” Regulus said with a wry tone as he looked back to Sirius again. “At least the list of relatives who want to kill me is not growing at the moment.”

"See if you get food poisoning before you declare that," Sirius said, lightly. "The bright side is maybe it's not all in the blood."

“What isn’t? The desire the poison your own family?”

"The being a few nuts short of a fruitcake," Sirius replied. Though that probably also applied. As far as he could tell, murder wasn’t normal fare for families either. "Besides which, Bellatrix wouldn’t use poison. It’s too subtle. Narcissa might. Mum, maybe, if someone pissed her off in a way she couldn’t have just screamed her way out of."

"Well, of course. By that specificity, at least if these people opt to poison my food, we will know it probably wasn’t due to our common relations, regardless of the nuts in their fruitcake," he quipped back dryly, then immediately shook his head. "But... the metaphor seems to be getting away from the point - which is to say, I'm glad to hear they do not seem 'evil,' as you say. I will reach out to them when the holiday chaos has passed."

"Ask before the holidays are up if you want to see the youngest lot," Sirius advised. "I did ask Harry, but no go. Either they're in a different house, or as Ginny informed me, Harry rarely remembers the names of people he doesn’t see regularly and couldn’t pick half the people in his own year out if his life depended on it. You'll let me know if anything interesting comes out of it?"

"I will… And on a related note, Emmeline gifted me with access to genealogical archives for the past few hundred years - to approximately the 1600s, from what I read," he said. "The extent of relevant information is still unconfirmed, but it seems like an intriguing resource."

"She's foisting your obsession on archivists now? Poor them, they have no idea what's coming."
Sirius could argue that the focus on genealogy was part of the problem; blood and family weren't the same thing, but they weren't mutually exclusive either, and pushing the point was probably going to upset him. It seemed more than a little cruel to pick a fight on Christmas day. "I was going to ask if you had a copy of everyone on it, but I'm betting you have everyone mentioned on it memorised."

“I will not deny that I put extensive efforts into memorising the tapestry and tucking it away in my mind for the long-term - which I suppose turned out to be a useful venture, after all,” Regulus said with a little flick of his mouth. “This ought to apply to the bottom third, at least.”

"I know." Sirius nodded. If he thought about it, he could probably recite at least the last two centuries from memory alone, but he wasn't about to bring that up now. "You may find yourself related to someone normal. We're not counting Tonks, she's anything but. Would you know how to interact with someone normal in a familial way?"

“I expect not,” Regulus admitted. “But I know how to be civil.”

"Just don't lead with the ex-Death Eater announcement, and I'm sure it'll be fine," Sirius replied. "It gets easier."

With a more pensive expression settling, Regulus nodded.

“I'm going to go wake Harry and tell him it's time to go,” Sirius said. He'd leave him with the information to mull over and figure out how he wanted to use it. They were a distance away, not really what he'd call family, but Regulus was far more attached to the idea of the tapestry as the be
all and end all. If this helped separate tapestry and family to him, it would be worth it
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains semi-graphic violence / blood.

There were very few people from Regulus's 'old life' who still saw fit to associate with him. Such truths were an insult to his pride, perhaps, though he could admit that the holidays had passed with far less obligatory stress than he recalled from his youth. Exclusion was a familiar weapon, turned on many over the years, but its accusatory jab was dulled by those who did not play along.

Horace Slughorn was among those who operated on his own social agenda, parrying jabs with a sort of confident disregard that rarely surfaced in societal circles. Including muggleborns in the Slug Club had always been controversial, and his criteria had not been without criticism, yet he had held his position - 'served his purpose,' as some might say. Harry did not seem to like Slughorn very much at all, but Regulus had been fond of his head of house, and however strategic the attention might be, it remained a fond dose of nostalgia.

With a legitimate invitation, this time, Regulus strolled through the entrance of the castle, then down to Slughorn's office in the dungeons. With three swift knocks, he wondered vaguely if Severus’s office had moved. It must have, now that he taught Defense Against the Dark Arts, but there was little time to ponder the point further before the door opened.

“Right on time, I see!” Professor Slughorn exclaimed, tapping a pocket watch enthusiastically. “You haven’t lost that knack for timekeeping, have you? Come in, come in.”

Regulus stepped inside with a small smile and a nod.

“Thank you for the invitation,” Regulus said politely. There was a kettle of tea with two cups set out at a small table, already poured and still steaming. “Has your holiday been relaxing, or have you kept busy, here at the school?”

"A little busy; lots of people sending their regards, but I can only do so much." Slughorn clapped his hands together. "But what about you? What have you been doing?"

"Concluding an eventful year with a comparatively uneventful holiday," Regulus replied. "We gathered for Christmas lunch at my cousin Andromeda's. I was eleven, the last time I saw her for the holidays, so it was notable in that respect."

"I don't think I've seen her in as long either," Slughorn said, taking a seat in one of the enormous armchairs. "Affinity for interesting cross-breeding, but not too troublesome. After all, we did eventually awaken the student that mistook her valerian-laburnum hybrid for valerian alone, even if it did take a few weeks! I availed myself to the joys of a Christmas at Hogwarts, myself. There is nothing quite the place covered in snow."

"I never did stay over the holidays as a student, but I can imagine how beautiful it must be." Regulus settled in the armchair across from him - large enough to fit two of him, but not quite a loveseat. Very well-cushioned, too, as he would expect. Picking up his teacup, he added, "Safer, too. I heard you were having unwelcome visitors, prior to your return."
The look on Slughorn's face turned sour for a moment, but he seemed to squash it down quickly enough. "Yes," he said. "I've never been quite so upset to be so popular."

"Understandable. Coercion is not my favourite brand of attention either." Regulus nodded and took a sip of tea, letting the comment sit for just a beat before adding, "I commend your resistance. They do not make it easy."

"No, but you're at an age yourself where you'll have had to deal with it more than once," Slughorn said, his voice a little jerky. "And here we both are! I think that speaks to excellent character."

With a strained smile, Regulus nodded. "Indeed."

For an uncomfortable moment, Regulus paused, thinking about the wireless interview - not yet enacted, but still lingering on the tip of his intentions. Anxiety twisted at the mere consideration of speaking about it to anybody - to everybody - but a certain resolve remained, too. As much value as privacy held, no one else was going to break that silence honestly… and more practically, better to remain in control of his own information than to leave it up to Bellatrix.

"It has come up multiple times, over the years," Regulus continued, fingers still loosely curled around his cup. "I hope you will not think too poorly of me for it, but I did get wrapped up in it all as a teenager."

"You didn't!" Slughorn's eyes widened, sitting forward in his chair with a creak. "Did you, really?"

"I did," Regulus said, though he could hear his tone souring slightly. "Sixth and seventh year. My involvement was low, all things considered, but I regret it, nonetheless."

Slughorn's voice gained a higher, squeakier pitch. "During your school years?"

Regulus nodded, shame buzzing in his head, but he fought to keep an even expression. "I apologise for the deception. I felt very anxious about it at the time."

"Yes, I can see why that would make you anxious." Slughorn took a drink of his tea, perhaps attempting to shift the obvious discombobulation he was feeling. "Whatever happened?"

"I quickly realised it was a terrible idea, but resignation was advertised as a death sentence," Regulus said with a dry sigh. "Hence the hasty departure."

"I see," Slughorn said. "That's quite a revelation. And I would suppose everyone already knows about this?"

"Not everyone," Regulus amended. "But a fair few, now. My family knows - including those who are pleased with me and those who are displeased with me. Friends and certain former friends. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement knows - and has agreed to a pardon. Dumbledore, too, who was supportive in that process. He offered a flattened smile. "Dreadful experience, but I am trying to move past it as thoroughly as possible."

"You had that well in hand," Slughorn replied. "All tied up before word got out. What do you do with yourself these days?"

"Self-directed research," he replied, honestly. "I don't venture out much, given the current target on my back, but I have been focusing primarily on charms, wards, and magical artifacts."

"So you're maintaining your family tradition, eh?" Slughorn said. "Some of the family, I should say. Your grandfather was one of my first students, and I don't think there was ever a quiet moment
around, rest his soul, of course."

Pollux Black would be the grandfather in question - his mother's father. "Of course," Regulus echoed with a nod. "He was an intense individual."

"Not my first intense student, nor my last," Slughorn said. "This year's crop is quiet by comparison."

"Harry attends, doesn't he?" Of course, Harry did not directly talk about it much, but deduction suggested as much. Draco, on the other hand... it was unlikely to be a 'quiet' group with those two... and with the Malfoys' disgrace from Lucius, he had a feeling Narcissa's son was not included on the roster.

"Of course!" Slughorn said. "Very sharp young man, that one. I imagine you've met Miss Granger and Weasley?"

Regulus nodded. "I was living with Sirius for awhile, and they sometimes visit Harry over the holidays."

"Yes, they do seem to get on well at the dinners too." Slughorn nodded. "I was quite surprised by Miss Granger. Not that there's anything bad about her being muggleborn, of course, but everything comes so naturally for her. Yet no magic in the family at all? Utterly fascinating, the way these things happen."

There had been a time when such a sentiment would have sounded as natural as 'Hogwarts is a castle' and 'muggles can't use magic,' but it sounded strangely awkward to Regulus's ears. He couldn't quite pinpoint what it was - technically speaking, they were all accurate enough statements - yet somewhere in his mind, he could imagine a collective eye roll. The surprise, perhaps.

Truthfully, Regulus had been a little bit surprised by her, himself. For as long as possible, he had pointedly tried to avoid acknowledgement of anyone's blood status. Perhaps it had been for the best that he couldn't see any of them at first. He barely understood the social rules, now, and he certainly hadn't, then. Keeping his mouth shut had seemed like the best solution.

Nonetheless, Regulus's mouth flicked up now, just slightly. "She is exceptionally bright, and very enthusiastic. An impressive mix, to be certain." He took another sip of tea.

"It's all new now," Slughorn said, a little wistfulness slipping into his voice. "This is my first generation without one of your family - several families."

"Just Narcissa's son," he said, even if it seemed a little risky to mention him first. "But none with the name. With how the tree was spread, I suppose that was a rarity."

"Yes, a troubled young man. To be expected, considering the business with his father and grandfather, but a shame nonetheless." Slughorn gave a hefty sigh. "But to teach three generations of one family does make me feel a little old. Even more so when they're no longer with us. I am grateful for the company today."

"It is a melancholy time of year for such things," Regulus said with a small nod. "I appreciated the stroll down memory lane - both your memories and my own. Many things have felt new to me too, these days - a good sort of new, in most respects, but certainly different."

"Variety keeps you young," Slughorn said. "Surviving long enough to need it seems to be the trick. I taught here for over fifty years, and now look: a decade and a half after retirement, back again!"

“You just can’t keep away, it seems,” Regulus remarked, lightly. “Does returning to teach initiate
the aging process once again because you have done it before, or does the distance between your last teaching venture funnel this change towards the variety of youth?"

"You haven't changed at all, have you?" Slughorn said, with obvious amusement.

"That seems to depend on who you ask," Regulus said wryly as he tapped the rim of his cup, then took a drink. The observations had come with a surreal sort of relief, but his old head of house did not seem to have changed much, either.

Slughorn laughed, “I’m sure it does.”

The first indicator that something was amiss at the Ministry was the flickering of the lamps. Arthur Weasley saw it first, wandering out of his office to look at the main floor of the Department of Law Enforcement to see if there was simply something wrong with the charms in there. There wasn't. Lights flickered out here too. He spotted one of the raid team members he'd been working with and wandered over.

“McCabe,” he asked. “Is something amiss in magical maintenance?”

McCabe looked up, scanning the room before eventually, again, a flicker happened. “I'll nip down and see what's what.”

He walked her towards the lift, which was a stroke of luck as Kingsley Shacklebolt came out. He was still dressed in muggle clothes (Arthur was unsure what that particular hat was about and resolved to ask about it later), but he also seemed immediately drawn to the flicker.

“What is that?” he asked.

“Going to maintenance now to see what's occurring,” McCabe replied, heading into the lift.

“How are things with the muggle Minister?” Arthur asked, as soon as the lift doors closed.

“Tense,” Kingsley responded. “How are the raids?”

“Not as fruitful as I'd like,” Arthur admitted.

“Wait-” Kingsley said suddenly, holding up one finger with one hand and his wand with the other. “Do you hear that?”

Arthur stopped and listened. There was a sound like scratching, but it almost seemed as if it were in the walls.

No, it was from inside the lift doors.

Arthur had barely a moment to process the doors opening before two black shapes emerged from it, wands drawn. There were two red flashes as Kingsley stunned them both. Arthur used a sealing spell on the lift to prevent what he suspected would be more coming through. He could still hear the noise – were they coming up the shaft of the lift? If so, why had no one raised an alarm in the atrium? How had they not been crushed by McCabe going down to maintenance?

“Good idea,” Kingsley said. “I'll sound the alarm to the usual lot if you can bind them. We'll need every fighter out and patrolling the departments.”

Arthur was already using a binding spell. “I'll get the more vulnerable staff somewhere to barricade,” he promised. He spared a thought for what could have happened if Kingsley were not
an exceptional Auror, but he had no time to dwell on such things. He had a crowd to round up and get to safety.

In the Department of Mysteries, there were no indications of any incursion. The maze-like hallways, the artificial sun and starlight, and the generally less present employees meant that it was business as unusual. Emmeline Vance had taken one look at the break room to find translucent finger prints on the biscuit tin, and with a grimace, decided to find a pastry of less questionable contamination in the atrium cafe. As such, the very last thing she expected when she reached the lift with her mug of coffee was to find two Death Eaters plop out of the doors with their hoods up.

For a tense moment, they looked at her, and she looked at them. Maskee #2 was quicker with his wand than Maskee #1, but Emmeline did not immediately reach for her own. She instead tossed her piping hot coffee at Maskee #1, making them give an almighty howl as they fell into Maskee #2, causing the slicing curse to only graze her arm. Emmeline hissed, more from shock than the deepness, and threw her mug at Maskee #2's knees. Back in the day, when Alice had taught them how to duel properly, she said the knees were the quickest way to end a fight. People duck automatically, but it takes a split second of thought to think to jump out of the way, and that second is all you need in a fight. Somehow, she didn't imagine Alice considering a mug would be used as a projectile in this scenario, but perhaps she'd spent too much time around Regulus fighting and picked up some of his habits.

In the time she went for her wand, Maskee #3 and #4 had shown up, and she found herself thrown against the back wall. From the stair side, a flash of red stunned the newcomers.

"Hello!" said Dedalus Diggle, at the top of the stairs. "Do cease and desist!"

Emmeline pulled herself to her feet, sending off Maskee....whatever, she had no idea, someone without a giant coffee stain looking as if had a little accident this morning.

"How long have you been there?" Emmeline asked, deflecting a nonverbal spell.

"Long enough to see you destroy the mug I gave you for Christmas," Dedalus replied.

Emmeline winced, then sent chains into the ceiling since she now had a moment to breathe. "Sorry," she said, ducking below an impediment spell. "I am getting a little sick of these guys showing up where they are not invited, and it turns out I have become a rage thrower."

"As long as you feel better," Dedalus skipped to avoid a frightening splash of green.

The chains wrapped themselves around the Death Eaters, hoisting them up into the ceiling. To Emmeline's surprise, the ceiling tiles opened and for lack of a better term, swallowed all four of the Death Eaters as one of the wands clattered to the ground.

"Where did you send them?" Dedalus asked.

"I have no idea," Emmeline answered. "But it couldn't happen to nicer people."

Dedalus put his head into the lift. "Do you think that's all of them?" The lift suddenly tried to close, causing him to jump back with a squawk.

"I'd wager not," Emmeline said.

Down from the upper layers, a streak of white appeared, then formed Kingsley's patronus. Then another. "Incursion at the Ministry," came Kingsley Shacklebolt's voice. "Stay safe."
“Well, obviously.” Emmeline said.

“We ought to secure the courts,” Dedalus said, looking back down at the stairs. “There will be civilians and Wizengamot down there.”

Emmeline nodded, but with two patronuses, that meant this was an Order wide alert. She would need to send a couple of messages of her own. The first to Hestia, as a warning that they will likely have injuries to attend to far worse than an admittedly red and angry slash and a bump on the head. The second to Regulus, in case he got any funny ideas of playing martyr again.

“All right,” Emmeline said. “Let us go ensure the safety of the civilians, and if we have time, the Wizengamot.”

“I'm afraid there are members of the Wizengamot who may be quite overjoyed with this development!” Dedalus declared.

“Then they can stay where they are,” Emmeline replied. If they ended up as crossfire deaths, they probably wouldn't be so happy about it. “Unless we deem them to be in danger, then I say a good, hard stun in the chest and lock them in a broom closet. There is no need for extra bloodshed unnecessarily.” The last sentence was grumbled, as she rather thought people on the Wizengamot were not children, but rather bigoted, old families who were set in their ways and still bitter that muggleborns could be seen as equal to their 'great' lines.

“We'll do what we can,” Dedalus agreed. “I do hope the others are alright.”

Emmeline spared a look at the sealed lift doors with worry that she had no time for. “Yes,” she said. “So do I.”

A whoosh of light burst from under the door of Slughorn’s office. It came to stop in front of them both, wisping into the glowing form of a large, cat-like patronus.

"Incursion at the Ministry," came Kingsley Shacklebolt's voice. "Stay safe."

Regulus sat up more stiffly, frowning at the patronus as it wisped away again. A Death Eater attack was the only sort of incursion that made sense, coming through that channel of communication. In 1979, they had had been lying in wait for a proper attack on the Ministry. Regulus was not surprised to hear it had finally come, but that did nothing to make it better.

Whether assistance would be needed was unclear, and certainly not appropriate to ask with Professor Slughorn sitting right there. Fortunately, Dumbledore or McGonagall were likely to be somewhere around the school; it was simply a matter of extracting himself from the conversation without looking too suspicious.

"Is that a new Ministry alert system?" Slughorn asked. "That's quite impressive!"

“Something like that,” Regulus said in what he hoped was an even enough tone, mind spinning for some quick explanation that didn’t sound unrealistically descriptive... “Nothing officially widespread, but one of the Aurors who helped with my case is keeping an eye out for me, ever since the pardon last month.”

"A personal touch?" Slughorn inquired.

Then another wisp of light pushed its way through the door, this time fluttering into existence as a large bird.
"Stay there," came Emmeline's voice. "I mean it. The Ministry is locking down, no one in."

"Very personal," Slughorn amended.

“I am, ah-” Regulus cleared some of the awkwardness from his throat before fumbling through a second excuse, trying to at least maintain a neutral expression, if nothing else. “I am also seeing someone who works at the Ministry. I have visited before, so she must be emphasising the seriousness of the situation.”

Slughorn sat forward, his interest immediately piqued. "Oho! You kept that quiet! Anyone I would know?"

Regulus let out a breath he hadn't noticed he was holding. It had felt like a flimsy distraction, the moment he'd said it, but apparently it was sufficient for now.

"Emmeline Vance," he replied. "She was a Ravenclaw in the year above me. She's an Unspeakable now."

"That does sound familiar, but I'm afraid I just can't place it. It's hard to remember who everyone is related to after a while, especially with people who notoriously remain secretive of their profession." Some of the interest seemed to fade at the fact that the name was not immediately recognisable. "Is it a lineage I'm familiar with?"

Regulus suspected it was not. “Vance and Henley were her parents’ surnames - both wizarding families, but we have not discussed the ancestral branches of her family tree in depth.”

Slughorn chuckled. "That has to be a bit unusual. Most people are dying to tell you which of the great houses they're related to."

Regulus smiled, slightly, trying to shake off the discomfort. "A bit unusual, yes - but I've come to care for her a great deal, so I would ask for discretion on the subject. The Death Eaters have many ears, both known and unknown, and I do not wish to put her in unnecessary danger on my account."

What Regulus could not say is that Emmeline was in danger with the Death Eaters by her own merit - a fact that was about as appropriate to specify as the fact that the patronuses were from the Order, which was to say not appropriate at all.

"Of course, my boy. I am nothing if not discrete." Slughorn managed somehow to say this with a straight face. "Shall I put the wireless on, see if there's any news?"

"I would recommend that, yes," Regulus replied, then spared a quick glance to the door as he started to stand. "I should be on my way, but it was wonderful to visit with you. I hope the remainder of your holiday is restful, before all of the children return."

"As do I." Slughorn was already rising. "Do be careful."

Regulus nodded, and before any other awkward questions could arise, he slipped out into the corridor, shutting the door securely behind himself.

Dumbledore’s office seemed like an appropriate destination; rare as it was for Regulus to reach out directly, Dumbledore was the most likely person to have the broadest view of the situation. He did not like that Emmeline was among the people locked inside the Ministry with an unspecified number of assailants, but busting into the Ministry was certainly unwise (and most likely useless).

For now, information was the most logical route to seek, and Dumbledore was not often short on
that.

The way Draco saw it, there were five main obstacles to retrieving the Dark Lord's prophecy.

First had been the lack of knowledge of its location; he'd tried listening in on Longbottom and Lovegood, but if he did it anymore, he was going to have to request a killing curse to put himself out of his misery. Then he'd tried going out after dark, which was easier as a prefect but annoying when he couldn't lose Pansy long enough to do anything of consequence, and when he did, Granger showed up and gave her usual irritating diatribes. Eventually, he'd realised that the easiest way to keep up with what people were doing after dark was the portraits. It meant moving a few of them around so he could be sure of a little house loyalty from them, but despite some initial whining, it proved helpful to know that prophecy was being kept in plain sight. At first, he'd thought it was transfigured as some junk in Dumbledore's office, but all at once, he realised that the best place to keep a prophecy that looked like a crystal ball was in amongst every other crystal ball.

Second had been avoiding detection. Potter and that bloody cloak were getting on his last nerve, let alone the professors. Even Professor Snape, usually a help, was beginning to grate on him. This was his task and his alone, given by the Dark Lord himself, and he would not fail it nor share in the rewards when he got this right. This would be the redeeming act that saved their lineage from disgrace. He could handle that. He simply needed to wait on an opening, to be patient. He had tried in October when Dumbledore had gone to retrieve the classroom keys from that great oaf of a groundskeeper, but the keys seemed indistinguishable.

This brought about the next obstacle. The locked tower doors. He’d known the locked doors would be trial and error. He’d made copies of the keys and returned them, with no one bringing up the fact that they had been missing. After that, he’d only needed to find time to keep trying the locks. He had been twenty keys deep and ready to just blast the door when he found the right one.

The fourth problem was the lush masquerading as a Seer. She seemed to wander about at night, so evading detection from her specifically required work, precision, and figuring out how to do enough of a sleeping potion that she wouldn't question it. That had been a fun few weeks, trying to hide Goyle who had slept for thirty hours on one attempt, then managing to give himself insomnia on another. This would give him an hour or two. He'd tested it twice on a couple of dullards who no one would notice if they took an unbidden snooze.

The fifth and final problem was the other professors, which could come under the second, and he could shove Potter under fifth, since he'd taken to stalking him, but if he stopped to think about Potter, his blood would boil, and he'd miss his chance. He had to stay home from Christmas to get this opportunity. He couldn't risk being distracted now.

There was going to be an invasion of the Ministry, his aunt had told him. They would retake the Ministry and his father would return home. While that sounded like exactly what he wanted, he had still to redeem his family name, and he still had a task to perform. The phoenix lot were guarding the tunnels in and out of the castle, so he'd have not only the other professors to deal with, but them too, if he got caught. The solution seemed simple enough: coordination. If they did it when Dumbledore was otherwise occupied – which he guessed they would – then a couple of thick-headed disposable fighters could try to take Hogwarts. He'd floated the idea successfully enough, pointing out that it seemed like the kind of initiative the Dark Lord wanted, and the glory of handing Hogwarts over had caused exactly the right reaction from people stupid enough to try it. He doubted they'd actually do it. They had rocks for brains. He didn't need them to. He just needed them to engage what was left of the phoenixes and the professors so he could claim his prize.

Sure enough, he felt the still unfamiliar burn on New Year's Eve, and a few pointed questions had
revealed that Dumbledore had indeed left the castle. With the potion in hand, he headed towards the Divination store room, and as predicted, there was Trelawney with a drink in hand, wandering about the stairway. He'd plastered on a smile, nodded a few times as she talked about how people didn't think she had the 'gift', and hiccuped her way through nonsense. Finally, when she took to looking at the moon and pointing out some utter waffle about the illumination of the heavens, he'd been able to drop in the vial. Then it was a matter of moving her to the bottom of the trap door and using the key to get into it.

Since Trelawney had prattled on so much, there wasn't much time for finesse. He pulled things out with his wand, looking for something that wasn't the same as the others. Finally, at the back of the stores, he could see a swirling among the empty orbs. He felt a sudden burst of excitement; this was it! He'd found it! Now he just needed to use one of the tunnels (if one of the idiots had actually beaten one of the vigilantes) and get back home. It wouldn't matter if they knew he was missing then. The Dark Lord would have the prophecy and control of the Ministry. It would be fine. It would all be fine.

“My dear, whatever are you doing?”

Draco froze. How was Trelawney awake? He hadn't been that long. He couldn't have been. Was it the alcoholic content? Had it reacted with the potion? Why hadn't he tested that? His heart was beating so loudly and intensely that he thought he could feel it in his fingers. The prophecy was in his now gloved hands even thought he had kept it hovering. She had to see it. His throat felt tight, mouth dry - and Trelawney was still standing there, slurring but functional enough to put on that weird bloody voice she did.

“Have the fates called to you as they have to me?” she pressed.

“Er, yes.” That was at least plausible to her, wasn't it?

“What do you See?” Trelawney was stumbling towards him at a rush. It was clear she had no idea what was in front of her, which seemed completely stupid for a Divination teacher. The orbs dark swirls made it obviously different. “Oh, I See it too!”

No idea what she saw, but if it got her calm and let him get out of there, he simply nodded.

“We must go and inform the headmaster at once!” she proclaimed, grasping as his arm and pulling hard.

Draco panicked. “I don't think he's here. It can wait, can't it?” He was scrambling now, trying to think of ways out of this.

“The Fates do not show themselves to be kept waiting!” Trelawney declared. “If my Inner Eye is right, he shall be there waiting for us!”

Her inner eye was clearly in need of glasses. He knew Dumbledore wasn't there. That was the whole point. She'd have to let go of him to get through the door. He could use a memory charm. It'd be a bit harder to explain the crystal balls all over the place, but she'd still wake and he could pretend maybe she'd done that in her state of...whatever divination-sounding word meant going a bit round the twist.

When he dropped out of the trap door, he cast Obliviate! as quickly as he could. It hit her from behind, so he had just enough time to hop down himself and hopefully, put the prophecy away in his disorientation. She took a few steps, muttering, and Draco scrambled to try and get the orb in his bag without touching it when he heard a clatter then a crack! He realised that Trelawney was
no longer in front of him. He rushed to the edge of the narrow landing to find that Trelawney must have stumbled in the aftermath of the memory charm and tripped on the narrow stairs. The crack must have been her head. Draco rushed himself down the flight, noting the small spatters of blood on the way down as a really bad sign, and when he reached the bottom of the staircase, his stomach lurched.

Her head was at an impossible angle. Her eyes were glassy and open.

It would be presumed an accident, wouldn't it? She'd had a few too many and fallen.. until they noticed the prophecy was gone; then they'd search every inch of the castle for it. He could scarcely breathe. There was the sound of people not far away and suddenly, he was light-headed too. If they were checking on people, he had to get back to the dorms quickly. He forced himself not to look, blinked away tears from his burning eyelids and pushed the feeling down. He was going to get himself thrown in Azkaban at this rate.

He ran down the seventh floor corridor, thankfully encountering no one at all. Outside, he could hear a commotion and caught a glimpse of the bottom of a Dark Mark. One of the idiots he'd recruited had gotten cocky, and now, the place would be swarmed all over. He just needed to get to the dorms and calm down. It would be fine. No one had to know. He had the –

The prophecy!

In his hurry to run and find out what had happened to Trelawney, he must have dropped it on the landing. He didn't hear it shatter, but what use was that to him. He had to go back up there, even if it made his throat sting with bile at the thought. If he didn't retrieve the prophecy, everything would be for nothing, and he will have failed his entire family. By now, he was down to the fifth floor. It would take less time to run back up and get it than it would to get to the dorms. He shifted his weight from one foot to the next, but he could hear footsteps now.

Drawing his wand, he took a couple of steps onto the staircase and peered around the corner. Of course. One of his mother's delinquent former family members. Was this not the absolute best ending to a horrible night? Where was he going? Ravenclaw tower? Dumbledore's offices? Was he coming this way, and if so, had he seen or heard Draco turn the corner and leg it up the stairs?

Maybe he had, because he was now walking straight for the staircase. Before Draco could backtrack to the hallway above, he heard the man call to him from the bottom of the staircase:

"Hello, Draco." Turning back to look, Draco could see he was watching Draco's face with an odd expression.

"The, uh," Draco pushed the words hard against his throat, so much so it hurt a little. "Bathroom's down that way."

"As much as I appreciate your preemptive assistance, I'm not looking for the bathroom," Regulus replied, taking a few more steps up.

Draco took a couple of steps back, almost slipping on the stone to block the way. "What are you doing here?"

"I was visiting with Professor Slughorn. Now I'm going to go speak with the headmaster before I leave," he replied. The odd expression was starting to furrow, but he had not stopped walking. "Are you alright?"

"It's not your concern, is it?" Draco tried to refrain from looking behind him. "Besides, he's not
here, so you’d better just go."

With a flattening expression, his mother’s cousin - Regulus, wasn’t it? - looked about to say something - but he paused a beat and smoothed his expression before responding, "I know better than you what my concerns are." A few more steps. "As for the headmaster, perhaps I will leave a message."

He had nearly reached the top now.

"Then I’d find Professor McGonagall if I were you," Draco said, hurriedly. He made no motion to move. Maybe he’d get the hint.

He didn’t.

"I would rather verify for myself." Flicking his eyes to the landing behind Draco, he added, "I did not take you for a Divination enthusiast." Back to Draco again. "I would say the North Tower pillows make for a comfortable reading nook, but you don’t look relaxed enough for that."

"You don’t have the password, so unless you just want to loiter about, there’s nothing for you here." Draco glanced behind his shoulder. He had no reason to go up the seventh floor stairs, so it’d probably be fine if he went on, but the problem was he had been seen here already.

"I’m aware of how the passwords work, Draco. I attended here too, as you know," he replied, lifting his brow and stepping up onto the sixth floor.

His posture seemed to loosen a little as he glanced down the corridor. "I hope the remainder of your holiday is…” He trailed off, and when Draco followed his line of sight up the next staircase, he could see that the frizz of Professor Trelawney’s hair and something dark and wet pooling at the edge of the landing. "Draco…”

Draco threw his hands up in shaky frustration. "I tried to tell you not to go that way!"

"What happened?" His voice was strained now, looking from the landing back to Draco.

"Nothing happened!" Draco exclaimed in a high pitch he couldn’t really control. "The stupid cow fell down the stairs!"

"That isn’t ‘nothing’." Regulus looked between the landing and Draco again. His expression had tensed even more, and he was starting to shift towards the stairs. "Have you checked on her?"

“There’s nothing I can do!” Draco said, feeling a creeping flush. “Her eyes are open, and she’s not moving. That usually means there’s nothing anyone can do, right?”

Regulus paused, frowning at the floor for an uncomfortably silent moment, and when he looked back to Draco again, his mouth thinned.

"I know you’ve gotten yourself… involved," he said with a quiet and measured tone. His hands were lifted, slightly, as if in some subtle hushing movement, even though he was the only one speaking. "Is that what is happening here?"

"I didn’t come up here to murder her, if that’s what you’re asking!" Draco snapped. He had planned to be subtle and clever about it. No one would know anything...

Regulus was getting fidgety, fingers pressing to his temple, and he looked for a moment as if he had just knocked someone down the stairs.
“You do realise that it is not an unreasonable assumption, don’t you?” With a huff, he dropped his hands, then, stilling them in a clasp. Once again, he turned a furrowed look up at the landing, and he sounded even more strained when he spoke again. “If you haven’t yet been asked to murder someone seemingly insignificant in completely illogical circumstances, you eventually will be if this is the path you intend to stay on.”

"Is this the moment for a lecture?" Draco said. "Whatever I have done or haven't - don't you think I'd proudly say so, if she was meant to die? She wasn't, so now I get to be the person who messes up again, and it's all a complete and total failure! No one was supposed to die, and she just had to-" He couldn't finish the sentence. His throat hurt, and his eyes were burning, so he was going to have to stand here with a traitor, being humiliated.

Regulus opened his mouth, closed it again, then frowned at Draco for just a beat.

"You are right. A lecture isn't helpful right now," he conceded, even if he didn't look pleased about it. Frowning, he looked up towards the landing where Trelawney lay, turned slightly to look down the corridor towards the headmaster's tower, then briskly cut his path to the staircase.

"I know you don't want my help - or care what I think,” Regulus started again when he was several steps up, “but I just - have felt the way you look right now. I'm inclined to want to keep you alive and out of prison."

"It's not prison I'm worried about," Draco admitted, following him up the stairs in case he had any idea what was in the bag at the top of the landing.

Regulus glanced back, then forward again. "What are you worried about?" The tone had lost some of its edge again as he walked past the bag on the floor to kneel down beside Trelawney's still form - carefully avoiding the small pool of blood. He was pressing two fingers beneath her jawline now, looking for a pulse, no doubt. He wasn’t going to find one.

"You're not that dense," Draco said. Maybe he was. You'd have to be to go mixing with the phoenix lot now. "I'm right, aren't I? She's dead."

He still looked fidgety, running a hand into his hair and tensing again. "Unfortunately, it seems she is."

Regulus's expression went stony, and he lingered for another moment before rising to his feet, eyes still fixed on the body for a suffocating moment. Fleetingly, he met Draco's eyes again, then strode past towards the stairs. When he reached the top of the stairs leading below, he paused, grasping the bannister tightly.

"My question was not a matter of being dense about this situation, but if you wish for me to draw conclusions, I will," Regulus said, his tone distancing. "Bringing the family shame and disappointment - putting them in danger because you have failed to meet expectations - dying before you've even finished your education, hoping it will mean something, but looking around, the deaths don't seem to mean anything at all... If you are worried that Voldemort is going to punish your family unfairly for the mistakes you make, you are right to worry about that. He doesn't care about them. He doesn't care about our blood. He doesn't care about anything but his own agenda - it just happens that we are convenient, replaceable pawns that often align with that agenda."

"Wonderful. So my father rots in prison, I'm going to end up dead, and my mother will be left alone." Draco didn't want to look at the vacant eyes of the body on the stairs, but he could see his
bag. He walked over the blood, not wanting to track it around, and lifted his bag. It felt heavy; the orb must have still been inside. But now he couldn't leave - he was caught, unless he piled up his own body count. If the potion had only worked how it was supposed to!

“If there is a way to avoid that, I would like to find it, but the Dark Lord’s poor attitude isn’t helping.” Pressing his lips to a line, Regulus started down the stairs again - paused - then looked back again. His focused gaze lingered on Draco's cargo for an unsettling moment. "Are you taking her bag to Professor McGonagall?"

"It's not her bag, it's mine. I dropped it." Draco didn't like the way he was looking at it at all, but he just had to distract him long enough to get out of there and figure something out. "What can you do? My family name is disgraced, my father is imprisoned, and now it's up to me!"

“It is a lot, I know. I could write at least one book on that singular experience.” Regulus looked at Trelawney with a slightly contorted expression, gestured down the stairs, then clasped his hands so tightly his knuckles went a bit white. “Yet we invite suspicion, just standing here. Come along.” He had taken a few steps down the stairway before adding, “Though - and I realise it would be more polite not to notice - but I do find it curious that your bag was so close to her at all during this accident. I haven’t even been offered a proper lie.”

"I don't need to lie," Draco declared, though the statement felt weak even as he said it. "She had a foolish idea I might want to discuss the fates, and I just wanted her to go away and let me alone! If I wanted people to hover over me, I'd have gone home for the holidays."

"Of course.” The tone was even and not very convincing.

It was an uncomfortable experience, but Draco wasn't sure what part would be more humiliating: having accidentally killed someone and gotten caught or having the first person he killed be a total accident. The entire moment was humiliating.

"Do you have any idea how embarrassing this is for me?” Draco asked. "I’m, you know what I am, and this is the first death I’m involved with? A batty professor who thinks planets talk to her and who can't keep her own balance when startled?"

“She was a magical life caught in the crossfire. That is regrettable, regardless of her personality - or the intentions.”

"I know that!” Draco snapped. He could feel heat and pressure in his cheeks, just to make this whole situation even worse. "She might have been a charlatan, but she was magical!"

Regulus didn’t say anything for a moment, just nodded his head.

"So what do you want to do?” Draco continued. “Report me? Go ahead, then! There's nothing I can do now. I can't save any of them.”

"I don't want to report you," Regulus said, shaking his head. "I want to help you, but I can't do that if you don't want to be helped. Until you would like to make a change, I suppose we are at an impasse.” Stepping into the stairway again, he glanced back at Draco to add, "I was quite stubborn about it at your age, too, and probably would not have listened to me either… but if you change your mind, you don't have to face it alone."

"I'm not alone," Draco replied, looking through one of the slitted windows. That was part of the problem, considering his recommendations for subtlety had been thrown away. "What can you do about it?"
Regulus followed his gaze to the Dark Mark looming outside on the ground, then fashioned a sour look. “Touche. What I can do depends on the time scale we are talking about, but I cannot do much of it from here.” He flicked his eyes to Draco. “So that is my cue. Be careful, and do not linger.”

Without waiting for a response, Regulus continued back down the stairs - this time, at a much quicker pace that saw him to the bottom in little more than a blink.

Draco let go of a long breath. He was fine, completely fine. It was not as if the important people would care if someone of little consequence was dead. He had acquired the prophecy - but as he reached into the bag, horror set in. He could feel the pieces of broken glass, shards from the shatter line along a now dim and useless prophecy.

He wasn't fine.

He was completely and utterly doomed.

At the safe house, the appearance of Kingsley's patronus had stirred two cartographers at work, ending the squabble before it had even begun.

“Have they lost their minds?” Sirius asked, but of course they had. Anyone who followed Voldemort around, flopping over themselves to please him, had to be soft in the head. But the Ministry? Where some of the most capable fighters would be, with the Death Eaters themselves having suffered an Azkaban-shaped blow in June? Had they filled out their ranks enough again so quickly?

Now wasn't that a pleasant thought.

“Perhaps they're attempting a liberation,” Remus said, already beginning to clean up the maps they'd been working on into some semblance of order in case they had to leave in a hurry.

“From the Ministry?” Sirius scoffed. “There's a ton of Aurors there. You'd be better off going to the island itself and just lobbing them out the window. I've considered it.”

It was too weird. Too fast. They weren't going to win like that. Of course, that could be ascribing a sane thought to a demented mind, and he shouldn't even try.

The appearance of a silvery tabby slipping through the door soon confirmed the idea that this wasn't some isolated, all-for-nothing run. A Dark Mark at Hogwarts? Sirius leaned over to where the original map lay, eyes scanning over it for the familiar names, then let go of a breath he wasn't about to admit to holding when he saw his brother in one of the towers with Narcissa’s son. He was probably chasing the boy down to make sure he hadn’t decided to don mask and cloak to join the foray. If anyone could nag someone out of major destruction and death, it was Regulus. Sirius had full confidence in his brother to annoy the kid enough to go sit somewhere till it was over, and if not, hopefully Regulus got a grip and just hexed him.

But then, Sirius caught sight of Remus's face.

“They'll be alright,” Sirius said. “They've got Dumbledore.”

“No,” Remus said, tightly. “They haven't.”

Sirius felt his heart slam in his chest. “What do you mean?”

“He asked for tunnels to be covered tonight,” Remus replied. They'd had them watched any time he
“Tonks is up there.”

Well, shit.

“Go up there,” Sirius said. He could go to the Ministry himself and give them a hand.

“You can't,” Remus said.

“I know,” Sirius said. “I'll go give them a hand at the Ministry. It's not like people don't have a decent guess as to my extracurriculars.”

“I don't mean that,” Remus replied. “How many places are they going at once?”

Sirius finished the thought. “And which is the real target.” He had to send a message to Andromeda; she could find out about St. Mungo's.

Harry.

Harry was at the Burrow. Wouldn't that be the first place they'd look? Yes, there were protections on it, but would they hold? It still had to function as a house so they couldn't do the more extreme protections on it. Here would be safer.

“I'll get the kids,” Sirius decided. He could argue it out with Molly if she disagreed, but he didn't imagine she would. Not when it came to their safety. “Be careful. I'll take a right thump if you get yourself killed.”

“You be careful,” Remus replied, getting his coat on and patting it down. “If they're sending someone for Harry, it'll be someone capable.”

That shortened the list, which if she wasn't at the Ministry, meant the top of it was his dearest, darling cousin. The flush was two parts rage and one part embarrassment, considering they were 0-2 in her favour. He wasn't about to allow a third, or he'd never be able to show his face in public again.

“I'm better than capable,” Sirius said, with finality. It was true, more so now than the half a year before. “It's Harry. You really think I'd put him in danger, after everything?”

Remus looked at him for a beat. “No. But be careful, nonetheless.”

There was a crack of apparition, because Remus was a prick who liked the last word almost as much as Sirius did.

Fine.

He didn't really have time to argue, anyway.

Jittery nerves were still tingling in Regulus's fingers when he'd found McGonagall. As expected, she had already received word about the state of the Ministry - and as Draco had said, Dumbledore was, in fact, away from the school. Regulus felt only slightly bad for doubting the boy's honesty - and that feeling was well eclipsed by the vacant eyes of the school's Divination professor. A Trelawney, as Regulus recalled, though he had never known her personally… and more importantly, another unnecessarily dead witch, caught in the crossfire of a war she was only periphery to.

“The Death Eaters have raised their mark,” he had said. More uncomfortably, he told her how he'd
found Professor Trelawney dead on the way to Dumbledore’s office. "It must have been one of
them," he had forced out.

As honest as it was dishonest.

Trelawney was gone, but the children weren't, and for the moment, those children would be
priority. McGonagall had called the teachers to action, shortly after Regulus found her. They were
to all gather in the Great Hall, and from where he now stood near McGonagall, he could see a few
more students trickling in. On one hand, Regulus supposed that it created one large target for their
enemies, but more practically, at least they only had to defend one area of the castle.

Regulus was trying to ignore the sick churning in his stomach, and when he saw Draco standing
amongst the few Slytherins who had remained over the holidays, that churning just got worse.
Even if it had been an accident, murder was at the top of his ‘list of things he did not want for his
little cousin,’ both for Draco’s sake and the sake of those in his path.

“Do you have enough support in here?” Regulus asked McGonagall quietly once she had shifted
away from a small hoard of young Gryffindors, who had been shuffled off to stand with Professor
Sprout and the Hufflepuffs. “If so, I intend to investigate our unwelcome visitors.”

"We'll be battening down the hatches," McGonagall replied. "If you leave, you may not be able to
easily return."

“I don’t expect there to be many of them here - not with the Ministry under attack," Regulus
replied, glancing at the Great Hall's towering double doors. “Should I be wrong, I know the exits.”

“Tonks was guarding some of the tunnels, so I imagine she’s out in the fray of it. Filius is out, as
well. One of the Ravenclaw students remains unaccounted for.” McGonagall looked over to where
the doors were being fiddled with. “Send out an alert if you run into trouble, but we can hold this
hall against a few rabble rousers until the headmaster returns.”

Regulus nodded. For a moment, he caught sight of Slughorn, who lifted his eyebrows in a 'fancy
seeing you still here' sort of way. After all, this probably did not qualify as going home and
minding his own business, but truly, it was not his fault that a simple side task had landed him in a
Death Eater attack, even without scurrying off to the Ministry. At least Slughorn was unlikely to
say anything for the immediate moment.

After ducking out into the corridor, Regulus had been wandering for several minutes before he at
last heard a commotion.

A troubling sound, given the proximity to one of the tunnels, and that concern was justified when
Regulus rounded a corner to see two Death Eaters lingering just outside of it. On the other side of
the Death Eaters was a boy - possibly a fifth year, though it was difficult to judge now. He was
mashed up against a suit of armour, but it did not seem to be accomplishing much in the sense of
armouring against the aggressive wand stance of his would-be assailants.

Brandishing his own wand, Regulus fired a stunning spell at the taller Death Eater, nearest to the
boy. In that flash, Regulus had drawn the attention of the other Death Eater, and he was already
raising an anticipatory Protego spell when an orange spark hurtled towards him. Seeing the Death
Eater’s wand start to move again, Regulus was already preparing for another deflection. He could
try to get between the Death Eater, and the student, or -

Instead, Regulus sidestepped away from the boy, watching the Death Eater watching him with a
full-body turn that Regulus remembered well. (Those masks had always been terrible, in respect to
Relief lept in his chest, out of time with the sudden rush of adrenaline. At least the Death Eater wasn’t fixating on the student yet.

This time, when the Death Eater lifted his wand with an aggravated huff, Regulus flicked a silent spell - one that brought a suit of armour crashing against his opponent’s back with a force that knocked the Death Eater on his face and sent metal plates flying hapardly onto the floor around Regulus’s feet.

A piece clipped his shoulder, and Regulus winced, slightly, but before the Death Eater could stagger back to his feet, Regulus followed up with a swift *Petrificus Totalus*. It was with a certain amount of satisfaction that he watched the black cloak topple down to the floor again. The first Death Eater was starting to stir from his stun, so Regulus petrified that one, too, then straightened his posture with an unsettled glance behind him - just in case anyone thought to sneak up.

These were not the top-tier fighters - Regulus required no reflection to realise that much - but he did with that all Death Eaters could be so easy to capture.

“You’re not one of the teachers,” the boy was saying as he came out from behind the nearest suit of armour. He was looking as much at the Death Eaters and the scattered metal as he was looking at Regulus himself.

“I’m a friend of Professor Slughorn,” Regulus replied, punctuating the words with an *Incarcerous* spell that hit with a vigour that flipped the Death Eaters over. “I’m also very unlucky with my timing, it seems.”

“You timing seemed fine to me,” the boy said with a blink towards the rope-wrapped Death Eaters.

Regulus offered a thin smile as he pulled a rope from each of them, first making sure it was wrapped in a way that wouldn’t unravel, then gave it a tug.

“I will escort you back to the others. I can’t imagine you desire to stay in proximity to these two, but others are probably still roaming about.” Regulus gave the ropes an undignified yank. They were heavy, but a bit of dragging felt surprisingly cathartic.

“What a nice thought. More monsters.”

Regulus eyed him for a moment, then leaned over to pluck the masks from both of their captives - revealing two very unfamiliar faces frozen in petrified aggravation. Whether it was more unsettling or more relieving that he did not know them, Regulus could not decide, but he did not let himself dwell on the question for long before looking at the student again.

“It’s important to keep yourself safe, and to keep a healthy respect for the danger, but under the masks, they are people.” Another yank that knocked them together a bit. Deciding he had made his point, Regulus handed the masks over to the boy and took out his wand again to lift them both up with another swish. “People doing monstrous things, but still just people - and people can be stopped.”

The boy nodded, grimacing at the two men now floating above the ground, but after a moment, seemed to settle. “Are you an Auror?”

Regulus could not help the soft snort at the question, but when he looked over at the teenager, he saw that there was not a trace of irony in tone or expression. Regulus’s robes were distinctly unlike that of an Auror, but he supposed ‘off duty Aurors’ did exist
“No. I’m just helping clear out the infestation,” Regulus replied. Footsteps from behind gave his chest an unpleasant jolt, but when he turned around with wand in hand, the vibrant mop of pink moving briskly towards them was immediately reassuring. “But she is one.” More loudly, Regulus called out to Tonks, “Shall I put these two anywhere in particular?”

“Lock ’em in the girls’ loo!” Tonks said. “Can’t think of anyone more deserving of Moaning Myrtle’s company.”

"Seems appropriate."

Tonks nodded. "Any more down your way?"

Regulus shook his head. "These are the only two I've found so far."

“I’m going to check the other tunnels in!” Tonks called, taking off at a sprint. Then she bumped into bannister, and bounced back. “Check the willow tunnel if you’ve got a see!”

"I will," Regulus called back. He was going to tell her to take care, but she had already rounded the corner, and it seemed he would only be taking to himself.

Moaning Myrtle's bathroom was only a short walk away - the same one Harry had taken him to when they accessed the Chamber of Secrets. Had the chamber been easier to access, he might have worried about the proximity, but these Death Eaters were unlikely to free themselves at all, much less sneak off anywhere.

Having directed the student to wait in the doorway, Regulus took their two captives inside. In the stalls nearest the door, Regulus could see feet sticking out, then wriggling in a way that looked like it was intended to be a kick, had there not been ropes secured around the knees.

Regulus did not acknowledge the kicks, but as he strolled past, a peek inside revealed that the two Death Eaters that Tonks had tied up were still masked; not the highest priority in the moment, he assumed, though his curiosity had piqued, once again.

After setting his own captives up in a stall, he secured the ropes around the toilet itself with a swish of his wand, then stepped back out again.

Before leaving, he peeked into the nearest of the other two stalls again. Upon plucking the mask off, Regulus found that he did not know this person either. A woman, this time, and she appeared to be shouting at him, though no sound was coming out. A silencing charm - wise, on Tonks's part. She was struggling against her ropes, until his own petrification spell stilled her.

In the final stall, he pulled off the mask, unprepared for the horrible strike in the stomach - not by a physical kick, but rather by an unsettled feeling. This one looked quite young - a recent graduate, most likely - bearing an expression contorted with fear. He was silenced, too.

Regulus knew he oughtn't hesitate, yet he couldn't bring himself to raise his wand, even to restrict movement. Though the boy looked nothing like Regulus himself - olive complexion where Regulus was pale, dark eyes where Regulus's own were blue-grey - it was nonetheless like looking at his teenage self. The boy’s face pleaded with a panic Regulus had felt too many times. Perhaps the act was false - but perhaps it was not.

Dropping to a crouch, Regulus cast a silent Muffliato spell to obscure his words. Holding eye contact, he spoke quietly. "You deserve better than life as a blunt weapon. If it's what you want, then it's what you will get, but it doesn't have to be that way. Remember that."
Pressing his lips to a line, he resituated the mask, thinking that it would have made him feel more secure, were he in that boy's place. After lifting the Muffliato spell, Regulus backed out of the stall, leaving him bound but unpetrified. He was still trying to scrub the shaken expression from his mind when he walked back over to the Ravenclaw student, still standing by the door.

As they stepped back out into the corridor, Regulus gestured to the side. "Let us be on our way to the others."

The boy nodded. He was still holding the first two Death Eaters' masks, but he looked less nervous now, at least. Behind them, the door shut with a punctuating thud, and they returned to the Great Hall.

Like roaches, the sparse Ministry workers had parted in a scatter as a swarm of Death Eaters moved through the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Not all of the workers had scrambled away - Aurors and Hitwizards appeared to be holding their ground - but the resistance was negligible with the pathetic efforts of a holiday night shift. Pathetic though their efforts might be, Bellatrix could feel the thrill of battle pulsing in her veins.

"Avada Kedavra!" Before her, a wizard crumpled to his feet, his raised wand falling to the floor with a clatter.

Stepping over the body, Bellatrix ducked a stray spell coming from a group nearer to the entrance of the Auror division.

"You must be really stupid, coming here, Lestrange. You're practically doing our job for us."

Through the debris, Bellatrix could see one of the Aurors was talking to her - a young witch with more grit than sense.

"That's the only way you Aurors ever get anything done, isn't it? When others do it for you?" Bellatrix's smile curled up at the spark of anger, and when the young Auror began slinging spells, Bellatrix deflected each in turn, waiting for a pause before: "Crucio!"

The girl's shrieks rang through the din, and Bellatrix held the curse for several triumphant seconds before she felt something cut deep into her back. With a yelp of her own, she stumbled forward, catching her footing just next to the Auror's head. Her assailant was an older witch this time, wand already firing another blast her way.

Bellatrix held her ground, digging her heel into the younger witch's throat as she deflected the blast, then wasted no time flinging a slicing curse of her own. It caught the Auror in the chest and would fester to a rot, soon enough-

Then a green flash of light lit the area, and Bellatrix saw another Death Eater stepping into view.

"I was playing with that!" Bellatrix protested, and when she felt hands grappling at her ankle, she stomped. The younger Auror gargled beneath her heel, and when Bellatrix noticed she was now reaching for her wand, just an inch out of reach, Bellatrix took a moment to disintegrate it with a satisfying - if small - blast.

"Focus. There is time for play later," Nott was saying - she could tell it was him from the patronising tone.

A snarl was bunching under her nose as she shot a hex in his direction, barely missing his arm as it blasted the wizard just behind him up against the wall - possibly one of Dumbledore's scum,
considering the attire, but as far as pests went, the vigilantes were difficult to track.

"Don't presume to tell me how-"

The doors leading into the Department of Magical Law Enforcement blew open with a bit too much flourish. Bellatrix hated the small rush of nerves that prickled beneath her skin, seeing that muggle-loving wretch stroll in like the department wasn't overrun with the Dark Lord's forces.

Albus Dumbledore was a problem, but he was an anticipated one, looking more ragged this time than the last - and her Lord, he was here too, bolstered by their numbers. She would need to work fast, to come back in time to support him-

"That is my cue," she said to Nott.

After leveling another killing curse - this time at the witch beneath her foot - Bellatrix disappeared from the fray.

They weren't in the atrium.

That was Emmeline's first thought upon reaching the entry point. There were no Death Eaters in the atrium. Since there had most definitely been some before, based on the scorch marks and scratches outside of the lift, that meant they were loose elsewhere in the Ministry. They hadn't come down to the Department of Mysteries or Wizengamot. That left the likely points as law enforcement or the Minister's office.

She could feel the whoosh as people hurried past her, ostensibly appearing as the odd woman who'd stopped when there was a clear exit up ahead. The atrium itself was a ghost town. The logical thing was to get the hell out, but she was a member of the Order of the Phoenix. If they didn't eat danger for breakfast, they certainly had it for lunch. There were others around, others who would be friendly to the Order even if they weren't members too, but it was also a holiday, and they were short staffed as a rule. The Order was already down Sturgis, so she wouldn't be able to track anything via transportation now that he'd been given the heave with the whole criminal record business.

"I'm going up," Emmeline said, taking a stride back to the lift.

"As am I," Dedalus replied, already beside her in a flash. "The Ministers or the Aurors?"

"Aurors," Emmeline said. "Kingsley will have the most up to date information, but I think you have more business being in the Minister’s office if this is a false alarm."

Something hit hard enough to shake the lift, causing Emmeline's stomach to flip upwards.

"Do you really think this is a false alarm?" Dedalus asked, looking at the top of the lift. Had someone jumped onto it, or had there been structural damage in the tunnel? It had to be close for them to have felt it.

"No," Emmeline said, grimly.

The lift came to a stop, and she raised her wand, sparing a glance back to Dedalus as the doors opened. "Good luck," she said.

The only word for it was chaos. The air was thick with debris, which caused Emmeline to retch enough that she almost felt jealous of those ridiculous masks if they offered even a modicum of
protection against the dust hanging in the air. It was only by the prickle of danger on the back of her neck that she moved out of the way in time to dodge a table that a Death Eater had thrown at her. She threw back a shattering curse, aimed at roughly the knees. Knees were especially painful, she was sad to say from experience.

Through the thick haze, she could see the telltale lights of exchanged wandfire. On the far right, she could see one of the offices had completely caved in on itself. The ground was torn, the glass blew inwards, and half the ceiling from the floor above seemed to sit in it. She had to find her priorities – if there were still people here who couldn't fight, they needed to be gotten out.

Running and dodging had never been her strongest point, but most of the Death Eaters were engaged already. She turned a corner and her heart leapt – Dumblefore was already here and fighting! She could hear snatches of conversation, Dumbledore as calm as ever and a highly agitated Voldemort.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of movement behind some of the upended desks. Some of the administration staff, surely. Emmeline's back went rigid as screams of pain wailed through the air. That would have to be her next stop.

“Quickly!” She called, coughing hard enough her throat hurt. It wasn't nearly as bad here as it was only a room away, but she must have inhaled it. “The atrium is now clear!”

Largely because all of the Death Eaters seemed to be here. This was unprecedented; there had been no sign, no warning, nothing. It was a hit out of nowhere. What on earth was the point of spy if they don't let you know a dark lord fancies wandering into the Ministry to bring in the new year? If she'd come up fifteen minutes earlier, she might have ended up sharing a lift with him. Probably not for very long, but that would have been a very awful way to die.

Finally, she caught sight of Kingsley. He was duelling two Death Eaters at once, a rapid-fire that made her eyes hurt to watch. The distraction cost her; she didn't hear the leg-locker till it hit and she found herself on the ground. She ushered people in front; with any luck, they would find Dedalus and get a move on out.

“Vance,” she thought the Death Eater said, but the noise was blocking so much that it was hard to tell. “...on borrowed time!”

Oh, was it Rookwood? It was probably Rookwood, making such an atrocious pun on her choice of vocation. She really ought to have guessed he was a Death Eater years ago. He never did his own washing up.

Emmeline threw fire at him, using the distraction of him having to put himself out to unbind her legs. She stumbled to her feet, having to bend again to avoid a red spell and feeling something warm and wet down her calves. She must have gotten some of the glass in there, but she had no idea if that spell had come from friend or foe. Someone was going to get hurt in this crossfire. She managed to shield herself from a spell from (probably) Rookwood, then sent him flying across the room and smack into one of his cohorts with a satisfying yelp.

Then there was cry out from behind her. Emmeline turned back to the young Auror who had called out, then followed her eye line to see Dumbledore’s wand go flying. She felt her heart stop for a moment in her chest as there was a telltale flash of green and Dumblefore seemed to crumple to the ground.

The Minister for Magic was not cowering in his office when Bellatrix found him; rather, he was on
the outskirts of the fight, and for that, she could grant him some credit. Rufus Scrimgeour had been a warrior himself, before he was elevated to power, and though he was flanked by a stringy ginger with a clipboard, Scrimgeour himself was far more threatening than his 'support'.

"I do hope you aren't too attached to your position here," Bellatrix began, not waiting for a response before she flicked a curse at the Minister. He promptly shielded, but she could see his hanger-on looked nervous. "Or your life."

"Minister-" the assistant had started to say, but she stopped listening, blasting him into a nearby desk, where a solid knock to the head kindly shut him up.

"Where were we?" Bellatrix began, lightly. "Ah, right! Your death. We only have room for one leader here in the Ministry-"

Scrimgeour flicked his wand without a word, knocking her feet out from under her like some big, hairy child, and she scowled as he pointed his wand down at her. Sharp pain was splitting down her back where the Auror had sliced her, but she bit away the pain.

Without delay, she retaliated: "Incendio!"

He roared as the flames engulfed his upper body, and even though he managed to douse himself before too long, the burns already marking his skin were satisfying. If he wanted to play off of distractions, the lingering sear of scattered burns would do the trick.

"Crucio!"

He was squirming now, but still stubbornly clutched his wand. She could tell he was trying to cast something but couldn't manage the concentration. How dreadful-

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw another Auror breaking from the fight to come to his aid. She dropped the Crucius for a moment to send a killing curse at the new assailant - a curse he dodged, and that dropped another Auror in his place. The horrible realisation that crossed his face as he looked back was sufficient opportunity to drop him, too. Her eyes flicked over them both and saw that one of her fellow Death Eaters had fallen just a few feet away. She would not be among them.

By the time she turned back to Scrimgeour, he had risen again with fire in his yellow eyes, if no longer on his face.

The next curse he shouted out struck her across the face and torso like a whip, and though she stumbled back a step, she managed to duck the next before finding out what it was. Hardening her mouth into a humourless smile, she reached into her boot to grasp a dagger, and without ceremony, flung it at his stomach. There was a brief but genuine look of shock as he crumpled forward with a staggered gasp, looking down at the jutting handle. Taking advantage of the hesitation, she fired a shattering spell at his legs, and there was a jarring crack as he crumbled the rest of the way to the floor.

This time, she kicked him onto his back and jammed a heel on his wrist, loosening the grip on his wand. With an unceremonious flick, she summoned the wand to her own hand, looked him in the eye, then snapped it in two.

"There are people I would rather be killing right now, but the Dark Lord is ready to squash you all like vermin, so here we are." She let the broken wand fall just shy of his face before pointing her own wand down at him: "Avada Kedavra."

Bellatrix heard an uproar behind her, but when she turned around, the crowd was too thick to see.
"What is it?" she asked the nearest Death Eater, yanking her dagger out of Scrimgeour’s stomach before approaching the hoard.

"It's the Dark Lord- and Dumbledore-" another Death Eater answered from further in the crowd, though his vagueness only irritated her more, heightened by a sudden fear. Had something happened to the Dark Lord?

"Get out of my way!" she shouted, forcefully shoving Death Eater, vigilante, and Ministry worker alike until she could see.

The Dark Lord was standing over the old wizard's body, his foot pinning a blackened hand to the floor. Suddenly, any fear that knotted in her throat was now bubbling with triumph. She had nearly given way to a delighted laugh when she noticed the fury in the Dark Lord's eyes. He was still staring at Dumbledore's hand as if he expected it to stir and lash back.

"My Lord?" she dared to say, and when he turned his scarlet eyes on her, she felt her insides leap.

"We have won here, tonight. There are yet other tasks of import that must be seen to, so let us take our leave." His voice was even, but there was nothing calm in his eyes, nor in the way his hand so stiffly gripped Dumbledore's knotted wand as he picked it up from the floor. "If anyone stands in your way, kill them."

Once again, Bellatrix felt a certain delight rising in her chest, and her mouth spread to a wide smile. "With pleasure."
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

The past few months have been peppered with various illness, life changes, and craziness, but thank you for your patience, everyone!

Happy holidays, whatever you may celebrate!

As a rule, Death Eaters didn't knock. Sirius had seen it happen once and heard about it once more, but on the whole, they were more inclined towards barging in and making a mess regardless of whether they had the right place or not.

The line of thought didn't help when there was a rapping on the door of the latest Order safe house. It caused silence to fall over the group that had congregated there. The noisiest of the bunch had been the twins and Molly arguing hotly over whether or not they should go to the Ministry to fight. Sirius had bowed out of it; they were adults and could make their own choices. He wanted to keep an eye on Harry and that lot, personally. They were just the type to use the argument as a distraction to make a break for it and seek out the fight themselves. Sirius couldn't blame them for that either; he wanted to do the same, but right now, surviving was more important than fighting. He kept periodically looking back at Hogwarts, but it was Ginny and Ron who had the map open and were scribbling down names they didn't recognise. It would be students they didn't know or law enforcement, but if not, they were making their first Death Eater list.

Harry's head had shot up from watching them the moment the door knocked, then winced when it did again. When he opened his mouth, Sirius lifted a finger to his lips and drew his wand. They could have used Moody and his eye, but if Sirius had to guess, he'd joined the foray at the Ministry.

"It's me," Sturgis said.

That wasn't helpful. There was always the chance of Polyjuice – people now knew of Sturgis's affiliation. It seemed overly precautious, but there hadn't been something like a passcode set. They went with the more embarrassing stories that people weren't likely to know the answers to if they weren't there. The problem being, as much as he liked Sturgis, he wasn't close with him and would normally have relied on Emmeline or Remus for something rebellion related.

“What charms did you put on my bike back in the day?”

There was a moment of silence. “None,” Sturgis replied. “You'd already charmed it to the nines years before we met.”

Someone like Regulus would have known that, but he doubted that either Regulus or their parents had discussed it after he left. Maybe Peter, but the bike had been his, not something he talked a lot about with anyone.

He opened the door with caution and allowed Sturgis to step inside. “Any news?”

“Not really,” Sturgis said, surveying the room around him. “They've closed off the visitor entrance.
I tried to go and look, but it's in pieces. I tried to look 'round the emergency entrances, but there were Aurors there, and they were looking at me shifty."

"Being an ex-convict really does cause a discretion problem," Sirius said. He was half expecting to explain that yes, he knew what discretion was, but everyone was too worried.

"What about the fire places?" Molly asked.

"Nowt I can tell about them from upstairs," Sturgis replied, apologetic. "Don't suppose you got that map working yet?"

Sirius shook his head, cursing himself for allowing himself a week or two to wallow when they should have been preparing more.

"Any word from inside?" Sturgis asked.

"Not since Emmeline," Sirius replied. "We can monitor the school. Seems like Tonks, Remus, and Regulus have joined with some of the professors, judging by them taking and dropping off people in bathrooms."

"Then we wait?" Sturgis said.

Sirius nodded, exchanging a look with Molly that he hoped conveyed he wanted to do be doing anything but. "Then we wait."

The wait didn't last long; less than an hour later, a whoosh of a bird patronus too small to be Emmeline's flew through the door and perched. "The Ministry is being evacuated," came Hestia's voice. "The Death Eaters have dug in. I'm on hand, but reports are that the Minister is dead."

Sirius swore. There wasn't much else to do at that point, as the bird dissipated.

"But what does that mean?" Harry asked, after a silent beat.

"That they have the Ministry," Sirius said. He could see the worry, but wasn't sure if he could really do anything about it. This was something to worry about. "But practically, just the Ministry – as long as Hogwarts and St. Mungo's hold, they can be thrown out of it."

"The people still in it..." Molly began, without finishing the sentence. Evacuation didn't sound like winning; it sounded like scattering.

"They're out there," Sirius said, firmly. "This is the Ministry offices they want; it's their play for legitimacy, and that's going to be their focus."

"Azkaban?" Ron asked.

"Probably that too," Sirius admitted.

"Malfoy said he'd be seeing his father again..." Harry trailed off.

Sirius followed his line of thought. "I doubt Draco Malfoy helped to instigate a takeover of the Ministry offices. He's still bound by the restrictions of his age. Don't give him so much credit. Besides, he looks like a decent punch would floor him, so you can always try that if you need to."

"He shouldn't go around hitting him," Molly said, with less of a stern tone than he would expect. She was obviously worried about her sons and husband.
“I always advocate giving Death Eaters a good thumping,” Sirius replied. “They’ll look for wand work, but most don’t know how to protect themselves from a decent punch.”

“Neither do I,” Harry admitted quietly.

“I do,” Ginny volunteered.

“GINNY!” came Molly’s predictable shriek.

“What?” Ginny shrugged. “I can.”

“Perfect,” Sirius replied, giving her a lazy thumbs up. “You can show him.”

The line of thought was interrupted by a crack of apparition from outside the door. Sirius tried to get a glance, but there was no need. The unmistakable sounds of Emmeline Vance’s bickering came out. Something unknotted in his stomach; one more accounted for.

This one, he could do. “Oi, Vance,” Sirius said quietly through the door. “Who did you have a crush on when we were young?”

“Piss off,” came the answer.

Sirius laughed, more from the nervous shock of it. She always had been notoriously more private about this kind of thing. “There’s kids in here,” he said, opening the door.

He was ready to give her an earful for not answering when he caught sight of her dirtier than he’d ever seen her, and leaning onto Hestia for support. “You’ve looked better,” he said.

“Thank you,” Emmeline replied, her teeth tinged alarmingly red.

“Shouldn’t you be in a hospital?” Sturgis asked, striding over.

“I didn’t know if it was secure,” Hestia admitted. “I have to go back and check, but I thought safety was the priority. How do you feel?”

“Humiliated,” Emmeline said, coughing low and deep. “We couldn’t hold it.”

“So we get it back,” Sirius said, firmly.

“Did you see Bill, or Arthur?” Molly asked, practically vibrating.

“Bill was holding the fires open,” Hestia replied instead. “They’re trying to cut them off and trap people inside.”

“I didn’t see Arthur,” Emmeline said, apologetically. “When Bellatrix Lestrange showed up, there were fights going on constantly and the ceiling and floor were bending and breaking under the pressure. I fell through mid-duel and landed in Magical Accidents and Catastrophes. I would have gone back up, but I’m seeing stars and less than mobile.”

At least that meant she was unlikely to have gone to the Burrow.

“There’s something else,” Emmeline said, her lips thinning into a hard line. “Dumbledore engaged V-Voldemort and lost.”

“Lost as in...?” Sirius asked, his heart in his throat. He already knew the answer.
“I didn’t see the killing blow,” Emmeline admitted, now sounding a little watery. “But I did see him fall.”

There was nothing anyone could say to that.

Silence fell over the room, filling every nook and cranny with palpable tension. The unmistakable feeling of shared loss, to different degrees. Sirius chose not to break the moment; Dumbledore deserved a moment or fifty. They’d never had to do it on their own before, but fuck it, these were good people, the older and newer Order, and he had to believe they could handle whatever was thrown at them.

There was a whole wizarding world depending on them for just that.

The air in the Great Hall was charged with a quiet, nervous energy that tingled in Regulus’s fingers as he closed its heavy doors behind himself. McGonagall gave him a curt nod, her eyes keen and uncowed as she secured it tightly in concert with Professor Flitwick, who had stepped inside just behind Regulus himself.

The children had broken into small pods, by this point - a separation by houses, if the occasional scarf was anything to go by. Regulus could see Draco, near his housemates but not speaking to any of them. The brooding expression did not look open to conversation at all, and Regulus thought he probably was not high on Draco’s list of desired company, at the moment.

Tonks was overseeing the transfer of their Death Eater prisoners to a secure holding area until word from the Ministry was certain. Hopefully, they had rounded up all of Draco’s unwelcome comrades, though it was at least a small consolation that they didn’t seem welcome to Draco, either. Regulus could not quite shake the face of the youngest he had faced in that girls lavatory - guilt for leaving him to the Aurors, and guilt for the thought of setting a Death Eater loose without knowing they would do no harm: A double-threat, taking turns bouncing back and forth in his mind.

The spiral was cut short when he heard a knock on the door behind him, which soon revealed a tattered but seemingly unharmed Remus Lupin. Regulus had not realized he was even in the castle. Severus has been around, in passing, though never near enough for Regulus to get a good idea of whether he knew what was going on. McGonagall had reached out to the Order, but most likely, everyone else was at the Ministry. Emmeline was, certainly, and both Dedalus and Kingsley seemed likely, but Regulus’s mind soon shot over to Sirius. Surely, he was helping keep an eye on Harry, but Harry had a way of finding trouble, so that was not entirely reassuring.

Meeting eyes with Lupin, they both came to the silent decision to step away from the concentration of teachers that peppered the area near the door. The students had settled themselves on the far end of the hall - a safer distance from any potential intruders - so Regulus and Lupin settled somewhere in between, and safely out of earshot by any reasonable estimate.

“Did the Death Eaters give you any trouble, coming in?” Regulus asked, settling in one of the chairs. They were at the Slytherin table, he suddenly noticed - furthest to the left, close to the wall. How long it had been - and how much emptier it felt now.

“Tonks had most of it in hand,” Lupin said, both answering and not. “I, too, know many ways into this castle. I doubt this was their primary target. It’s too haphazard.”

Regulus made a concentrated effort not to look over at Draco. "No, I imagine it was not. If anything, it seems more like a distraction."
"It wouldn't be the first time." Lupin looked back towards the children. "It could also be motivated by Harry - as I understand it, he does typically remain here over the holidays."

"If that were the case, fortunate that they missed their mark."

"Given who is here," Lupin began, with a wince, "or more specifically, who is not here, I doubt that's why. Did you run into trouble?"

Regulus's mind first jumped to Draco - arguably the larger problem that night - but forcibly shook it from his thoughts again.

"I crossed paths with a few Death Eaters, but nothing too concerning," he replied.

"No one of note," Lupin said. "Odd, for Hogwarts."

"I suppose all the heavy-hitters are at the Ministry," Regulus said, thinning his mouth. "Have you heard any updates?"

"No, nothing yet. The last Tonks heard of anything when I saw her was that it was a full-scale attack." Lupin ducked his eyes. "We weren't expecting one so soon. They shouldn't have had the numbers yet."

Frowning, Regulus felt a twinge of worry. Something on that scale was no minor 'incursion', and however capable Emmeline might be, he did not like the thought of her in the thick of it, even if there were Aurors in the Ministry too. There would be several other Order members working there too, no doubt, even in the later evening - and the possibility of others showing up...

"Recruitment is difficult to monitor," he said, solemnly. "Did Sirius go?"

Lupin shook his head. "If they were attacking multiple locations, the Burrow would be an excellent target. I thought we would have heard something by now."

How exceptionally uncomforting that was. "Sirius is there with Harry, I take it?"

"Given that Harry is likely equally unhappy about not being able to go into the fray, I deeply hope so." Lupin replied.

"Better bored than dead," Regulus said, grimly. "Three locations would be a thin split. Hopefully their ranks are not that full."

"I agree, assuming they stayed where they were supposed to. Historically, it's not either of their best suits." Lupin took a loud, deep breath. "At least he's got the map. They can see what's going on up here."

"I could use one of those," Regulus said with a pressed expression. He did not care for the idea that, anytime he was in the castle, his movements could be watched. It was not a crime to talk to his cousin's child, though it did not help that the child in question was stupidly involved in crime. Regulus had been stupid too, but that only made it feel worse.

"They take time to make," Lupin admitted. "The protection and concealment will be needed if it were to fall into the wrong hands, so even copies of Hogwarts itself isn't as simple as it sounds."

"I know," Regulus said with a sigh, then added pointedly, "but that doesn't mean I couldn't use it."

"No one is stopping you asking Harry for it if you need to either," Lupin said, evenly. "Though I
don't recommend using it without the code to open it - most of the directed responses were put in during sixth year and if what happened when Severus attempted to use it without permission is anything to go by, I imagine it'll respond by insulting you in a personalised sort of way."

A few thoughts flickered in Regulus's mind - that he wasn't going to steal it, nor did he need a map of Hogwarts specifically, so much as he had an interest in their concept - but explaining as much without sounding defensive felt tiring, even if it was just Lupin.

The briefest glance over to Draco confirmed that he was still isolating himself, even amongst his housemates. Regulus could only guess at what he was thinking - but at least he was thinking it here, and not at Bellatrix's heels.

There was a sudden thud thundering footsteps by the door. It opened swiftly, only to reveal Tonks looking red-faced and winded. “Where’s McGonagall?”

Lupin blinked at her. “Over there. What’s going on?”

“They couldn’t hold it, the Ministry,” Tonks said, breathlessly. She kept walking, banging into the corner of the table with the barest wince as she walked backwards towards the professor. “It’s in evacuation.”

A cold rush of nerves crashed, and he thought again of Emmeline. If she had stayed in her own department, she could easily blast an assailant into the Brain Room to be absorbed or munched on or electrocuted - or whatever terrible things the brains would do to an intruder. She was highly competent, highly capable...

... But also unlikely to stay in place with a full-scale attack, and that only made the dread grow colder.

"Do we know of any reported losses?" Regulus forced himself to ask.

Throwing a look over her shoulder hesitantly, perhaps aware that she was a spectacle coming bursting in, she mouthed something that looked disturbingly like Dumbledore.

"Let me talk to McGonagall," she said aloud. "I gotta go help the Aurors; the Lestranges are there."

"Am I seeing things, or did she just mouth what I think she just mouthed?" Regulus said with a different sort of unsettled apprehension.

"I don’t think she wanted to cause a panic," Lupin whispered in response, wide eyed.

"I assumed as much," Regulus said, watching with a continually sinking feeling as Tonks approached McGonagall. "I was just hoping I might have stress-hallucinated it."

“We’ll need to find somewhere to put the captured,” Lupin said, already moving to stand.

“Yes, it seems Azkaban is unlikely to remain a secure option at the moment,” Regulus replied, dryly, though his stomach felt like it was dropping out. Azkaban would not be secure - it scarcely had been before - and there were several angry people in Azkaban that Regulus would have preferred to stay there. Steeling himself, he stood, mirroring Lupin's movement as he added, “I must admit I’m not familiar with Ministry contingency plans for such things. Unfortunately, all of my properties are all residences. They could be cleared and spelled, but residential areas are hardly an ideal place to store Death Eaters.”
“No, I think I’m more familiar with suitable cages than most,” Lupin replied, wryly. “However, the Ministry has entertained the notion more than once of shutting the place down, so there have to be other places around. If they go to Azkaban, it will lighten the load temporarily at the Ministry, and they may be able to secure it; but they will need more hands - a lot more - if they return with reinforcements.”

“The Dementors are rogue, as you know,” Regulus said, his mouth tightening slightly. Brow crinkling slightly, he continued, “Already, there is nothing but the ocean keeping Death Eaters caged right now, and I have a hard time believing they will stay there, with a bold strike like this. Funneling in more prisoners will just give the current ones transport to steal for their own escape.”

“I know.” Lupin sighed, aloud. “Another solution needs to be met. For now, all we can do is wait.”

“Prepare for the worst and hope for something better than the worst,” Regulus said with a flattened look.

The conversation was interrupted by Tonks, almost tripping over her feet as she tried to steal another look behind her.

“I'm gonna go to the Ministry,” she said, definitively. “I need to know what's going on. Even if Voldemort’s pissed off, there’s no way he’s giving up the Ministry. Soon as I know something, I'll send word. What do you need now?”

“Somewhere secure,” Lupin replied.

“McGonagall is on that,” Tonks said.

Regulus paused just a beat before adding, “Before you go, have you heard anything about Emmeline?”

“Nothing yet,” Tonks said, glancing up and down. “But if there’s one department able to withstand the Death Eaters, it’s that one.”

Finding comfort in anything but 'Yes, she made it out and is doing well' was difficult, if that mouthed news of Dumbledore’s death was accurate, but he swallowed the thought, along with a knot of anxious nerves. His mouth was still tightened to a line when he nodded the silent agreement.

“Alright,” Tonks said. “I’m moving out. Be careful. Tied up Death Eaters are still Death Eaters.”

Regulus nodded solemnly. Unfortunately, that was all too true.

They needed somewhere to go.

The Order safehouse was functional enough for the Order, but St. Mungo's would be impossible to secure en masse, and then there was the matter of secret identities to consider if they were going to mingle as a group. Hogwarts was the last place standing they could use, so the Order (along with Harry and the Weasley children) would relocate there for now. Hestia had already communicated the need for a medical assessment point that the Ministry could use that wasn't immediately beyond its grounds, since no one knew when - or if - the Death Eaters would come out wands aloft and attempt to blaze the lot of them.

So, Sturges had left to speak to a few friends from magical transportation and had sent only his
patronus back with the news that they were going to open some of the fireplaces from a local muggle tavern and redirect them to the Three Broomsticks. Rosmerta had already kindly agreed to let the place become a half-way station for people coming out of the Ministry, while it would be simple enough to get people up to Hogwarts medical wing that required it.

Emmeline herself was greatly irritated by the fact this included her, if only because she wanted to be mobile enough to check her own library. As it was, she’d borrowed some parchment from Harry and was already trying to capture the details enough that they’d be able to go over it afterwards. By the time she had taken up one of Rosmerta's chairs and washed some of the plaster and dried blood from her face and knees, she needed only to keep her legs elevated for a few hours to ensure proper healing, and at the very least, writing things kept her busy.

Some people came in one at a time, others in clumps. Molly had taken to writing names down for people trying to find each other, using the upstairs fires to check people’s homes to see who had simply gone home, thus could be checked off as fine. Hestia herself had gone to St. Mungo's, but she had since returned with supplies and had a list of her own, which glowed and updated now and then as people came in. Horrible invasion of privacy, but whether someone has done something embarrassing really wasn’t a priority.

There were too many people unaccounted for. Tonks had gone back to the Ministry to try and round them up, but giving up wasn’t in Mad-Eye's bones, and he was at the top of the list of who she worried would not make it back alive. The next being Dedalus, whom she hadn't seen since leaving him at the lift to get staff out of the mess, and Kingsley, who had his hands full, to say the least. Both Bill and Arthur hadn’t been flagged down yet, but the twins, Fred and George, had slipped out to help with the evacuation effort, and she imagined they'd hear something of them soon.

Personally speaking, she wanted to know where Severus was and what the hell was going on with him. At the moment, his lack of informative response was ranking higher than Regulus's, but this was down to Sirius already confirming that it had been a skeleton crew attack at Hogwarts, which they had been able to quash, and that both Regulus and Remus were visible on the map. They might come down when things were more secure, but frankly, had she been a little more mobile and Hogwarts not quite so difficult to do anything but walk to, she would have gone up by now.

Hogwarts without Dumbledore felt vulnerable, regardless. It didn’t feel quite real yet.

“S’cuse me...coming through...” A blonde head emerged from the increasingly crowded inn, inching his way around an older witch who looked ready to smack him with her umbrella.

“Pardon me.”

“News?” Emmeline asked.

“Still some fightin' going on,” Sturgis said. It had been hours; people would become tired and sloppy. “Saw some people from the media offices say a bloke in a top-hat sent them out not fifteen minutes ago.”

Something like relief blossomed in Emmeline's chest. “I'm increasingly thankful that he's very distinctive. Moody?”

“Someone says they reckoned they saw him in a three-on-one in Robards offices,” Sturgis said. “But can't corroborate it. You ready to get a move on?”

“I've been told walking up to Hogwarts is against Healer advice.”
“You're going to listen to Healer advice?” Sturgis asked.

“Unless you have a way to get up to Hogwarts that doesn't involve hobbling up to the school,” Emmeline replied.

Sturgis threw her something, and it clattered to the ground. The two old friends looked at each other for a beat, Emmeline indicating her bandages before Sturgis moved to go and grab whatever he had thrown (‘It's a bad enough day without idiots throwing things!’ came a growl from a wizard only a few feet away... it really was getting horrendously crowded.) This time, he held out his hand, and she instantly forgot about telling him not to throw things if she's injured. It was a portkey, looked rather like the old ones they used to carry on them back in the day, set for a last minute jump out when required.

“There are people who need to go up more than I,” Emmeline admitted, even if she wanted to go up.

“Aye,” Sturgis said. “I've made them something bigger than a charm on a chain, and sending them straight to Pomfrey. Except for Harry. I think they're going to take a tunnel up.”

“Where am I going?” Emmeline asked, picking up the chain.

“Kitchens,” Sturgis said. The confusion must have been evident on her face because he went on. “Rosmerta’s been great, but people are scared, worried and hurt. The elves'll help on the food front since they can apparate in and out where no one else can.”

It was a reminder of another elf Emmeline wondered about, if someone had checked there.

“Alright,” she said, wincing as she stood up, and sharp pains slammed through her ankles. “I'll be your less than mobile waitress and messenger for the evening.”

“I'll see you up there, once we know anything.”

Truthfully, Emmeline had given very little thought to the house-elves of Hogwarts. Not unlike the Department of Mysteries, their best work was the work you didn't notice and took for granted. It didn't take long to whip up a frenzy in the kitchens, with more elves than she had ever seen in one place and knowing a little of their life spans, they must have been here through generations. The last war, Grindelwald before that, the dragon pox epidemic before that, there was no telling how much these beings had seen but had never really been noticed. With some pang of irritation at herself, she realised that she, too, had overlooked the same resource that the 'Dark Lord' had, and as per usual, Regulus had noticed a quiet presence and acknowledged it.

"Excuse me," Emmeline said, stopping one of the elves in their tracks. "Would someone mind dropping me with everyone else? I'll only get underfoot here."

The house-elf nodded, ears twitching. Perhaps castle-elf would be more appropriate for these particular elves. They relied on the sanctity of the school as much as any other creature. It was a great pity they could not recruit the giant squid to the Order. Hogwarts was home to more than just witches and wizards, after all, and she'd quite like to see what would happen in a Death Eater on Giant Squid battle.

Pushing the thoughts aside, she took their hand and felt a jerk as the kitchen blurred into the Great Hall. It was an embarrassing sort of scene, since this did not in any way constitute keeping her legs elevated, and as such, she had to grab onto the table for support. She turned to say thank you, but the elf had already gone. Perhaps they were shy; she had certainly garnered some attention.
Ah. In response, Emmeline pressed her lips together and gave a wave to the remaining students, the faculty and sundry helpers.

Regulus was near the wall, sitting near to Slughorn at the Slytherin table - a far throw from the students at the other end, though Regulus had appeared to be looking towards them. The crack of apparition must have grabbed his attention, because not even a beat passed before he shifted his attention her way. Tension was melting from his face as he stood to walk over.

"I don't suppose you want to sit down over here?" Emmeline said, looking at the table and then back to Regulus himself as he approached. "I've had a disagreement with a former employer, and my mobility isn't what I'd prefer."

Regulus was nearly to the Gryffindor table when he nodded in response, and by the time she had eased herself from a lean against the table to a settled seat, he was slipping into the chair beside her.

"How bad is it? Should you be moving around?" he asked, giving her a once over before looking at her face again, brow furrowed slightly. "I trust you left him worse off."

"I've already seen a healer," Emmeline replied, waving off the question before it got any more in depth than that. She was glad to sit, however. The dull ache in her ankles was deeply unpleasant, but she didn't fancy dulling her senses until she could be sure the danger had passed. "I left once I realised I would be more of a hindrance than a help. There are others worse off being evacuated to the hospital wing as we speak."

"Seeing a healer doesn't answer my question, and I did notice that, but I am going to let it slide for the moment," he said, slipping a hand in hers. "Among those numbers, are there any of ours?"

"No," Emmeline said. It sounded like it should be good news, but it wasn't - if they were unaccounted for or still in the foray. She smiled thinly, squeezing his hand lightly. She lowered her voice this time, "I last saw Kingsley fighting, reports of Moody doing the same, and Dedalus has been defending the floo so people can get out as has Bill. Molly is trying to track people as they appear; Hestia is attempting to do the same from St. Mungo's, but some people will have gone home, so there is no telling for sure if everyone is accounted for. There is something else - He, you know, he stormed off immediately afterwards, so we have no idea where he is right now. Except that he isn't here, since he didn't appear on the map."

"Hogwarts doesn't seem to have been a primary target," Regulus said, grimly. In a lower tone, he added, "I would call it a half-hearted, disorganised distraction - but the Divination professor was caught in the crossfire, it seems. I don't think they have told the children yet."

"Trelawney?" Emmeline asked, feeling her forehead crease. He likely had no idea of her role in the chosen prophecy, so of course it would look like crossfire. "She was the origin of Harry's prophecy, so it's not unlikely she would be a target."

A beat of stillness passed before the tension tightened his mouth and brow again. "I see."

"I know you don't think much of divination, but...she had her moments. It's very sad. Dumbledore always believed in her." A terrible thing to happen, regardless, but a double blow for the loss of the information.

Regulus nodded, expression solemn as his eyes flicked down to the table. "My opinions on divination are irrelevant to the matter. She still lost her life. I simply did not realise the connection."
"I wasn't dismissing it. Just pointing out why the blind spot likely existed," Emmeline replied. "I don't suppose you have any idea what it is about killing Dumbledore that would have made - you know - so angry, do you? By all accounts, they were winning."

"That does seem strange." Regulus frowned at the table, brow furrowing a little deeper. "He just… killed him, then left angrily?"

"Yes," Emmeline said. "Well, no. He was looking at something, and then stormed off as if the whole business at the Ministry was immaterial."

The pensive expression on his face pinched further, and for a stretching moment, Regulus didn't say anything. The frozen look soon started to peel away, leaving something uncertain and no less tense.

Meeting her eyes, he lifted his free hand between then, speaking even more quietly. "Is it possible he was looking at…?"

"The thought had crossed my mind," Emmeline said, wincing at the thought more than any physical discomfort. "I think we need to face the possibility that we are running out of time."

Regulus's expression tightened a little more as he nodded. "Inevitable, I suppose, but… a troubling thought."

"A day for them," Emmeline huffed. Confusion, frustration and irritation were swirling around like a mental vortex and getting on her last nerve. "I hate sitting around while the fight is ongoing, knowing that there's nothing I can reasonably do to help yet. I want to start trying to find out exactly how they expanded their numbers to that level without us knowing. I want to know where he went because following him now could be the biggest clues to the other locations. I want to know where Severus is because what on earth is the point of him if not this, and I want to know if it's safe to mourn one death for now without waiting to see if it will be multiple deaths in a few hours."

"I do too," Regulus said, shaking his head.

"I am glad you're alright," Emmeline added. "That probably ought to have been said before I started expressing that amount of frustration."

"It has been a difficult night." He squeezed her hand. "Frustration has a place in it. I'm glad you're alright, too."

"What's going to happen here?" Emmeline asked, glancing around to the scattered hall. "You don't think they'll close the school, do you?"

"It's hard to say," he said with a frown. "McGonagall is likely thinking it over, as the… Headmistress, I suppose she will be?"

"The better question is if it's safe for them," Emmeline replied. For years, Dumbledore had kept the Death Eaters at bay, but that was no longer an option. That fact would have to begin to feel real at some point, wouldn't it? "It shows where children will be, and if the children are targets..."

Regulus shook his head, slowly. "I don't think it's safe, no. If they can get in once, they can get in again."

"When I'm able to walk at a semi-normal pace again, do you want to go and raid the books?" Emmeline asked. It was almost funny, or would have been if she'd been two decades younger. Perhaps not; he would have been embroiled in the Death Eaters, and she would be about to join
the Order, but if they hadn't, if there had been a shred of normalcy about their teenage years, it
could be something she could have done, asking him to join her to retrieve books. Probably not the
same books - these would be books they might need, or that they'd prefer Death Eaters not have
access to - but there was some humour in looking back two decades and remembering they'd both
been in the same place but different people on the surface.

"Of course." Regulus lifted up the corner of his mouth just a little and nodded. "If there is anything
you would like for me to fetch for you in the meantime, I can relate to the perils of limited
mobility."

"Not until people are accounted for," Emmeline said. Once that had happened, they could move
forward with planning the next move but they were scattered to the four winds. "Harry is coming
here. If there's ever a time to go hunting for a missing link here, I think this might be it so we ought
to at least wait for him."

"At least there is something potentially useful to come of this horrible night."

"Perhaps." she replied, distantly. It was hard to think that way at the moment. Too much was
uncertain. "If he knows, you ought to check on Kreacher."

Regulus nodded stiffly, a frown creasing his brow. "There's a decoy in place, but I cannot
guarantee that decoy will fool him - or that the magic has held for, what, seventeen years?
Seventeen and a half? That's almost as long as I had been alive at the time." He shook his head. "I
can't leave Kreacher there, no. Not with things as they are."

"I know it was uncomfortable, but my door remains open." Discomfort came before potential
death, after all.

"I appreciate that." His mouth curved up in something like a smile, though it wasn't exactly a
happy one, given the circumstances. "I will talk to him about the options. He won't like any of
them, but until it's safe, the house just isn't one of them, blood wards or not. We can't rely on enemy
ignorance anymore."

"Perhaps tell him Sirius isn't there. Small victories," Emmeline said, returning the vaguest smile.

"An effective motivator," Regulus replied, his own smile lightening a little.

"Until then, I suppose we wait for Harry." Not ideal at all, with a battle still going on, but if there
was a way to strike another blow today, they should take advantage of it. When she was wobbling
less. Out of the corner of her eye, Professor Slughorn was eyeing the two of them. Perhaps he
wanted news, but she wasn't quite so distracted as to not notice the staring lingered. "Did you
happen to tell Slughorn something about me?" she asked, noticing then that the man was already
moving to get up.

His eyes flicked over to Slughorn. "Ah... yes. The patronuses came while we were having tea, and I
favoured that facet of the truth over the vigilante one. I do hope you don't mind."

"Which facet of truth is that?" Emmeline asked, despite the precious little time before an entirely
too social Slughorn arrived within earshot.

"The 'us' facet."

"Miss Vance, I assume!" Slughorn said by way of introducing himself. "I thought you looked
familiar."
But not quite important enough to address without being brought up first. Same old Slughorn. "That could be who I spent time with at school as much as anything else," she commented, even if she doubted he actually did find her at all familiar.

"Oh?"

"I spent a considerable amount of time with Marlene McKinnon, Mary Macdonald, and Lily." There was no point in explaining which one. "I was always a little more unobtrusive and little less noticeable."

"An excellent trait in an unspeakable," he replied.

Emmeline shot Regulus a look at that. He was usually the soul of discretion, but she supposed she hadn't explained that she didn't often tell people her line of work. Then again, she could be fired right now. Something told her the only severance that Death Eaters tended to give involved that of limbs. "It has its advantages," she said, finally.

“Advantageous, indeed,” Regulus added, mildly. “In many aspects of life, I’ve found.”

"I can imagine so!" Slughorn declared. "Difficult times, difficult times. I’ll let the two of you have a little...privacy."

You could practically hear the wink, wink, nudge at that. If she hit her head repeatedly on the table to hide the irritating blush, would that be considered rude?

Regulus pressed an embarrassed smile as he waved off their old professor, waiting until Slughorn was likely out of earshot before clearing his throat. “Sorry about that.”

“I was going to tell you not to tell anyone what I do,” Emmeline replied. The entire thought was redundant, wasn’t it? It was better to be a little embarrassed about having a relationship than to deal with their current reality.

Regulus lifted his brow. "I didn't specify beyond the general department. I didn't realise that part was a secret - partially because if someone asks, and I can't tell them, that is probably a bit of a tip." A but more lightly, he added, "Unless your occupation was just something really embarrassing, I suppose."

“I know. I hadn’t explained myself,” Emmeline replied. It wasn’t his fault, after all. “Usually, I don’t volunteer even that much, but you weren’t to know that. We haven’t really interacted beyond friends and family and people who have no idea who we are."

"Things have been rather isolated, it’s true," he replied, thoughtfully. "Regardless, I will keep it in mind for the future."

“If there is one,” Emmeline added, miserably. That could really go for either a self-indulgent look at their terrible odds or in respect of her vocation, couldn’t it? “Because I might get fired - but I think already have been, haven’t I? I think getting the sack is probably worse than a gossipy potions master.”

“Perhaps you could think of it more like quitting - temporarily vacating your position in protest of a change in oversight conditions.” He squeezed her hand again, gently. “Quite frankly, Voldemort’s regime doesn’t deserve you.”

“As if any self-respecting unspeakable has ever served at a Minister's pleasure.” Emmeline sniffed at the idea.
He bumped her shoulder. “Then they can’t sack you, can they?” Regulus said, tipping his head and raising his brow. “So my point still stands. Besides, not serving at a Minister’s pleasure doesn’t mean he couldn’t find a way to misuse your brilliant work.”

“He couldn’t understand my brilliant work,” Emmeline more mumbled than spoke. “Or he’d probably be stuck in a loop of getting killed by someone who isn’t yet toilet trained instead of...this.”

“That is not actually a terrible plan. Let’s tuck that one away, just in case the current one doesn’t pan out.”

“I recommend something that doesn't involve Harry,” Emmeline replied. Not a terrible idea, on the whole, but best to use them in a way that doesn’t involve others in case Harry is accidentally erased from existence. “I don't usually set them up at all - it's quite illegal, you know.”

“Of all the things we do to stop him, how many of them are legal?” He pressed his mouth into a pointed slant, before adding matter-of-factly, “Furthermore - let it be on record that I was only referring to the time-loop, not to trapping Harry in it too.”

"In general, we don't have very legal lives." Even without Voldemort's involvement. "I suppose I have time to practice. It's very tricky. The eternal downside of time travel - it's like trying to take aim with a live bumble bee.”

“I have the utmost faith in you,” he responded. “We will keep on our search, but it never hurts to have a backup plan.”

“You've become quite the optimist," Emmeline said. It ought to grate, but she supposed worrying wouldn't change the situation.

“Perhaps. Alternately, I may be trapped in a state of willful denial, born from decades of exhausting paranoia,” he began, a bit wryly, “but ‘optimist’ does sound more complimentary, by comparison.”

"I'm surprised anyone with rabid curiosity such as yours can handle willful denial," Emmeline replied. He did, though. She had seen it both first hand and heard of it more than once. Talk about being a walking contradiction. "Let's stick with complimentary. If we must wait and worry, let's not do it upsetting ourselves."

“I can agree to that.” He tipped a small nod. "And when you are feeling better - may the search resume.”

"If you don't mind letting me borrow your shoulder, we can go and take a look now. I’m sure Harry knows well enough where to find the research contingents when he arrives." Pressing her feet to the ground, they felt unsteady and sore, but not to the point that she could keep sitting there if there was something else they could be doing. Still, it wasn’t exactly comfortable.

"If you feel you can do so without causing yourself more harm, then my shoulder is available to you,” he replied with a little nod, though he was still eyeing her, as if to make sure.

With a swift look up and down him, Emmeline pushed herself up. "You look sturdy. As long as we don’t try any turrets, I think I'll manage."

Standing up, he offered an arm. "Let’s get to it, then.”

Thankfully, Emmeline took his arm. If little else, it would get them out of the Great Hall where
there was quite literally nowhere you could be discreet, and she could at least pretend they were doing something that mattered.

Perhaps they were.

When Harry, Ron, Ginny, Sirius, and Mrs. Weasley had arrived at Hogwarts, they'd all gone to help as best they could.

The hospital wing was chaotic, with people being brought in by house-elves who disappeared again just as promptly. Ron had the map open beside him, which had gotten no real reaction from Madame Pomfrey, so Harry reckoned she'd seen it before. Every time someone appeared in the hospital wing, he wrote down names as Molly went to find out if they knew of other people within the Ministry that may still be unaccounted for on her list. His hands were tapping, probably trying to distract himself from the fact his brothers or father still hadn't surfaced. The Department of Law Enforcement and the Minister's offices – both the places you'd be most likely to find them – were the most badly hit. Mrs. Weasley was obsessively going through checks of names, trying to reassure people when she could, but the nervous energy coming from her was hard to ignore. Ginny had gone to tell Professor McGonagall what they now knew, which she must have reached by now.

“Ginny in the hall?” Harry asked Ron, who almost jumped. He nodded, then pointing to her name.

There hadn't been a lot for Harry to do. People kept telling him to sit down, to try to relax, but how could he with all of this going on? Sirius had disappeared about ten minutes before. He wanted to ask Ron to check where he was, but he also couldn't tell him not to watch Ginny in case something happened. There were still Death Eaters there, even if Hagrid was standing guard.

“Oh, that explains all of it!” came the voice of a man who must have been apparated in. “Harry Potter, of course.”

Harry flushed, a little with anger and a little with embarrassment. This hadn't been down to him. He'd been nowhere near the Ministry.

“You should try blaming Voldemort and not the underage wizard that bought you a decade without this shit.” Sirius must have come back in unnoticed; it was funny how he could somehow make his presence completely known and unignorable at times and others, he just seemed to slip out and back.

There was a noticeable, near universal flinch that usually accompanied saying Voldemort's name.

“Mr. Black!” Madame Pomfrey's voice cut through the air.

“Everyone's just scared,” said one of the witches a few beds away. “He doesn't mean it.”

“Welcome to the programme,” Sirius said. There didn't seem to be heat to it, though. “Better late than never. Come give me a hand, Harry.”

Harry was so relieved to have the chance to do something other than hang around the increasingly crowded hospital wing making a nuisance of himself that he didn't even think to ask what exactly Sirius had been doing until they were already in the corridor.

“Checking the entrances,” Sirius said. “It might be some of our lot, since we know the way in, but thanks to Wormtail, could also be reinforcements.”
Harry's heart beat a little faster. Maybe it was a good thing he hadn't raised the idea in the hospital wing. He didn't think Mrs. Weasley would approve of him going to potential Death Eater entry points. It wasn't as if Harry really wanted to fight either, but if he could help defend Hogwarts, he would.

They checked the statue, the clock, the one-eyed witch, and even checked the mirror, even though it was caved in. There wasn't anything there. They'd have to go out to the Whomping Willow, so they slipped out into the grounds as quietly as they could.

“What about the cloak?” Harry suggested.

“You'd see the footprints,” Sirius said, pointing to the snowfall. “We could vanish them, but may as well do it on the way back.”

The insides of the tunnel felt a lot smaller than they had three years ago. Harry put his hand up and realised he could practically touch the ceiling. They didn't light the tunnel in case someone was inside it, but when they reached the other end, there was no sign anyone else had been back there. Harry wasn't sure if he should feel relieved or disappointed.

Since there was no reason not to, they lit the tips of their wands and began to walk back. About halfway up the tunnel, Harry couldn't take it anymore. He had to ask.

“Do you think Voldemort's coming here?”

Sirius slowed enough to look back. “No.”

“How can you be so sure?” Harry asked.

“You heard Vance,” Sirius replied, looking forward again as he took a few steps. “Something caught his attention and now he's left the Ministry to his followers to deal with. Since he didn't show up at the Safe House, Grimmauld Place – by now, that bloody elf would have shown up if he had – or your aunt and uncle's, it's nothing to do with you.”

“Then...what did he want?” Harry asked.

“Dunno,” Sirius replied.

“Azkaban?” Harry asked.

“Because he's so terribly devoted to helping the idiots who follow him?” Sirius asked.

That was true, but..."He does need more followers,” Harry said. “He's been pressuring people into it.”

“There's different kinds of following,” Sirius said, gesturing. “There's the Death Eater kind, the hangers on, and those he just wants to know if they'll let him do what he wants, either because he's clinging to a thread of legitimacy by preying on the prejudice and fear of losing magic, or just because he can scare or torture them into submission. The Ministry gives him the latter – he used to just send people to do it.”

Harry remembered hearing something the same about Slughorn. “He sent people chasing up Professor Slughorn – like that, you mean?”

“Yep,” Sirius replied. “Slughorn's no Death Eater, but he was a formidable bloke in his day, and he's got influence. He wants his support. He tried the same twaddle with most people I know –
Andromeda, she got the bad end of a few curses for refusing to be scared. Your mum and dad, too.”

Harry stopped in his tracks. “What? But my mum was muggleborn! She couldn't have been a Death Eater.”

“You don't think having an insider to the muggleborn community would have been more useful than people who dress up in stupid masks?” Sirius gave a humourless laugh. “Like I said, he doesn't just want Death Eaters, but he wants people he can use outside of that. You know that blood doesn't mean anything to him. They were talented and well-liked. Your family name still had a lot of sway in neutral circles. He wanted them for the same reason he wants Slughorn – because they'd be useful if they could be pushed into accepting him.”

That somehow made it feel worse. “And they said no?”

“With gusto,” Sirius nodded. “That pissed him off, couple of eighteen-year-old kids telling him where he could shove it. See? Voldemort's been underestimating teenagers for years.”

“Were you asked?” Harry asked.

“No!” Sirius laughed, this one more real. “I never was. Remus, he got them calling, talking about joining with werewolves and a better life for them, like that was really going to happen under Voldemort. He doesn't care about any of that. He just wants power.”

They made it back to the entrance hall in time to see the clock entrance open. Harry's heart skipped a beat, and he reached for his wand, seeing Sirius do the same. However, the sight of bright pink hair caught his eye before he even registered who was coming out of it.

“Give us a hand,” Tonks said. She and Bill, both half-covered in dirt, soot, and what Harry feared was blood, were almost carrying Percy. Harry wasn't even sure if he was conscious.

Sirius conjured the stretcher right away, “How's it looking back there?”

Tonks took a look at Harry and shook her head.

Irritation overtook worry. “I want to know.”

“We should get Percy to the hospital wing,” Bill said, his voice hoarse.

“Where's Fred and George?” Harry asked.

“Fred and George were there?” Bill looked panicked, head turning from Harry to Tonks. “I've got to go back.”

“Here,” Sirius said, fishing into his pocket and pulling out something on a chain. “Click the switch. It'll portkey you to the safe house when you find them.”

Bill nodded, already half-running back into the passageway. Harry was still watching him when he heard Sirius speak.

“Casualties?” his voice was low, but not so low that he could expect Harry not to hear. He turned back in time to see a sharp nod from Tonks. “Any of ours?” Again, another sharp nod. She then looked to Percy, and Harry's breath left his lungs – was he dead and Harry hadn't even noticed?

“I think he must have been trying to get his kid out of the way of the blast,” Tonks said, tightly.
Percy didn't have any kids. Did he? No, someone would have mentioned that, that would mean...no...Mr. Weasley wasn't with them, Bill had gone back for Fred and George but not for their father...

Harry was broken out of his horror by the feeling of Sirius squeezing his shoulder hard enough that it hurt, a little. He snapped his head around to look at them. “Ginny's in the Great Hall,” he said, because it seemed important to say where they were.

“Okay,” Sirius said. “Do you want to go get her?”

Harry's throat felt tight. “You want me to tell her –?”

“No! No, I just think it'll be better for her to be with her mum for this, most people would want their mums for this,” Sirius said, looking to Tonks as if that was a question. Thinking back to Grimmauld Place, maybe it was a question. “You don't have to, we can all go down there right now.”

“I don't...know,” Harry said. His entire throat was dry. His eyes burned and itched under his glasses at the thought of it, the memory of Mr. Weasley being attacked brought fresh to his mind.

“I'll bring Percy down to the hospital wing now,” Tonks said. “It can't wait.”

“We'll be along in a minute,” Sirius said, quietly. He gave Harry a small push to the stairs and automatically, Harry sat down on them.

There were a few moments, maybe more than that, where all Harry could feel was his heart hammering in his chest. “I should owl Hermione,” he blurted out, not even sure where the thought had come from.

“You can,” Sirius said, without elaborating.

"I should go down to Ron, he –" Harry stood up, then stopped. What could he do about it? Maybe they didn't want him there, intruding on that moment. “I don't know what to say.”

“I think it's probably more important to just be there in case he has something he needs to say,” Sirius said, still eerily even for there being two dead people in the Order today.

Two of the first people who were ever kind, and interested, and didn't treat Harry like a freak...

“But what about –”

“I'll go to the Great Hall,” Sirius cut him off. “You should be with your friend.”

Harry nodded jerkily, then ran.

When he reached the hospital wing, he realised he must have been sitting with Sirius longer than he thought. Percy was awake, talking in a low voice as Mrs. Weasley held him close around his shoulders. Ron was sitting next to the bed, white as a sheet and his eyes glassy. He turned when Harry burst in. Maybe he was expecting Ginny, and instead, it was just Harry...

"What's happening now?" Ron asked, shakily.

"Bill's gone to get Fred and George," Harry said, unable to think of a single remotely helpful thing to say.

Ron nodded, sitting back down without another word. Harry joined him, the chaos of the hospital
wing seeming far away now as he could really only hear the low whispers between Percy and Mrs. Weasley.

"We're going to kill this bastard," Ron said, looking to him suddenly. "Right?"

Harry thought of everything he'd seen and heard today; of the deaths, of the fall, of all of the injured around them and the dead he didn't know. It seemed like the kind of thing that should make him say that he didn't know, or that they would try, but he didn't say that. They knew how Voldemort was staying alive - he was using horcruxes, and it was long past time that Ron and Hermione knew that too. They would find them and destroy them and be rid of Voldemort and his followers for the last time. They had the Order. They had the DA. They could win this. Taking one more look around the room as yet more injured were being brought from the Three Broomsticks, Harry thought, we had to win this.

"We'll stop them," Harry said, as fiercely as he could. As fiercely as he could mean it. "Once and for all."

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