Secret & Keepers - Keep Us

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Summary

When Harry ran away from the Dursleys after blowing up Aunt Marge he never got on the Knight Bus or to Diagon Alley. Instead he found himself in 12 Grimmauld Place with Sirius and Regulus Black and boy do they have something to say about how his life looked up until now. Contains manipulative!Dumbledore.

Notes

Disclaimer: I don’t own Harry Potter or anything you can recognise from any books or TV series or movies. I do however take liberties with the plots or mentions provided by JKR or other writers. The only profit I’m getting out of it is improving my English.

Title: Secret & Keepers – Keep Us

Rating/Warnings: R/M [AU; Manipulative Dumbledore (therefore not Dumbledore friendly); profanity; canon typical violence; frank discussion of past child abuse (Harry but not only) and of past child abuse of sexual nature (not Harry); not very detailed descriptions of torture (not Harry); Black family feels; not beta read]

Characters and pairings: Harry Potter, Sirius Black, Regulus Black, Severus Snape, Remus Lupin, Nymphadora Tonks, Bathsheda Babbling. All more or less paternal towards Harry and generally friendly or at the very least civil towards each other once they will sort out their differences. References (later on) to past and present relationship of sexual nature between Snape and Babbling. Occasional mentions of one side Sirius/James, not one sided Sirius/OFC (Mirzam Verascez if anyone wonders). Might at some point contain a very slow burn Remus/Tonks. No Harry pairings because he has a lot on his plate and he won’t be
having a crush on anyone in PoA timeline.

**Summary:** When Harry ran away from the Dursleys after blowing up Aunt Marge he never got on the Knight Bus or to Diagon Alley. Instead he found himself in 12 Grimmauld Place with Sirius and Regulus Black and boy do they have something to say about how his life looked up until now. Contains manipulative!Dumbledore.

**Word count:** About 35 000 give or take a few.

**Spoilers:** All seven books with occasional, brief references to ground work for HP & CC main plot.

**Author's note:** This chapter and its primary set up – Harry running away from the Dursleys after he blew up Aunt Marge and running into both Sirius and Regulus instead of getting in the Knight Bus – was written way back in 2007 and it quickly developed into one of my typical stories so I left it in my documents folder and didn’t really thought about it. Trust me, the original version deserved shelving. This one however is an improved version of it which in the past few months undergone major adjustments to the plot, both of this chapter and the story in general. Also in the meantime I found myself drawn to manipulative!Dumbledore, both in reading and wanting to write it because Dumbledore in my stories was either not present or moderately helpful. Well, this one is not, he is for all intents and purposes the same Dumbledore from the books but people who are looking at him and his actions or lack of thereof with new awareness and are no longer fooled by his appearance and trust me they are all royally pissed. Like get in the bloody line so we can kill him pissed. They won’t, they will take care of him eventually but not before they will take care of Voldemort.

*Dedicated to all of my readers who stuck with me for so long. Thank You, I hope that You will find this story enjoyable. I would be the most grateful for constructive criticism.*
Chapter 01 - Recovery

Chapter Notes

Beta read by Goddess of IT

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world.

Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Meade

Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you mad.

Aldous Huxley

Secrets & Keepers: Keep Us

Chapter one: Recovery

Harry Potter, Little Whinging, 6th August, evening

Harry Potter walked quickly through Privet Drive, he was taking long steps and muttering curses under Aunt Marge’s address. After he turned the nearest corner he started panting from the effort of dragging his trunk. Harry stopped for a few seconds in order for him to catch his breath before resumed walking slowly in the direction of Magnolia Crescent. The last thing he wanted now was being caught by a neighbour or a policeman or even worse, Ministry of Magic representatives who could come and snap his wand in two.

With passing steps, his cursing of Aunt Marge’s got from mutters to whispers and finally died when he reached the west end of Magnolia Crescent. Tired from dragging his heavy trunk he sat down on the curb and sighed.

He really did it this time, there is no way that he was going to come back to Hogwarts this year because he had broken the Decree for the Restriction of Under-age Wizardry again, although for the first time intentionally.

Harry huffed under his breath. He shouldn't have done it, he should have been more careful. Why he just couldn't ignore what Marge had said? Because she insulted his parents and he in all his Gryffindor rashness tried to defend their honour.

Harry was so deeply in a thought that he didn't realise that someone was getting nearer to him and before he knew what had happened he heard a whisper, "Stupefy!" and everything around him went black.

Secrets & Keepers: Keep Us
Sirius Black, Little Whinging, 6th August, evening

For Sirius Black last week was rough, but so were past eleven years and compared to them last week was practically a bloody vacation. He was free.

Free.

Free.

FREE!

Finally! Out of that godforsaken pit of pain and misery that was Azkaban.

Free to feel the grass under his paws.

Free to sleep for how long he god-damn pleased.

Free to eat everything he bloody wanted.

Free!

Sure, the proximity of Azkaban and fear of the eventual chase kept him from more than a celebratory roll in the grass and pilfering bowls of food and water of some farm dog, a Newfoundland judging by the sheer size of it and its absurd calmness upon witnessing some strange dog eating its food. He didn't know how he looked but he had to look pitiful enough for the other dog to do absolutely nothing to chase the intruder from his property.

Man, he loved Newfoundlands. One day, once all of this will be over and if Harry will want to live with him, he will buy a cottage or use one of the Potter properties. Maybe not by the sea but maybe near some body of water, at least a stream, preferably lake. Something with a big garden and plenty of windows. He will try to locate Lily's beloved furball if he managed to make it out of the house and seeing that he couldn't find him or his body when he was searching…

Yeah, a dog would be good, dogs were boys' best friends and even though he was one he was really looking forward to not being one.

Padfoot was good, Padfoot was great, Padfoot kept him sane for all these years but he really wanted to just be himself again.

For himself.

For Harry.

Harry, James's and Lily's precious little boy.

Little Harry.

Sweet Harry, the only thing that kept him from doing anything stupid like attacking a Dementor to end his hell.

Harry was a smart little boy, sooner or later he would start asking questions, and he was Lily's son and she was smart and maybe what he lacked in his looks he would compensate with his brain, his empathy, sense of right and wrong. He spent years desperately wishing for it, for Harry to ask questions and not liking answers, for Harry to think like Lily, wanting to get to the bottom of things.
But it never came. Of course, it didn't come because Harry was what, barely thirteen?

And who knew how Petunia raised him, if she ever spoke of Lily, of James, of him. He doubted that, and it was that doubt which rather than heading north to hole himself close to Hogwarts intellectually led him to Scarborough railway station and into a southbound train.

He had to see Harry.

Check how he was faring, and how his life looked with Petunia. He needed to know that Harry was safe. That he would be safe until he will finally catch that god-damned rat. Granted he would sleep much better once he caught Peter but right now that arsehole was in Egypt. With that band of unsuspecting Weasleys, so up until the term started there was really nothing he could do other than kill time.

Checking on Harry was a good idea.

It was a splendid idea.

It would calm him down a bit and maybe, just maybe, if he was lucky…

The idea of seeing Harry, lead to the idea of talking to Harry, telling him the truth and the possible consequences of thereof.

Azkaban really messed with his head, if the thoughts of roping in a thirteen years old boy to help him clean his own mess entered it.

So south he went, mostly by train, sometimes on paws. Never apparating, granted once a day had passed, he found that he had enough strength and magic to pull off wandless apparition. He was a bloody Auror, he was trained to do that, and he could do that, but it was the best to not attract too much attention. Say if he somehow ended in the pound that was another bowl of kibble but paws and trains would do, for now.

It was the evening of what he estimated to be 6th August, when he finally reached Little Whinging. He was hoping that Petunia and her oaf of a husband, hadn’t decide to move but even if they did, well, with luck, that still left Hogwarts.

He managed to locate Privet Drive quite easily, after all even as Padfoot he could still read even, if reading the map colour-blind, in the evening, wasn't easy and the letters on the map were so bloody tiny. Go figure that the Black family shitty eye-sight finally decided to catch up with him. Once everything will settle down, he will need to get a pair of reading glasses.

He set off for Privet Drive at quite decently unsuspicious – never mind people, just your regular neighbour dog on a lone walk – pace but the further south he ran the more agitated he became. Finally, when his paws hit the corner of Privet Drive and some other street he was running at the top speed that he could muster in his current state.

He stopped by the rose bush at number 2 and stared at number 4. The house was awash in light and there were screams coming from inside. Not all of them reached him but scraps of 'that freak' and 'wringing his scrawny neck when he will show himself here again' did.

Harry wasn't there.

He was before, but wasn't now, and for the better judging by the noise. He wasn't coming back there for as long as Sirius had something to say about it.
But where he was? Where he possibly could go?

Trying to block the noise coming from the house Sirius took a deep whiff through the nose. The scent of boy and stress and fear and magic and something familiar he couldn't place his paw on nearly choked him. Harry was in danger, he was afraid and for some reason, he used magic even though...

Pettigrew?

Did that rat apparated?

He was supposed to be back from Egypt with the Weasleys and the Prophet mentioned that the family just recently left for Egypt and were planning to leave with the end of holidays. Nah, leaving them now would attract too much attention and Pettigrew wasn't powerful enough to pull transcontinental apparation.

Even when he was in top shape, he wouldn't risk that kind of journey. Ireland definitely; France maybe; Germany perhaps; Denmark probably, if he was feeling particularly daring; maybe southern Norway or northern Spain or Portugal. Any further in any direction in rapid succession would be magically exhausting, and he was much more skilled than Pettigrew.

Something else happened in there, not Pettigrew. Something that sent Harry running from that god-damn house.

He needed to find Harry and he needed to leave fast before Muggle authorities or worse wizarding ones will be contacted. So, he took another whiff, turned around and following the scent he again broke into a run.

He followed it up north, then west into a street called Wisteria Walk, then through the alley between houses to another, slightly crescent street, Magnolia Crescent if he remembered the map correctly, then further west.

Then he saw him. Harry was seated on his truck by the end of the street, empty owl cage by his side.

Harry.

Small, scrawny Harry.

Oh Harry.

Were all thirteen years old this tiny these days?

But then on the edge of his vision, he spotted movement. It was dark, and it was far but the shape nearing Harry was definitely human and, sweet Merlin, armed with a wand pointed at unsuspecting boy.

Instictively he started to run as fast as he could, he was getting closer but still too far way. He opened his mouth to bark a warning, with hopes to make Harry turn around. To see that there was someone standing right behind him, but no sound left him.

Then the time seemed to slow down, the stranger's hand raised his wand pointed directly at Harry's back. A jet of red light and whisper of “Stupefy” tore softly through the air. Harry slumped to the side before landing on the ground beside his trunk.
Then somehow, the stranger seem to sense that he was there, turning in his direction, wand pointed directly at him.

Another whisper “Snuffles” was released, just at his hind paws left the ground as he jumped to tackle the stranger.

Snuffles.

Snuffles? What the hell?

But the red jet of light was already heading in his direction and he was too strung up, too exhausted to try and evade it.

That was the end.

He failed Harry.

The world around him went black.

He woke up with a start, realizing mid sitting up that he was fully human and was previously lying on a bed, but he didn't have time to ponder what it meant because he immediately zeroed in on the strange figure standing by the foot of the bed.

He was tall, lean, dressed in a pair of Muggle jeans and dark, long-sleeved shirt which spelled out Queen in a very familiar cursive. He used to have a similar t-shirt. But then he fixed his gaze on the stranger's face.

He had longish, thick, shiny, black hair which was pulled into a ponytail. His face was heart-shaped with high-cheekbones, a straight nose, thin mouth; thin and straight eyebrows, and pointed chin. His dark-brown eyes were hidden behind a pair of rectangular silver framed spectacles.

He seemed familiar.

Disturbingly familiar.

So disturbingly familiar that Sirius took a very quick look around the room and he nearly groaned recognizing immediately the grouping of posters and banners.

He was in his childhood bedroom and the man standing in front of him was his supposedly dead brother. Disturbingly dressed in Muggle clothing and equally disturbingly alive.

Alive and armed, when he spotted the wand sticking out of Regulus’s ponytail.

What the fuck was Regulus playing at?

Regulus opened his mouth but almost immediately closed it shut and then he smiled. He smiled but it wasn't that painfully polite 'I'm your better' smile he used to direct at 'commoners' or that cruel smile of a junior Death Eater.

No, Regulus's smile was big, radiant, very childlike and it transformed his entire face. For a moment rather than thirty-something adult he looked like he was ten again, back at the platform, listening to Sirius when he told him that everything will work itself out in the end.

It hadn't, and he never saw that smile again.

What the fuck was going on?
"Man, you look like something a cat dragged in," said Regulus cheerfully. "Through several puddles," he added, paused and after another moment said, "and uphill."

"Does your mother know how you dress yourself these days?" Sirius asked finally.

"She noticed," said Regulus simply. "But I didn't pay her that much attention, I was too busy dragging upstairs two quite heavy, for something so light looking, lumps."

"Harry," Sirius breathed out. "Where is he?"

"Can we talk?" asked Regulus earnestly.

"Harry," hissed Sirius.

"My old bedroom," answered calmly Regulus. "Sleeping off the stunner, looks like he needs it too. What in the name of Merlin, have you had gotten yourself into?"

"You know, that's rich coming from you," Sirius sneered at him, as he tried to swing his legs off the bed and onto the floor, but for some reason, they refused to cooperate with him. "Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

"Properly buried and stuff from what I heard," confirmed Regulus. "Nott senior seemed pretty convinced that he killed me, I wasn't planning to disabuse him from that notion back then and I'm not planning to do so now. No, it's best for everyone, to believe that poor, stupid Regulus Black died back in 1979."

"Why?" asked Sirius.

"Because I did not die as you can see," shrugged Regulus. "Plus, I have a score to settle with the Dark Lord and my success strongly relies on him not realizing that I'm alive until I can rub it into his face. Preferably right before some mountain will drop on top of him and get rid of him for good this time."

"Wasn't he supposed to be gone for good?" asked Sirius sceptically.

"Snuffles, you poor summer child," Regulus shook his head. "A Dark Lord at the peak of his power, surrounded by his faithful followers, with so much Dark Magic behind him that makes both of us look like a pair of uneducated toddlers rather than sons of Orion 'You Need to Know Dark Magic in Order to Fully Understand It' Black. Wasn't that always your problem with Snape, that you knew exactly what he knew, at times maybe more?"

"You don't believe that he had fallen?" asked Sirius grimly.

"Oh, he had fallen, alright," nodded Regulus. "Thanks to Harry he had fallen and had been out of commission for about a decade but unlike the majority of wizarding world, I never believed that he was completely gone. Harry might know more," he shook his head. "Should know more even though I doubt that barmy old cot actually told him anything vital."

"Dumbledore.." started Sirius.

"Yes, Dumbledore," snorted Regulus. "Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, to be exact. Yes, please tell me more about the Hogwarts Headmaster, Grand Sorcerer, Supreme Mugwump, Head of the Order of the Phoenix and Chief Warlock of Wizengamot. If my memory serves me correctly, he was all of this back when you were taken to Azkaban, still is if my information remains correct. And while you're at it clarify something else for me because I couldn't find any information about
"Because there was no trial," snorted Sirius, trying hard to not remember the arrest and what followed.

"Isn't that curious?" asked Regulus pensively.

"Crouch wouldn't allow it," Sirius muttered.

"Screw Barty, he was Head of DMLE not Chief Warlock of Wizengamot and Head of the Order of the Phoenix," snorted Regulus.

"You're saying?" sighed Sirius.

"I'm saying that from where I'm standing it appears that you have been royally screwed," muttered Regulus. "Sideways, with no lube and not so much, as much as thank you for your services," he added. "Doesn't really surprises me, considering what I know he did to Harry," he concluded grimly.

"What he did to Harry?" asked Sirius harshly.

"Ever met Petunia Dursley and or her husband?" asked Regulus.

"At James's and Lily's wedding, briefly," answered Sirius. "Not a very pleasant experience."

"Not very pleasant people," snorted Regulus. "Come to think about it, that's an understatement," he grimaced. "They're the least suitable guardians in the world and I met my share of unsuitable guardians over the years. They're so unsuitable that I wouldn't trust them with a snail, let alone raising two boys."

Sirius swallowed and breathed out, "Harry?"

"Delightful, intelligent child," answered Regulus. "Polite, shy, helpful, Merlin only knows how he managed to turn out like that. Considering that pair of apes who raised him and his cousin," he paused and shook his head. "Harry has non-existent self-worth when I last saw him, but he might have gained some away from those fuckwits, but I'm not betting on it. Small, scrawny, too small for his age, always underweight, might have gained some at Hogwarts but even after two years of proper feeding he's barely tethering on the edge of what is considered as an appropriate weight for a boy his age."

"How..." started Sirius. "How did you get that information?" he asked meekly.

"I taught him," shrugged Regulus. "Him and his cousin both, through entire primary school. I had access to school records, to medical records. Called or convinced others to call Child Protective Services on the Dursleys more times than I can bother to count. Merlin only knows how I managed to not get myself obliviated in the process because curiously that's exactly what happened every single time the system got involved with the Dursleys," he grimaced. "And I know the system, I worked with the system, I trust the system because it had never failed in any other case, except with the Dursleys," he spat the last word.

"The system?" asked Sirius.

"Teachers, nurses, physicians, police," grunted Regulus. "Abused kids, neglected kids, kids with a difficult situation at home. Take your pick. Yes, the system is flawed and some fall through the cracks but no one fell through all cracks every single god-damn time like Harry Bloody Potter."
"What you know?" whispered Sirius.

"Plenty," snorted Regulus. "I know plenty. I have his entire unedited medical history. I've seen things that should have sent that bloody oaf straight to prison, that jade too, for less but from where I'm standing neither of the boys should remain under their care from the very first time CPS had been called on them. And that was before I started teaching," he muttered. "But no, every time the system gets involved people mysteriously develop a case of amnesia and I have a physical proof who is responsible for that."

"Dumbledore?" asked Sirius weakly. "Dumbledore wouldn't allow..."

"James's and Lily's child to grow up in an abusive and negligent household?" asked Regulus. "Are we talking about the same man who let you rot nearly twelve years in Azkaban without as much as a proper trial?"

"It seems so," grimaced Sirius. "But why? What he would gain from not removing Harry from the Dursleys?"

"Good question," sighed Regulus. "Remind me, what is your relation to Harry aside of being second cousins?"

"I'm his godfather," answered Sirius pensively. "From the very day he was born. James and Lily had their last will and testament drawn shortly after the wedding. Long before they started trying for a baby. It's there black on white, should they have any children and somehow they managed to predecease them and said children are underage at the time of their parents' deaths then they should be put under my care until they reached adulthood."

"And we have a winner," muttered Regulus. "Say, how you would raise Harry if that shitstorm hadn't happened? If right from the moment of the Potters demise you would have been his de facto parent?"

"Aware," Sirius said the first thing that came to his mind. "Of his parentage, his heritage. Why his parents died. Who killed them and why," his thoughts flew back to that god-damn prophecy. "I would make sure that he would be prepared for..."

"... an encore?" Regulus supplied eagerly. "Say what you want but seven years in Gryffindor didn't uproot twelve years of Slytherin conditioning. Because that's exactly what I would do too."

"It's not Slytherin conditioning, it's common sense and self-preservation," muttered Sirius. "And I've got both in spades."

"Something Slytherin is famed for once you get past blood purity," said Regulus with a smirk. "And I will give you self-preservation because if you had enough common sense you wouldn't be in this mess in the first place."

"It's a very selective common sense," snorted Sirius. "Sometimes it takes a setback when self-preservation gets involved and my self-preservation tends to extend on people I care for."

"You want that as an epitaph when you die?" snorted Regulus.

"Nah, that would be 'lived long and fully in spite of some setbacks in his youth and died of old age, have a pint in his memory'," chuckled Sirius.

"If that happens and I'm still around to do so I will get you that," snickered Regulus. "That and a drawing of a prick on the tombstone."
"Why?"

"Because you deserve it after everything you put me through, you humongous bell end," chuckled Regulus. "I take my eyes off you for two effing years and then bam you get yourself landed in bloody Azkaban of all places. If I had any magic at all in me when I first heard that I would have broken to Azkaban with the sole intention of hexing your sorry arse from then to eternity."

"Magic?" Sirius asked curiously. "What you're talking about?"

Regulus shrugged and put his hands in the pocket of his jeans before he finally answered, "While the news of my demise had been greatly exaggerated, I came pretty close to dying very shortly after my supposed death. Hence why no one came looking after my supposed corpse had been discovered. That bloody tapestry tracks blood and the magic within and..."

"And?" pressed Sirius. "You stunned Harry, you stunned me."

"Let's not forget side-apparating your sorry arses here and thorough warding of the house," Regulus snorted Regulus. "This is now," he added and paused before he said, "let's just say for now that I had a pretty good fucking reason to develop my Muggle alter ego considering that for all intents and purposes for quite a long time I had been one."

"You lost your magic?" asked Sirius softly. "How did it happen? When?"

"Back in 1979," shrugged Regulus. "It's a long story and I will tell you that but first I would really love to get the full picture of what I'm dealing with. From you, from Harry."

"Reg," Sirius pressed.

"Sior," answered Regulus, using that stupid childhood nickname he gave Sirius when he was five.

"Rab," Sirius changed tactics, using Regulus childhood nickname remembering that Regulus was always proud of both his names, Sirius less so considering the similar use of his own names stood for Sob which essentially stood for a son of a bitch which while accurate wasn't what he wanted to be known as.

"Oh, bugger off," chuckled Regulus. "I'm fine, really," he shrugged. "A bit worse to wear and a little winded considering the complexity of magic I pulled off in last few hours but I'm fine. Let's talk about you."

"Me?" asked Sirius. "What about me?"


"Pettigrew," grumbled Sirius. "Pretty much answers all of your questions."

"Didn't you kill him?" asked Regulus pensively.

"I thought I did," Sirius snorted. "Or he, himself to be exact. I convinced James and Lily to use him as a Secret Keeper for Fidelius Charm instead of me. Without altering anyone about the change," he snorted. "I was supposed to be a diversion for Voldemort..."

"Can you not?" asked Regulus quickly. "Call him that, I mean?"

"I'm not calling him the Dark Lord, if that's what you're asking for," muttered Sirius.
"I abhor that aristocratic moniker, but I prefer to not invoke his name just in case," grimaced Regulus. "Call him Dark Wanker for all I care, just don't use that V word when I'm around."

"Like I was saying, I was supposed to be a diversion for the Wanker while Peter remained safe from his wrath and in consequence so were James, Lily, and Harry," Sirius continued. "Except that plan had one, giant flaw I was unaware at the time but one that became evident after what happened in Godric's Hallow."

"Pettigrew was already working for the Wanker," nodded Regulus.

"For over a year for certain," sighed Sirius. "Maybe more but that's when we realized that someone was evidently spying on the Order..." he shook his head. "I might as well hand them over to the Wanker myself."

"You can't be responsible for other people choices, Sirius," sighed Regulus. "Here is the thing I learned as a Muggle, people are always convinced that they know better, even though, and especially when, they don't."

"That's not going to change what happened," said Sirius grimly. "I went after him. Took me an entire day to track him down and when I finally did..." he shook his head. "He screamed at me how could I do it to James and Lily before he blew the street apart. Killed twelve innocent people, Muggles, adults..." he paused and licked his lips before he softly added, "kids. Seven of them, the youngest was hardly a few months older than Harry. I thought that he died too. Good riddance."

"But?" Regulus asked as he approached slowly Sirius's side of the bed.

"But he hadn't," snorted Sirius. "Cut off his god-damn finger, blew the street apart, transformed before the dust settled down and ran into the bloody sewers like a rat he was."

"Please don't tell me that he's an animagus too," Regulus groaned before he sat on the edge of the bed.

Instead of answering Sirius pulled from his pocket the photograph he tore from the Daily Prophet, of Pettigrew with the Weasleys and handed it to Regulus.

"Weasleys," muttered Regulus. "Didn't any one taught that woman contraceptive charms or potions?"

"If they did, it had fallen on the deaf ears," muttered Sirius. "Arthur and Molly were in the Order during the war, though she hadn't done much 'ordering' considering that at the time she was popping one kid after the other. Their youngest son is in Gryffindor, with Harry. Look at his pet."

"The rat is missing a finger in his front paw," said softly Regulus. "But how you can be so sure?"

"Because I saw countless times how he transformed," grumbled Sirius. "I taught him that, we taught him that. James and I, he nearly bloody didn't make it..." he shook his head. "He shouldn't have make it."

"Potter?" asked Regulus. "Prongs?"

"Antlers," sighed Sirius as he tried to mime the antlers with his hands. "Stag."

"Strangely appropriate," snorted Regulus. "And Lupin was what?"

"A werewolf," answered Sirius. "Since he was a little kid."
Regulus whistled before he said, "So that was his furry little problem and not a badly behaving rabbit."

"He tried to hide it but between curious snots like me and James he was really lucky that he managed to last a year," sighed Sirius. "Took us a solid month of observation to reach that conclusion once we allowed the answer 'werewolf' into the equation. It was really rough on him, transformations, trying to hide it from us."

"But how you got from werewolf to Animagi?" asked Regulus. "It's a pretty big leap."

"Not so much," shrugged Sirius. "Transformed werewolf is dangerous to humans but also himself. Add into the equation a non-human distraction and you cut off self-harm which was a pretty big deal for Moony."

"Padfoot?" asked Regulus.

"Moony's fault," snorted Sirius. "Observant swot upon closer inspection of our Animagi forms – once he stopped freaking out and seeing all of us locked in Azkaban – saw that while I was entirely black, I had pink pads on my paws. Eventually, I grew out of it and they turned black but at the time it was either Padfoot or Pinky."

"Sweet," snickered Regulus. "Now I know why I liked him better than the other two. Pity, that it took me so fucking long to come around."

"You saw him?" Sirius asked hopefully.

"Nope," Regulus shook his head before he handed Sirius the photograph back. "I don't know if he was around Harry before I came into the picture but for sure I know that he wasn't there afterwards."

"Maybe you've missed him," sighed Sirius.

"Nada, not Lupin," Regulus muttered. "Sense of humour isn't the only thing we have in common," he added. "Lupin, while fairly talented and fairly powerful, had this particular talent of blending with the background. I used it a lot after I took the mark, especially when I was recruiting. I used magic at first but after some time it became natural and I developed a talent for picking from the crowd similar people. Lupin could do that, Snape could do that, Verascez and Babbling could do that, hell even you could do that when you applied yourself. Potter and Evans always stood out like a pair of sore thumbs and Pettigrew was too much of a klutz at the time."

"Your point being?" asked Sirius pointedly.

"Is that, even if he doesn't want to be seen I can still spot Lupin in the crowd. I never saw him around Harry," answered Regulus. "Why are you asking?"

"I thought..." Sirius started and shook his head.

"That he took care of Harry when you couldn't?" Regulus supplied. "Didn't happen and I have a pretty good idea why."

"Dumbledore again," muttered Sirius. "He was the one who convinced Moony's parents to let him go to Hogwarts."

"Of bloody course," snorted Regulus. "Enormous debt of gratitude, Lupin wouldn't go against Dumbledore's wishes even if his life depended on it... Especially if his life depended on it."
"Fucker," grumbled Sirius.

"It also makes me think..." started Regulus. "Muggle, and I presume also wizarding authorities are looking for an escaped convict Sirius Black and not an escaped convict Sirius Black and a black dog. Had been since Harry's birthday," he added pensively.

"Harry's birthday?" asked Sirius sceptically.

"Yeah, 31st July," nodded Regulus.

"Yeah, I know, I was with them when that happened," Sirius nodded. "And happy birthday by the way. What you want for a present?" he added.

"My present is sitting right in front of me," answered swiftly Regulus. "Breathing..." he paused before he added, "and smelling like a dirty, wet dog. Your point?"

"That photograph comes from the Daily Prophet, I got from Fudge on 27th July. I barely slept a wink that night, plotted my escape through 28th and finally escaped right after 29th July headcount," answered Sirius. "Which gave me an entire day before they realized that I was missing and you're telling me now that the news hit the papers on 31st?"

"Yep," nodded Regulus. "I nearly choked myself on a toast when I first saw it. Knew from that very moment that I had to sit on Harry around the clock."

"I'm hoping not literally," muttered Sirius.

"Not really," shrugged Regulus. "I have a pair of very good binoculars and blessedly the entire Dursley household by bugging it from top to bottom. Hence that sudden reunion on Magnolia Road, I knew that the kid was pulling a runner the very moment he did so. I'm older and I have longer legs and there is the only way for a runaway kid who can't use magic to get away from that god-damn town and that's through Magnolia Road."

"Not the only road," muttered Sirius.

"But the best road to the bus station," retorted Regulus. "I intended to intercept him before he reached it, hoped to get him to talk, didn't really expected a reunion but I'm really glad it happened."

"So, what now?" asked Sirius.

"Now," said Regulus pointedly. "You're going to take a very thorough bath, while I will find something for you to wear. My old clothes should be around somewhere and if not mine then father's. Either way, once I will find them, I will get back to you and we will see if I can make you look less like a male banshee."

"Won't work," snorted Sirius.

"Why?" asked curiously Regulus.

"Black family genes," muttered Sirius. "That accursed metamorphmagi hiccup from our great-great something great-grandfather that was the reason why you never shaved, why father had to shave at least twice a day and why mother never managed to straighten out her hair even after she took a bath in Sleekeasy. In me, it manifests in spontaneous hair-growth and is tied to stress levels. I spent entire Hogwarts education with relatively short hair but once they let us out of the training into the field, I always ended the day looking like a hippie. I gave up trying, so did my instructors."
"Your hair is tied in knots," pointed out Regulus. "But I give up, if you can tame it yourself, I'm all for it. I'll have time to get us some food. You're still partial to pizza, aren't you?"

"Salami, mushrooms, black olives with lots of cheese?" asked Sirius eagerly.

"I was thinking chicken, avocado, egg and pickles," smirked Regulus.

"You bloody heathen," Sirius snorted.

"Heathen?" snorted Regulus. "The Dursleys adore pizza with pineapple, peach, and anchovies."

"And Harry?" asked Sirius.

"As far as I'm aware the only time that kid had pizza was when it was on the lunch menu at school," muttered Regulus. "I will get him something easy. And I know that you don't want to leave him out of your sight but please have a bath before you approach him, and don't wake him up unless he will wake himself up. He really looks like a proper night of sleep would do him good."

Sirius nodded, albeit reluctantly but deep inside he knew that Regulus was right. He didn't know how he looked but approaching Harry in his all recently escaped Azkaban and spent a week as a dog glory wouldn't convince Harry to trust him.

"Come on," Regulus said as he stood up and extended his hand to him.

"I can walk," Sirius sighed as he slowly swing his legs over the side of the bed to the floor. He barely managed to stand up when his right leg cramped, and he would have fallen down like a sack of potatoes, if Regulus hadn’t managed to catch him.

"I can see that," Regulus commented as he pulled Sirius's right arm over his shoulders and wrapped his left arm around his middle. "You're what 1.91 Meters?" he asked when he started leading him slowly out of the bedroom.

"1.90 Meters," answered Sirius with a slight grumble.

"That means that you should weight about 68 Kilograms at the very least," said Regulus. "I'm not feeling it and you definitely don't look it."

"Azkaban feeds prisoners once a day," muttered Sirius. "Right after the headcount," he snorted. "A bucket of water interchangeable with a bucket of weak as fuck tea. Always a small loaf of bread with either small pot of weak vegetable stew or some suspicious meat stew and there is no rhyme or reason for when you get one. And let's not forget that I already started my stay at about 72 Kilograms."

"Wouldn't give you more than 59 Kilograms," grunted Regulus.

"Might be," agreed Sirius. "Though I lived on as much kibble as I dared to steal from random dogs. Might be less than that."

They didn't speak through the rest of the trek to the bathroom until Regulus deposited him on the lid of the toilet as he eyed the bathtub suspiciously. It took few cleaning charms but soon enough the bathtub was filled with alluringly looking warm water and after a thorough inspection that also contained sniffing the bottle of bath foam Regulus dumped half of the contents of it into the tub.

Then came the hard part which technically should be an easy part. Disrobing his Azkaban rags, something he should be very eager to do but suddenly he remembered what was under them. Not
the gaunt body, but scars that hadn't been there when he was taken to Azkaban, not ones earned in battle and worn proudly but ones that were given to him by some people he used to trust. And then there were tattoos.

With a flick of Regulus's wand Sirius's Azkaban rags disappeared and self-consciously Sirius curled his arms around his middle and hung his head just as he heard Regulus take in a harsh breath. He knew what Regulus saw, nearly everything.

"Bastards," spat Regulus as he knelt in front of him, immediately taking Sirius's left arm into his hands and examining it closely, its scars and tattoos. "Who done it?" he asked harshly.

"Doesn't matter," whispered Sirius softly.

"Traitor, murderer, Death Eater," Regulus muttered as he ran his fingers over the runes. "Very lousy rendition of a Dark Mark which an artistically challenged ten years old kid could have drawn better," he added as he quickly pulled his right hand away from Sirius's arm and rolled his own left sleeve.

It was there, on his forearm, barely visible, pale like a smear of ash rather than completely black like he remembered seeing it on arms of the Death Eaters he managed to capture or kill.

"You're right, yours looks better," Sirius chuckled mirthlessly.

"Who done it?" pressed Regulus.

"Doesn't matter," shrugged Sirius.

"It does," objected Regulus vehemently.

"No, it does not," Sirius shook his head. "It's not going to change a thing. It's just ink. Words, just words. They aren't hurting."

"Words, no," muttered Regulus. "But this," he pointed at the jagged scar that ran from the inside of Sirius's left elbow all the way down to his left wrist, "this looks like it was done with a saw."

"It was," admitted Sirius. "It healed."

"It healed?" Regulus bristled angrily. "Stab wounds," he added as he looked down at Sirius's legs. "About twenty on each leg. Something that looks like scars from open fractures on the right tibia… and femur," he ran both his hands down Sirius's lower right leg. "Badly healed."

"But it healed," sighed Sirius. "I'm fine, Reg."

"Fine," muttered Regulus. "I'm fine and I had both legs ran over by a bloody ambulance of all things. Had to learn how to walk again like a bloody toddler and I was in a hospital the entire time. Limped for some time after and I still lit metal detectors like a Christmas tree at Harrods."

"Let me guess? Another long story?" asked Sirius.

"Still the same story," snorted Regulus. "But this," he gestured at Sirius's leg, "this is barbaric. Whoever had done this..."

"Does no longer matter," finished Sirius. "It's over and has been over for some time."

"How long?" asked Regulus quickly.
"About nine years, maybe eight," shrugged Sirius. "The vultures stop playing with their food once the food stops being entertaining."

"You call this entertainment?" snorted Sirius.

"Some wardens do," sighed Sirius. "I call it bloody inconvenient but once you get used to it... It's not as bad as singing lessons."

"Singing lessons?" whispered Regulus.

"Reserved for top security, a lifetime in Azkaban, prisoners. Three to seven wardens, one prisoner and a merry round of Cruciatus Curse," clarified Sirius. "Rhythmic, short bursts about two, three seconds long each. Repeat until the prisoner passes out, acquire a new target. Usually applied weekly, sometimes every three, four days... My memory gets a little fuzzy on the time constraints but what I do remember is that they usually came back when one's hands stopped shaking after the last one," he explained.

Regulus shot up into standing position.

"Gets boring pretty fast too," Sirius continued without looking up at him. "After all the purpose of entertainment is to entertain and when your prisoner cannot scream because he screamed his throat raw earlier, they tend to leave one in peace for a while. Top that with rudimentary Occlumency shields and one can blank out the entire lesson," he added with a shrug.

"How long?" whispered weakly Regulus.

"About two, two and a half, maybe three years," answered Sirius simply. "Old crowd either died out, moved on, retired or got promoted back to the civilisation, and their replacement just didn't measure up to their expectations. Bunch of wimps," he shrugged. "They stick around for the headcount before they hole themselves at the top of the tallest tower behind some pretty fancy wards which Bathsy would love to take apart."

"Bathsy?" asked Regulus. "By Bathsy, you mean Babbling?"

"It's not my fault that her arse of a father couldn't write her name right on her birth certificate because he was too drunk to do so," replied Sirius. "She used to be fascinated with that wardwork, left me notes what I should be looking for every time I was dropping a prisoner to Azkaban."

"And you being a good friend obliged," finished Regulus. "Pity that it didn't go both ways."

Sirius shrugged before he answered, "She had her own problems, I had mine and without..." he hung his voice and cleared his throat before he added, "we grew apart and she moved back with her parents. For all that I know, she might no longer be a Babbling. Last I heard of her was that her parents were planning to marry her off to some cretin."

"She still might be, a Babbling, I mean," said Regulus thoughtfully. "I didn't know her as well as you used to but unless she has undergone a thorough removal of her spine and brain she might still go by that name. Would you like me..."

"If that sentence ends with fetching her the answer is, no," Sirius shook his head. "If you're right and she isn't married then she has enough on her plate already. And if she is, she probably even has more..."

"...to fetch some old Daily Prophets for you to read," finished Regulus. "Clarify one thing for me while you're at it."
"Sure," Sirius nodded.

"Bathsheba?" asked Regulus pointedly. "Yours?"

"De facto goddaughter, yes, even though we never officially signed anything because it was always evident to Bathsy that she would outlive us and if someone would wind up inheriting our parental responsibilities it would be her, not us," replied Sirius. "And if you meant daughter then your answer is, no. I have no idea who her father is and if I did..." he hung his voice and moved his hand with a slicing motion over his neck.

"I'm strangely glad to hear that," sighed Regulus. "For a moment I thought..."

"... that you will have to orchestrate another reunion?" chuckled Sirius. "Maybe much later when I'm officially free. Sheba should be in her fourth year and if she is anything like her mother Harry could benefit from a level-headed friend and maybe a motherly figure in his life who could be bothered to look up life expectancy of pet rats."

"Not a fan of the Weasleys then?" Regulus snickered before he helped him stand up and get into the tub.

Sirius hissed slightly as he sat down before he answered, "Not a fan of Molly. Temper and obstinacy of a Prewett, attention span of a very attentive Goyle, coupled with an inability to exert any kind of control over her offspring..."

He slid down under the surface of the water for a moment before he sat up again and continued, "At the time I first met her she had about five boys running around. Aged ten, eight, five or four, a pair of two years old twins and was about to pop out another one at the time. Should be appropriately named Tornado, Hurricane, Walking Disaster, Chaos, and Destruction because that's how they acted when I was around. Couple that with her complaints about how frugal their financial situation was..."

"And let me guess you pointed out the obvious solution?" asked Regulus as he reached for a washcloth and soaped it before he ran it over Sirius's shoulders.

"I'm sorry," Sirius snorted before he groaned at the feeling of the warm, soapy cloth over his back. "I'm a firm believer that people who can barely afford to support themselves should not procreate until they can afford to raise a single child, let alone such a big number. I understand the allure of having one child to love and raise, someone to take care of you when you grow old. But I've seen enough of what poverty does to people to know for certain that while every child needs love and support of their parents they also need food, clothes, and proper education. And last time I checked you can't sustain child's hunger with love, you can't cloth them with love and sure as hell in order to gain their education they need books, not love."

"Personal experience?" Regulus asked softly as he dipped the cloth lower.

"I spent entire summer before seventh year juggling three jobs when I wasn't studying for my masteries because Third Class Masteries in Transfiguration and Defence Against the Dark Arts were my best shot at getting into Auror training on the top of the list and I needed to be on the top of that list in order to get additional funds," explained Sirius. "Bear in mind that while Uncle Alphard left me a decent bit of gold it was barely enough for a humbly finished flat..."

"And a bike," added Regulus with a small chuckle.

"1977 Triumph Bonneville, with a sidecar. Won it in a bet, fixed it with my own two hands and
lITTLE SPEWWORK,” clarified Sirius. "GOOD, OLD DIESEL ENGINE, COULD RUN ON USED COOKING OIL AND A CHINESE RESTAURANT BY MY PLACE WAS VERY HAPPY WHEN I OCCASIONALLY RELIEVED THEM FROM A BARREL OR TWO. I WONDER WHAT HAGRID HAD DONE TO IT, WE COULD USE THAT."

"OR WE COULD USE MINE 1985 VOLKSWAGEN BEETLE," SAID REGULUS POINTEDLY. "CHROME, FLAMING RED, SAFETY BELTS, PLENTY OF STORAGE SPACE."

"AND YOU APPARATED US OUT OF LITTLE WHENDING?" SNIORTED SIRIUS.

"I PANICKED, ALL RIGHT," SHRUGGED REGULUS. "PLUS, YOUR MUTT IS KINDA RECOGNIZABLE RIGHT NOW AND I'M NOT GOING BACK TO LITTLE WHENDING UNTIL IT STOPS SWIMMING WITH AURORS. ALSO, I DON'T HAVE IT RIGHT NOW."

"SO, YOU DO OR DON'T HAVE IT?" ASKED SIRIUS CURIOUSLY.

"MUM AND DAD DO," SHRUGGED REGULUS. "NOT OURS, BECAUSE FROM WHAT I MANAGED TO ASCERTAIN THEY'RE AND HAVE BEEN BOTH DEAD FOR YEARS."

"HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO ACQUIRE ANOTHER SET OF PARENTS THEN?"

"THROUGH MY NATURAL CHARM," RETORTED REGULUS. "NOT REALLY," HE SIGHED AFTER A MOMENT. "MUM WAS ONE OF THE NURSES AT MY HOSPITAL. THEY HAD A SON ABOUT OUR AGE, A SOLDIER STATIONED IN NORTH IRELAND, MICHAEL WAS HIS NAME. HE WAS KILLED EARLY IN THE YEAR 1979," HE SIGHED AGAIN. "AND THERE I WAS, ABOUT HIS AGE, HIS HEIGHT, OF SIMILAR BUILT. JOHN DOE, FOR OVER A YEAR IN A COMA AND WITH MORE SURGERIES UNDER MY BELT THAT I COULD COUNT. NO NAME, NO NEXT OF KIN, ALL BY MYSELF. SO, SHE LINGERED, PAID ME MORE TIME THAN THE OTHERS, STAYED AFTER WORK TO READ TO ME, TO BATHE ME..."

"ADOPTED YOU BEFORE YOU KNEW WHAT WAS HAPPENING," SUPPLIED SIRIUS.

"NAH," SHRUGGED REGULUS. "THAT CAME MUCH LATER AFTER I REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS. AT FIRST, SHE ANNOYED ME AS FUCK. ALWAYS THERE, ALWAYS TALKING, ALWAYS SO BLOODY EAGER TO HELP AND ALWAYS CONCERNED HOW I WAS DOING. SHE GOT ME THROUGH A VERY DARK PERIOD OF TIME FOR ME. YOU KNOW," HE SHRUGGED AGAIN, "NO MAGIC, USELESS, BROKEN BODY, BLOODY DARK LORD HANGING SOMEWHERE OVER MY HEAD. AND SHE WAS PATIENT WITH ME SO WHEN I FINALLY STARTED TALKING, SUPPOSEDLY REMEMBERING THINGS ABOUT MY 'PREVIOUS' LIFE WHEN DOCTORS ASKED, I GAVE THEM THE NAME I THOUGHT SHE WOULD GIVE HER SON, MARTIN GREEN."

"NICE," MUTTERED SIRIUS.

"NOT VERY," CHUCKLED REGULUS. "AS PARENTS NAMES, I GAVE THE DOCTORS HER AND HER HUSBAND'S NAME, MARTHA AND MARK GREEN, COULDN'T REMEMBER DATES OF BIRTH BUT THAT'S WHEN I RAN INTO DAD. TURNED OUT THAT HE WAS WITH SCOTLAND YARD AND AFTER A VERY PRIVATE AND STERN CONVERSATION IT TURNED OUT THAT MARTIN GREEN, BORN 3RD NOVEMBER 1959 NEVER EXISTED."

"OH, REG," SIGHED SIRIUS HEAVILY.

"BUT HE EXISTED AFTER," SMILED REGULUS. "WE ARE WIZARDS, PURE-BLOODES AND RAISED BY PURE-BLOODES SO TECHNICALLY WE DON'T HAVE ANY MUGGLE IDS SINCE WE DON'T USUALLY NEED ONE. I DIDN'T TELL THEM EVERYTHING. BUT THAT'S WHEN THEY 'OFFICIALLY' ADOPTED ME. THEY TOOK ME IN, PUT ME BACK ON MY FEET, PUT ME THROUGH SCHOOL, THROUGH UNIVERSITY. I WAS LUCKY I'VE MET THEM, AND I OWE THEM A LOT, A DEBT I WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO FULLY PAY BACK," HE SHOOK HIS HEAD. "BUT I'M TRYING," HE ADDED WISTFULLY.

"WILL I GET TO MEET THEM?" ASKED SIRIUS PENSIVELY.

"EVENTUALLY," SHRUGGED REGULUS. "BY MY ESTIMATIONS, THEY SHOULD BE IN SPAIN RIGHT NOW, THEY'RE
both retired so I've sent them on a very long and very deserved vacation and I'm not really expecting them back before the end of August, maybe even mid-September."

"Good for you," smiled Sirius. "That you had them, and still have them, I mean. In a span of last fourteen years, they've done more good for you, than our own parents through previous eighteen."

" Twelve and about a half but yeah," nodded Regulus. "Will you be all right if I'll leave you to finish? I want to swing by pizza place before it closes," he asked.

"Sure," confirmed Sirius. "Just leave me a change of clothes and go."

"All right," said Regulus. "I'll be right back," he added before he left the bathroom.

He came back about a few minutes later with an armful of clothes when Sirius was still soaking in the bath without as much as a twitch to start washing or changing the water because it started to look a bit grey.

"Still fit me," said Regulus when he placed the clothes on the counter. "Should fit you just about right too, for now at least. I'll need to go shopping tomorrow anyway. You want anything specific?" he asked.

"Anything you're buying for yourself you can buy for me too," answered Sirius with a smirk. "It took some time, but you grew into some sense of comfortable fashion."

"Fuck you," snorted Regulus. "But you're right," he grinned "Muggles are far more practical than wizards in that regard. Merlin, entire childhood and teenage years in slacks, button-ups and this weird cross between robes and jackets. I gave up slacks after the first week of teaching. I still must wear button-ups though. See you later," he added and left the bathroom.

Sirius tried to listen to his footsteps, but he couldn't trace him farther than past the landing and one flight of stairs. Once he couldn't hear Regulus anymore he pulled out the plug and watched almost transfixed how the water was pouring out of the tub trying hard not to think about anything he recently heard or learned.

Don't think, he told himself.

Take a deep breath and let it out, just like that.

Now another and another.

You're safe here.

Harry is safe here, even Reg is safe here now that that cow is gone for good. It's not ideal, never will be ideal but you can get past it. Sooner rather than later you will find Pettigrew and you can move out of this hovel, maybe even with Harry. But for now, this will have to do.

His father's face swam before his eyes and he quickly waved his hands in front of his face. The bastard was dead, had been for nearly as much as Regulus and unlike Regulus he had been gone for good, he checked just in case, but he was definitely dead. Good riddance too.

And Regulus might have mellowed over the years from a junior Death Eater and pure-blood supremacist into a sensible young man who saw the error of his ways, but it was obvious from the way he was speaking about father that blessedly he didn't have the same memories of the man as Sirius.
Thank Merlin.

Don't think, he chided himself again. He's dead and you aren't, he's not going to hurt you anymore just like he was never going to hurt Reg as he promised. It's over, you're safe and what happened to you is not going to happen to anyone anymore.

Sirius closed his eyes and tried desperately to not think but it was already too late because there he was, standing right next to him in all his glory. Dark, fancifully elegant robes that cost more than they were worth. Black hair pulled back into that pure-blood ponytail with a bow to tie it, nothing like ordinary Muggle elastics he and Reg used. Grey eyes so much like his very own but full of disdain, disgust and this...

"Good boy," he said. "You're not going to scream because your half-breed godson is sleeping in the next room and who knows where that good for nothing brother of yours had wandered off. For all you know he's downstairs making that disgusting Mudblood pies by hand like a useless squib he is..."

"Get out," Sirius hissed angrily. "You aren't here. You're dead and I even know who killed you, you bastard."

"Yes, that Mudblood, you used to be sweet on," the image of his father sneered. "Where is she now, remind me?"

"Out!" Sirius hissed again, and he slammed his left hand against the ridge of the tub.

Pain was good, pain was real unlike the vision of this animal before him. Because that what Orion Black truly was. An animal, a savage, cruel beast of a man whose greatest source of joy was his son's suffering.

"Oh yes," the man said again. "Are you certain that your head is screwed the right way, Sirius? That you will never follow in my footsteps? Wasn't there a time when you used to be enamoured with James Potter? His half-breed son looks just like him. How easy it would be..."

"I'm not you," whispered Sirius. "I never was, I never will. And if I will ever feel for Harry what you felt for me, I will end myself first. I will never do that to him, ever. You heard me."

"Coward," came a sneered taunt. "Good for nothing, lousy coward."

Instead of answering Sirius slammed his hand again at the ridge of the tub and opened his eyes. He was alone in the bathroom like he knew that he was alone in the bathroom, to begin with. His hand was throbbing slightly. But this vision felt too real, too tangible, too close.

"I'll never be you," he sneered at the air before he sprung out of the tub, nearly toppled over the edge but somehow, he maintained a standing position.

He limped to the cupboard and opened it. He found what he needed within his reach and quickly tested the razor on a clump of hair just under his chin. It fell almost immediately with little effort. Fine goblin-made silvered steel enchanted to always remain sharp. He reached for the scissors and this time he grabbed a fistful of hair before he cut his hair as close to his skull as he could get.

It took more than a handful of snipes but finally, his hair was all on the floor rather than on his head and what remained on it was an inelegant chop of differing lengths but that was easily amended with the help of the razor.

Once thoroughly bald and clean-shaven he took a good look at himself in the mirror. The man in
front of him looked nothing like Orion Black, not even remotely close to him, more like a prisoner from Muggle concentration camps he once read about. Gaunt, sunken face, waxy skin, yellow teeth and painfully thin with nearly all bones visible.

He smiled at his reflection and it smiled back at him.

Merlin, he looked pitiful.

He reached again into the cupboard, found toothpaste and toothbrush that appeared to be never used. He washed his teeth trice before he was remotely pleased with his efforts. It wasn't what he remembered seeing in the mirror before he went to Azkaban but at least his teeth no longer looked like teeth of tobacco smoking and chewing miner.

Once he was pleased with the state of his head, both in and outside, he headed back to the tub. Run more fresh water, poured less bath foam into it than Regulus did and proceed to thoroughly scrub himself. By the time he was nearly done with his arms and chest, he could feel the pinpricking sensation of growing hair on the top of his head. By the time he was done with washing his lower body his hair was reaching his shoulders. Once he stepped out of the tub after rising himself his hair was reaching past his shoulder-blades. Stupid metamorphmagi gene, but Merlin, it felt good to get rid of it even if it was for a few minutes.

He dried himself and put on the clothes Reg left for him. Generic, white underpants. A pair of black slacks that he needed a belt, that Regulus thoughtfully also left with them, to keep them from falling down his scrawny arse. Slytherin green button-up shirt with grey trimming but ridiculously soft. Grey cardigan with Slytherin emblem that was also as ridiculously soft like the shirt and very warm, too warm to be a standard Hogwarts equipment.

It reminded him of Remus because Remus always loved Hogwarts's cardigans and in all seven years, Sirius didn't remember seeing him in plain jumpers he, James and Pettigrew preferred.

"They come with pockets, idiots," he once told them when they teased him about looking like a teenage grandpa.

"Oh Moony," he sighed heavily. "Where are you, old pal? Are you even alive?"

Because that had to be it. Regulus might have believed that Dumbledore had an enormous sway over Moony and that the man purposely kept Moony away from Harry. But it was Harry, the only thing left of James and Lily, aside from few photographs and knick-knacks. If it was him not even Dumbledore and the entire Ministry of Magic couldn't keep him away from Harry.

But he wasn't a werewolf. A poor werewolf to be exact that between helping his father in Lyall Lupin's small dark creatures eradication business had to work odd Muggle jobs when his bosses one after the other kindly let him go when they learned that he was a werewolf.

That had to be it. The poverty, the stigma, Remus's fear of inflicting his condition upon others. And on the top of that, Dumbledore, against whom and whose wishes Remus would never go out of pure gratitude for allowing him to attend Hogwarts. Reg was right.

But that was going to change. All he needed was Pettigrew whose capture would grant him his freedom which will grant him removing Harry from the Dursleys supposed care. With that out of the way, it will take some coaxing and a lot of glowering to convince Remus that Dumbledore wasn't as white as his beard. Reg would obviously help. Maybe they could even get Bathsy on board if she felt up to it and good old Bathsy abhorred manipulative bastards by a simple principle of being raised by one. She would see the light immediately and she was a Ravenclaw, Remus
always liked Ravenclaw way of thinking, the house-misplaced Ravenclaw that he was at heart.

With a clearer head, new hope in his heart and a pair of socks in his hands he left the bathroom and padded to Regulus's old bedroom. The room looked just like he remembered, a mix of Slytherin silver and emerald green but other than noticing that the colours hadn't changed he paid it no attention. For what really mattered, who really mattered, was lying on the right side of Regulus's bed.

As softly as he could he approached the bed and as gingerly as he could manage he sat on the edge of the bed.

Harry looked so peaceful. So small and thin and so much like James, the only thing that didn't look so much like James's was his nose, shorter and the lightning bolt scar on his forehead.

Merlin, he was so thin and the huge clothes he was wearing only emphasised it. Sirius's heart sized in his chest. Curse Petunia Dursley, if Lily knew how her sister was treating her baby boy…

Later, he thought to himself, we will take care of it later. Not with murder even though they might deserve it, but we can ship them off one way to the Australian outback, hopefully, the fauna and flora there will do the trick without getting our hands dirty.

He smiled at the thought and as gently as he could he ran his fingers over Harry's shoulder and arm. Under his touch the boy curled slightly and nuzzled into the pillow. So, the stunner was replaced with a sleeping spell.

"Thought that I might find you here," whispered Regulus from the door. "Pizzas are in the kitchen but if you aren't up for a walk, I can summon them. How is your leg?" he asked as he approached them.

"Better," admitted Sirius quietly. "A soak did it well. Throbbing is gone, I'm not even limping."

"Liar," snorted Regulus, softly to not wake Harry. "But I can't fix it without Skele-Gro so I will let it slide for now. If only I could find Kreacher..."

"What you need him for?" asked Sirius sceptically. "He was as maniac about blood purity as our parents."

"But loyal to me," answered Regulus without hesitation. "And it's a long story."

"Still the same one or a different one?" hummed Sirius.

"I'm not sure," mumbled Regulus. "I used to want to summon him when I was recovering but I always managed to talk myself out of it. Later on, too. Summoning him wouldn't do me anything good for as long as mother was around."

"Now you know that she isn't," pointed out Sirius. "What keeps you from calling him?"

"What remains out of this screw up family that hadn't been dead or locked up in Azkaban," answered Regulus with a shrug. "From what I learned Lucius Malfoy weaselled his way out of Azkaban. Claimed Imperius Curse but if he was really cursed I will eat my socks for dinner."

"You think that he might have gone to the Malfoys?" asked Sirius pensively.

"You think that he stayed here after mother died?" asked Regulus in return. "You've seen your room, bathroom, and this room. It hadn't been cleaned in ages. The rest of the house looks the
same. I know that Lola predeceased him, saw her head on the wall when I was going down. Una might have gone to the Malfoys or could have been set free if mother was in a right mood, you know how she was going through the house-elves. Kreacher only stayed as long as he did because he adapted."

"If you call becoming house-elf version of a pure-blood supremacist adaptation, then sure he adapted," Sirius snorted softly.

"You never got along well, didn't you?" sighed Regulus.

"No," Sirius shook his head. "Mutual charm, he pissed me off as much as I pissed him off. Every single time he was obliged to listen to anything I said I had to give him an exact and very detailed order. I got along better with others. Lola used to like me the most, poor thing," he sighed. "Wouldn't surprise me if that was the reason mother chopped her head off."

"Nah, if it was because of you she would have never made it past that summer vacation you escaped from here," muttered Regulus. "And she was still around when I supposedly died. My money is on Wanker's defeat or shortly after. Probably after Bella's incarceration, Lola hated her with as much passion as she allowed herself to muster. Which for a house-elf was surprisingly a lot. Called her a whore once."

"Lola?" whispered Sirius. "Called Bella a whore? To your face?"

"Yep," nodded Regulus. "I wholeheartedly agreed with her. Told her to never mention it to mother."

"Bella was a murderer and a maniac..." started Sirius.

"She was also the cunt the Dark Lord used to put his prick in," said Regulus with a grimace. "I guess it never reached your ears that she was the one who put a price on your head? On a goblin-made silver platter."

"How do you know that?" asked Sirius.

"I was there when the order was first issued," muttered Regulus. "He was inordinately pleased with her back then. He was even more pleased when the same order was issued again," he paused and shook his head. "To me directly, so I could prove my loyalty to him and the cause. Why do you think I decided to bow out and exit stage left?" he asked simply.

"You were told..." Sirius whispered. "To kill me?"

"Yep," nodded Regulus. "And I was warned about what will happen to me if you outlived your due date," he added with a shrug. "You had. Killed few bastards in the meantime. He sent Nott Senior and Frederick after me. I got them caught easily in that old summer mansion in Cornwall that belonged to our great-great-great-great-grandfather. I overpowered Frederick with little effort, force-fed him with Polyjuice, put an Imperius Curse on him, had him attack Nott as me and watched him getting killed in my place. I knew that in the long run that rouse won't work but I needed time to finish the long story."

"Which you aren't going to tell me now, let me guess?" grimaced Sirius.

"Maybe a little later, after I will find Kreacher," answered Regulus. "Or at the very least ascertain his whereabouts. Changing the subject. Pizzas?" he asked pointedly.

"Did you put warming charms on them?" asked Sirius.
"No," Regulus shook his head.

"Liar," smirked Sirius. "You used to abhor cold food that wasn't supposed to be cold to begin with."

"I used to abhor a lot of things but then I grew up," came a reply. "I went to college and I shared house with a Scotland Yard Inspector, don't forget that. Dad's eating habits always drove Mum nuts, she always worried about his high cholesterol, with good reason seeing that a heart-attack nearly finished him off," he clarified.

"The more I hear about them the eager I'm to meet them," admitted Sirius with a small smile.

"Weirdly, I'm just as eager to arrange that meeting," smirked Regulus. "At the very least she will stop complaining about my eating habits and will focus on yours," he paused. "Yeah, I can see a lot of coddling in your future," he beamed at Sirius. "You just wait."

"Is it a threat or a promise?" asked Sirius cheekily.

"Either, both," said Regulus with a shrug and he grinned.

"What?" asked Sirius quickly.

"It just occurred to me that you and Harry will be a package deal," he grinned again. "Man, it keeps getting better and better. No more complaints about my eating habits and no more setting me up on blind dates so I can start a family on my own because she misses the pitter patter of tiny feet. I love her, but she drives me nuts and after spending an entire day at school dealing with other people kids the last thing I need is kids on my own."

"Really?" drawled Sirius teasingly.

"Plus, any procreating efforts from my part would destroy the illusion that I'm dead," clarified Regulus. "No, until the Dark Lord is gone for good I'm not procreating. Forget it and convince her to forget that too."

"If I will get a chance to do that I might," smirked Sirius. "Does she know that you're a wizard?" he asked curiously.

"I tried my best to not advertise it when my magic started slowly to come back," admitted Regulus. "Luckily for me, it happened around the time I started teaching and we moved to Little Whinging. Luckily for me, our house shares a garden wall with the Dursleys and my spontaneous burst of magic was written off as Harry's until I managed to lay down some pretty fancy ward work to keep the Ministry from tracking me down."

"That didn't really answer my question," Sirius pointed out.

"I never told them," sighed Regulus. "I thought about it, but it never seemed like a good idea at the time. There were always another issues at hand and wizarding world is a lot to take in," he shrugged. "But they aren't stupid, there's only as much as I can get away without them noticing that I'm not completely normal. I think that they write off some of my weird behaviour as an effect of a trauma or previous upbringing," he smiled. "I think our mother would have rolled in her grave if she knew that Dad suspected me of being raised by some sort of criminals because I could get into a thoroughly locked house without a set of keys."

"You were," grunted Sirius. "In a way."
"So were you and I know for a fact that you are familiar with lock-picks, unlike me," retorted Regulus. "I had to learn how to do that after that stunt."

"Magic is mighty but it can be flashy as fuck," shrugged Sirius. "Plus, magic leaves a trace and a skilfully picked lock does not, not to mention that state of locks in wizarding households just asks for breaking and entering. So, they don't know?" he changed the subject. "How you're planning to explain all of that to them?" he waved his left hand around the room.

"I didn't plan that far ahead," shrugged Regulus. "Plus, I don't have to worry about it at least until mid-September. Hopefully, by then Pettigrew will be in prison, you will no longer be a fugitive from the law and I'm banking on your ability to charm off the ladies. You will take care of Mum, I will take care of Dad and hopefully, they won't hate me afterwards for hiding the truth."

"Oh Reg," Sirius shook his head. "Eighteen years of Slytherin upbringing and still thinking like a house-misplaced Gryffindor at times. Like planning ahead takes all the fun out of life."

"You're the one to talk, Padfoot," snorted Regulus. "What can I say? With some experience under my belt, I learned that I often do my best work under threat and or intense terror. Sure, I can predict ten different outcomes from the situation in theory but until I'm in a said situation the theory is just a theory and they rarely become completely true and work the way I want them to work. So, I learned to think on my feet and adjust theories accordingly."

"Like Dumbledore being up to no good?" asked Sirius pointedly.

"That, I know for certain," grumbled Regulus. "I'm just not sure to what end. I have some ideas," he shook his head. "But for now, it's just a theory and to clarify it I need a very thorough heart to heart with Harry. Which, considering the fact that for all intents and purposes, we kidnapped him and are holding him against his will might not go as well as we are both hoping it to go," he added grimly. "So, let's stop worrying about it until he wakes up and let's go eat something."

Sirius, as hungry as he was after a week on kibble and water, didn't really need much coaxing into heading downstairs in order to eat. And while quite a large part of him wanted to remain in Regulus's old bedroom, with Harry, he also knew that out of Harry's immediate earshot Regulus might be more forthcoming with information.

Regulus, Merlin bless him, thoughtful waited for him on the top of the stairs to catch up and they headed downstairs together. Because after the first flight of stairs it became evident that while his right leg seemed fine after thorough soak up, the strain he put on it in the last few days on the top of his old injuries had taken its toll on it. He was limping again by the time they reached the third floor.

"Wait until I get my hands on Skele-Gro," grumbled Regulus.

"I'd rather not, I hate this stuff," admitted Sirius. "I would love to get my hands on a wand though. You're forgetting that I'm a trained Auror and I had a course in basic healing, broken bones amongst other things."

"Your bones aren't broken," pointed out Regulus with a huff. "They are badly mended. I, too, had a basic healing course as a part of my training as an Unspeakable and my Healer was a master in treating broken bones. Clean, non-fractured breaks can be easily fixed with charms but anything that had been fractured or healed badly needs Skele-Gro."

"Well, Skele-Gro tastes like ass," grunted Sirius.
"And you know that because you licked enough of them in your life," retorted Regulus. "Your own for certain, you daft git."

"Wanker," grumbled Sirius.

"Pillock."

"Bell end."

"Knob head."

They were halfway down the stairs to the second floor when a thud reached their ears. It wasn't overly loud but loud enough to resonate in otherwise, supposedly, empty house.

"Harry?" mumbled Sirius over Regulus's whispered, "Kreacher?"

The thud came from upstairs and as far as Sirius could tell it could be either of them. After all they had an entire three floors above them counting in the attic where Kreacher might have been skulking.

"I'm not climbing up the stairs to the attic," Sirius stated firmly as he turned around and started the trek upstairs.

Secrets & Keepers: Keep Us

Harry Potter, 12 Grimmauld Place, 6th August, night

Sometime later, not really knowing what had happened and where he was, Harry woke up. He slowly opened his eyes and saw the blurry and dark room. He moaned silently and pressed his hands to his eyes, that movement proved him the fact that he wasn't wearing his glasses. He huffed silently and started searching for his glasses.

Somehow, he realised that he was lying on a bed. Thinking that if he was lying on a bed then something akin to a bedside table should be somewhere in his reach and that was where his glasses should be lying. He extended his left hand and felt that he touched something wooden which could be a bedside table of some sort. He raised his hand for about an inch and extended it even more. He grinned happily when his fingers brushed the frame of his spectacles but before he could grab them, he realised that he was hanging on the edge of a bed thus he lost his balance and fell on the floor with a loud thud.

Few seconds passed without a sound, then few more and for a brief, quiet minute he believed that he was in the clear and no one heard him. But just as that thought flew through his mind, he heard a pair of footsteps outside the room. At that sound, Harry cursed softly under his breath, shoot into sitting position and grabbed his glasses. He put them on in the exact moment when the door to the room opened swiftly.

Harry froze in his place without tearing his eyes from the direction of the door. What he saw there almost gave him a heart attack. In the doorway stood two men. Both were thin, rather tall and looked like they just had one hell of a scare.

The man on the left was about a few centimeters smaller than his companion and looked painfully
thin. He had a mass of long, black hair which hung to his elbows. His pale eyes had been shinning and were fixed on Harry. His teeth which looked like he didn't brush them for a long while were bared in a grimace that could have been a grin. His face was abnormally pale and gaunt but somehow still possessed aristocratic features. He also happened to look disturbingly similar to the escaped convict whom Harry saw on TV few days ago, Black, like a cleaned-up version of Black.

The man on the right was taller than his companion and far better good-looking. He had thick, shiny, black hair which was pulled into a ponytail and was touching his shoulders. His face was heart-shaped with high-cheekbones. He had a straight nose, thin mouth, thin and straight eyebrows, and pointed chin. His dark-brown eyes were hidden behind a pair of rectangular framed in silver spectacles. He, too, looked familiar, but Harry couldn't recall when and where he had seen him before.

Both men looked like they froze in the doorway before they rushed in Harry's direction, Black, definitely limping, the other one not. Reflexively Harry reached for his wand only to realise that he didn't have it on him.

"You alright, kid?" asked the other, not Black, man as he stopped in front of Harry and reached out for him with his left hand.

The realization of who was standing before him hit Harry together with the realization of what was sticking out of the man's ponytail. A familiar looking, dark piece of wood, Harry's wand, but why his old Mathematics teacher, Professor Green, from primary school needed a wand? Harry's wand on the top of that.

"Professor?" whispered Harry. "What's that piece of wood in your hair?" he asked. "And what is he doing here?" he pointed at Black just as Black reached them.

"Explaining himself," Green answered simply as he pulled Harry to his feet and steadied him with a quick touch on Harry's shoulder. "Like you, young man. I, too, have some explanations to make. And since either way that's going to involve a lot of talking, I strongly suggest taking ourselves and our explanations down to the kitchen where the food awaits."

Harry stared at him in shock.

"Or we can stand around and gape at one another," said Green with a shrug. "I can skip a meal without harm, you two on the other hand..." he paused and waved his hands between Harry and Black.

"He's an escaped convict," Harry pointed out quickly. "You," he pointed at Green, "have my wand and I have no memory of getting in here. Which means that I didn't get here willingly. I'm not going anywhere with any of you unless you tell me what's going on. Where, the fuck, I am? And what you're planning to do with me."

Black grinned at him just as Green muttered, looking sideways at Black, "Are you sure that James Potter fathered him?"

"I'm positive," Black chuckled as tried to steady himself, he looked like one good kick could send him down on the ground.

"Let me guess," drawled Green in a tone that strangely reminded Harry of Snape, "you've been present at the conception?"

"Merlin, no," groaned Black as he shook his head.
"You sure?" Green asked pointedly.

"I'm sure that I will kick you in the nuts if you don't stop," muttered Black grimly.

"I'm sure you won't," Green shook his head. "Because unlike you..." he started but didn't get a chance to finish because Harry knew an opening when he saw one, so he kicked Green in the nuts like Black promised to do.

Limping Black in spite of his substantial limp wasn't as threatening as completely healthy and armed Green. Of course, Green tried to grab him but Harry was quicker and already out of the room. Years spent at avoiding anything coming his way to hit him at the Dursleys, something that Quidditch and avoiding being killed by one form of Voldemort or the other only honed more.

He was down the flight of stairs in a heartbeat and ran further down as if he was chased by another basilisk. Screw his wand, the Ministry was going to break it in two anyway. His life had depended on getting away from this place. Quickly he reached what seemed to look like ground floor and he made a beeline for the door, tugging at the handle before he even stopped in front of the door properly. The handle didn't budge. Whirling around in search for another exit he spied another door at the other side of the hall. He ran for it but just like the other, it wouldn't budge.

"Damn it," he cursed under his breath and dashed back to the other door because it seemed bigger and therefore might lead outside on the street rather than into a garden.

He slammed his hand on the door and screamed, "Let me out!"

The words barely left his mouth before he was nearly deafened by a horrible, ear-splitting, blood-curdling screech. He looked in the direction it came from and saw moth-eaten velvet curtains flying open. For a split second, Harry thought he was looking through a window, a window behind which an old woman in a black cap was screaming and screaming as though she was being tortured – then he realised it was simply a life-size portrait, but the most realistic, and the most unpleasant, he had ever seen in his life.

The old woman was drooling, her eyes were rolling, the yellowing skin of her face stretched taut as she screamed; and all along the hall, the other portraits awoke and began to yell, too, so that Harry for a moment screwed up his eyes at the noise and clapped his hands over his ears.

"Filth! Scum! By-products of dirt and vileness, begone from this place! How dare you befoul the house of my fathers..."

But someone was already running down the stairs and from the corner of his eye Harry saw Black limping down the last flight of stairs, wand in hand.

"Shut up," he roared, waving the wand at the portraits. "Shut the fuck up or I will turn you into kindle-pitch if you breathe another word to anyone, anywhere and trust me I will know."

The portraits further away from Harry one after the other quieted down until the only one left was the old woman by Harry's side. Black slowly approached them, wand out and pointed at the portrait.

"Shut up, you horrible hag," he spat at the woman.

"Yoooou!" she howled, her eyes popping at the sight of the man. "Blood traitor, abomination, shame of my flesh. How dare you show your ugly mug here after all these years! How dare you pollute my little Regulus with your filth..."
"Oh, shut your bloody gob!" Black snarled. "He polluted himself on his very own with no help from me," he grunted as tried to tug the curtains shut over the old woman.

The curtains refused to close, and Black appeared to be a little too weak, too winded, to do this on his own, so Harry grabbed the other one and with a stupendous effort they managed to force the curtains closed again.

The old woman's screeches died, and an echoing silence fell.

Panting slightly and sweeping his long dark hair out of his eyes Black turned to face him.

"Well, Harry," he said grimly. "I see you've met my mother."

"Your mother?" Harry mumbled. "You mean that's..."

"An ancestral house of a Black family," Black explained. "A miserable hovel that should be burnt down to the very ground it's standing on. But hey, it was warded, by a pair of very paranoid fuckers, one of which is still trying to recover from that blow below the belt you gave him. Nice one, by the way."

"Thank you," mumbled Harry suspiciously. "What I'm doing here?"

"From what I gathered having a family reunion planned by an idiot," replied Black with a shrug before he said, more to himself than Harry. "Let's give it a try..." he waved the wand he was holding and said, "Muffliato."

Nothing happened but Black appeared to be pleased and started walking around the hall pointing the wand on other portraits casting that 'Muffliato' spell on them followed by another, non-verbal spells, which made them glow faintly before he conjured similar, smaller curtains over every single one of them.

Finally, he stopped at the far end of the hallway and looked at Harry curiously before he said, "Are you coming? There's pizza in the kitchen."

At the mention of the pizza Harry's stomach grumbled loudly and he sighed to himself. It was evident that he wasn't going to get out without assistance or a wand and even if he somehow would manage to wrestle the wand out of Black's grasp there was no telling what other spells could have been placed on the door.

He was screwed and the best thing he could do was, well, make the best out of the situation he found himself in, like say eating a bloody pizza with an escaped convict from Azkaban. And seeing that Black was more than capable of doing magic because he was conjuring stuff (which according to Hermione was an advanced level of Transfiguration) therefore he had to be a wizard, and as one and an escaped convict both, he had to escape from the only wizarding prison Harry knew about, Azkaban. Unless there was another one.

Shows how much ignorant you're of the world you are spending ten months in, he told himself. Well, not anymore, he added pensively. He didn't know what was worse, Black and Green, or the Ministry of Magic officials who were ready to snap his wand in two outside.

Black at the very least didn't appear to be hostile. Oh, he, for sure, wanted something from Harry but whatever it was he wasn't going to get it out of Harry by using force. And Harry could work with that. He had plenty of experience in dealing with lunatics.

So, in the end, he followed Black down the narrow stone stairs that were behind the main staircase.
Through the open door at the bottom of the stairs, he saw a cavernous room with rough stone walls. Most of the light was coming from a large fire at the far end of the room. Through the entire length of it loomed the menacing shapes of heavy iron pots and pans hanging from the dark ceiling. The wooden table over which they hung was long and narrow with several chairs crammed around it and Black was already sitting at the far end of it.

Harry slowly, almost gingerly, approached him, spying five boxes of Joe's Pizzas' placed one upon the other. On the table, there were also several bottles of soda, water, and various juices. It reminded Harry of the evenings when Aunt Petunia let Dudley's friends come over to watch TV.

He shook his head and seated himself, all the time watching the pizza box which Black opened and was already helping himself to a very generous slice. Salami and mushrooms. He liked salami and mushrooms, at least when it used to be on the top of the pizza when pizza was on lunch menu in primary school.

"Can I?" Harry asked cautiously as he pointed at the pizza.

"Sure," Black mumbled mid-chew and he waved his hand at the box, chewing and swallowing the bite before he added, "I know that at least one of them is an egg, avocado, and pickles if you like such a thing."

Harry stared at him.

"My thoughts exactly," said Black with a slight smirk. "Reg is a bloody heathen. He might have brought another one with pineapple, peach, and anchovies."

"Well, he can eat them himself," muttered Harry. "I hate anchovies."

"Me too," Black agreed before he asked, "Soda or juice?"

"I get to pick?" asked Harry pointedly.

"Sure, why not?" Black asked sceptically.

"Oh, you know, this kidnapping thing is confusing," shrugged Harry as he reached for a slice of pizza.

"If it's any consolation he kidnapped me too," shrugged Black between a bite of pizza. "I would never set a foot in this house willingly even if my life depended on it."

"Why?" asked Harry curiously. "You said that it's an ancestral house of Black family and last time I checked you were named Sirius Black."

"And you were supposed to be named Euphemius Fleamont," said Black just as Harry was about to clamp his teeth on a generous bite of pizza.

"What?" he sputtered and stared at Black.

"You heard me," shrugged Black with a small grin and paused long enough for another bite. "Almost through your mum's entire pregnancy, you were supposed to be either Euphemia Fleamont if you were going to be a girl or an Euphemius Fleamont if you were a boy."

"But I'm not," mumbled Harry. "My name is Harry James Potter."

"That it is," nodded Black with a smile. "Luckily for you, even before you were born, you had in
your life people who could see how miserable life of one Euphemius Fleamont Potter could get. Add into that the fact that your father somehow managed to put himself out of commission in the last few hours of your birth and the fact that it was a long and complicated one and your mother really needed to curse at and curse someone. Once she recovered from the birth, she told your dad that until he could get through childbirth like a proper father, and not a useless wimp that almost poisoned himself by accident, he had all of his naming rights revoked."

"I bet it went well," sighed Harry.

"Better than I imagined," shrugged Black, still smiling. "Your mother was far more susceptible to suggestions once your dad's choices were out of the picture. Sure, for next few hours she had some other ideas, some crazier than the others, but eventually she conceded that Harrison James was a good, not embarrassing, name and that it will wear itself well."

"How did you know that?" asked Harry curiously. "I mean you were in the room at some point of time obviously..."

"James and Lily named me your godfather," whispered Black softly, so softly that Harry barely heard him.

"Godfather?" Harry echoed. "You mean my guardian? I have other guardians that the Dursleys?"

he asked eagerly.

"Well, there is me," Black said sheepishly. "Supposedly legally appointed in your parents' last will and testament as a guardian of any children your parents might have. There's also another one, a werewolf, who wouldn't have been given any legal rights due to his condition, but it never bothered your parents and in case they managed to predecease us..."

"Which they did," nodded Harry.

"... he was supposed to step up as my counterweight into the role of your ipso facto godfather," Black finished pensively.

"Why he hadn't?" asked Harry curiously.

"Excellent question. I'm going to ask him that next time I'll see him," said Black with a shrug. "I have some idea why, which mostly gets back to him being werewolf, but I don't think it's that simple. That's obviously not going to happen any time soon. Then there is Reg," he added slowly.

"Reg? Who?" Harry asked quickly. "You mean Professor Green? Isn't his name Martin? He's my other guardian?"

"Not really," answered Black. "Not legally at least. You might know him as Professor Martin Green, but his real name is Regulus Black and he's my younger brother. He might consider himself as some sort of a guardian seeing, I've been out of commission for nearly last twelve years and unlike me, he had an access to you. But you will have to ask him yourself for clarification."

"Whom and of what?" came a grunt from the doorway, and Green... well, the other Black, Regulus entered the room.

He was walking, slightly slouched, as if he couldn't decide whatever or not keep his legs together or apart. Finally, he found himself on the opposite side of the table to Harry and dropped into a chair with a heavy sigh.

"You and about who is Harry to you," Black, Sirius answered.
"Right now, my former student and the bane of my existence," mumbled Regulus as he literary out of nowhere produced about ten different wands. "Here have some wands and give me mine back."

"I would also want my wand back," said Harry pointedly.

"Sirius," Regulus glared at Sirius.

"Whose wand it is?" Sirius asked as he raised Harry's wand into the air.

"Mine," Harry and Regulus said in unison and stared at each other.

"This one is yours," Regulus said finally as raised his right hand with a singular wand in it. "This one," he pointed with that single one at Sirius's hand, "is mine. They're both made from holly wood which is why you're confusing them but yours is shorter for about an inch and a half," he passed the wand to Sirius.

Sirius held both wands together, side by side and showed Harry the difference in their lengths before he passed both wands back to their original owners and asked, "Where did you find them?"

"Mother's," shrugged Regulus. "There were more in there, but I only took the ones which, I remembered answering to you at all. I might have gotten it wrong but there's some more holly, ebony, fir, blackthorn, cypress."

"Cores?" Sirius asked.

"All of Ollivander's," answered Regulus. "Anything particular?"

"Dragon heartstrings or phoenix feathers," explained Sirius. "Unicorn hairs never worked well for me."

Regulus put away about a half of the wands he was holding and extending the remaining half to Sirius. Sirius picked them all, placed on the table in front of him before he tried one after the other. The first three quickly landed back on the table but the last two had him weighing and twirling them before he, using both wands he wordlessly conjured a lump of snow which quickly turned into a nice and very detailed looking sculpture of a sleeping cat.

"Ebony is good but the one with dragon heartstrings is better," he said finally as he placed the other one on the table, away from the other three, next to Harry's hand before he levitated the sculpture towards Regulus and unceremoniously dropped it into Regulus lap.

"Thanks, fucker," mumbled Regulus as started swiping the snow down on the floor.

"Happy to help," said Sirius cheekily. "How are your family jewels?"

"At the moment shrivelling," snorted Regulus. "But it's better than earlier," he added with a sigh before he looked at Harry and said, "You kick like a preschool girl."

"Had any of them kick you lately?" asked Sirius pointedly.

"Sometimes I assist in rudimental self-defence classes the school holds for our youngest students," grumbled Regulus. "You know stranger-danger and how to protect yourself if someone tries to grab you," he added. "For me, it involves a lot of biting, kicking and headbutting but I always wear protective gear. I learned long time ago that testicles are a primary target in such cases."

"I'm not sorry," Harry said simply as he rolled the wand Sirius left by his hand with his forefinger.
"I wouldn't buy it even if you said that you are," retorted Regulus with a shrug. "You might look like a mini version of James Potter, but that obstinacy and cheek reminds me more of him," he pointed at Sirius, "than James. Never saw James kick anyone in family jewels, unlike you," he glared at Sirius.

"Oh, he was honourable in that manner," chuckled Sirius.

"Yeah, at least two against one was more down his alley and he always had you for that," snorted Regulus. "You, at the very least, were brave or stupid enough to get into a fight without back up."

"I'm not even going to dignify that with a response," muttered Sirius.

"Good," said Regulus with a shrug before he reached for a slice of pizza. "Because you're going to sorely lose," he added before he took a bite.

"He got into a lot of fights?" asked Harry quietly. "My dad I mean."

"Countless," answered Regulus between bites. "He was a resident troublemaker and when your mother was in the picture..." he shook his head. "All bets were off, scared off few of her potential boyfriends and few of the actual ones."

"Well, some of them really deserved it," muttered Sirius. "Terrence Hooper was a first class wanker. Even Lily admitted that she didn't know what she saw in him. Claimed a temporal loss of all her senses from what I remember."

"What about Evan Proudfoot?" asked Regulus. "He was the gentlest..."

"... prick that never met an eager cunt he didn't like, and he met plenty of them?" finished Sirius with a shrug.

"Language," muttered Regulus.

"Well, that wasn't James," shrugged Sirius. "All that happened to him was Lily when she saw him balls deep in Yvette Griffin's love cave."

"And you just happened to be passing by, am I right?" snorted Regulus.

"No, actually she was following me because she was convinced that I was up to something and equally convinced that I hadn't seen her following me. It annoyed me as hell that day, so I decided to shatter some illusions," clarified Sirius with another shrug.

"How nice of you to do that," commented Regulus. "What a great friend you are."

"The best," smirked Sirius. "After that, she used to come to me fishing for gossip about prospective boyfriends and I might have been truthful about ninety percent of the time."

"Really?" Regulus asked pointedly. "I'm supposed to believe that?"

"Have you seen Lily Evans bad side?" retorted Sirius. "It was a dark and scary place to find yourself in. Alone."

"Alone, because Potter got the kids in the divorce," finished Regulus with a chuckle.

"What kids?" asked Harry curiously. "You have kids?"

"One, to some extent, you," Sirius answered with a smile. "He means our other friends. At the
beginning of our sixth year we had a huge fight..." he paused and shook his head. "It took us the rest of that school year to get back to where we were been but it worked out for the best in the end."

"It had," nodded Regulus. "At the time," he added after a moment and sighed, "I wonder..." but after a moment he shook his head.

"Not back then," sighed Sirius. "He didn't have time for that, not back then. He was a slow learner and never particularly talented and his mother was most displeased with his O.W.L.s results," he shook his head. "He was supposed to be a Healer..."

"Are you kidding me?" asked Regulus with a snort. "Him? A healer? He was the lousiest potion maker I ever saw."

"My point exactly," grumbled Sirius. "So during the summer after our fifth year she changed her mind to a Ministry worker and for that he needed top grades, especially in History of Magic which he had failed but she somehow managed to wrangle an exemption out of Binns and Dumbledore but he had five years of lousy grades in History of Magic to make up on the top of studying the sixth and seventh year material. I doubt that he had enough time to wipe his arse properly between all the history books he had to read," he shook his head. "No, that definitely came much later, after we graduated."

"You can't be sure," muttered Regulus.

"But I can," shrugged Sirius. "I got into Auror training on the top of the list with two Third Class Masteries under my belt. James signed the contract with Puddlemere United before we even left Hogwarts and while he didn't have any sort of mastery in any subject, he made the first string within the first month. Even Remus got into Borgin & Burke with his masteries in Defence and Charms, they let him go after first full moon, but the important thing was that he got in."

"And he hadn't," nodded Regulus. "What he was doing?"

"Cleaning at The Daily Prophet headquarters because he failed N.E.W.T. in History of Magic," answered Sirius with a shrug. "He made it to some sort of an assistant or researcher of a reporter eventually, I'm not sure. I was up to my ears in books or old reports at the time and I barely remembered my own name. But if he fell with the bad crowd it had to happen after we started working separately. James might have been way into Lily to pay attention to anything but hers and his studies and Remus might have been a little frazzled with all the studying he needed to do to catch up with his masteries."

"But you, thanks to the sixth year, were ahead of schedule," Regulus nodded again.

"A little," Sirius confirmed. "Enough to be aware of my surroundings and what my friends were up to. Serving a Dark Lord wasn't one of those things, not at the time."

"Well, he made it all up," snorted Regulus. "Big," he muttered and shook his head. "But why them of all people?"

"Beats me," admitted Sirius. "Your guess is as good as mine. They've been in the Order, they openly supported Dumbledore and his beliefs. If Voldemort," Regulus shuddered at the mention, "returned they would be amongst the first people to know."

"Death Eaters would be the first people to know and I asked you to stop using that name when I'm in the room," Regulus said grimly. "He wouldn't even need to hide if he ended with Death Eaters."
"I disagree," Sirius shook his head. "What happened on that Halloween night?"

"The Dark Lord had fallen, the world rejoiced, and some people were devastated by the loss of good people in the process," answered Regulus.

"Exactly," Sirius nodded quickly. "The Dark Lord had fallen. One of the most powerful and influential dark wizards of our era. One, who at the time was a series of successful assassinations away from ruling the country. One who had his spies everywhere he could put them, and he put them in high places or paid his way into them."

"I would like to remind you that I was out of commission for the last months of the year 1979, entire of 1980 and a better part of 1981. And I didn't get to hear any news from wizarding world until late spring of 1982," muttered Regulus.

"My point is, that Wanker came very close to succeeding in his plot of taking over the country and he would have succeeded if he didn't fixate himself on James and Lily," Sirius explained. "But he had, and he found his way in," he paused and shook his head. "He found them," he whispered softly, "he found them even if he wasn't supposed to find them and there he had fallen," he paused again. "Vanquished by a baby who could barely say his own name, let alone hold a wand," he sighed.

"Still..." Regulus started.

"And who led him there?" Sirius asked. "Who told him where he can find the Potters? Who was indirectly responsible for his downfall?"

"The one who led him there," Regulus answered with a nod. "No wonder he never went looking for help on his side. If he was found alive by any of the staunch believers, he would have been immediately considered as Dumbledore's spy and killed on the spot."

"Who you're talking about?" Harry asked, not really wishing to know the answer but they were talking about his parents and Voldemort.


"Voldemort," Harry finished of him and Regulus shuddered at the mention of that name. "It's just a name."

"It bloody isn't," grumbled Regulus. "By 1979 the Dark Lord started experimenting with the Taboo spell. It's a very powerful spell that was firstly designed by and for Healers. It started out as a ward, anchored to geographical points of small areas and was designed to alert the caster of the use of a key word, which was usually Healer's name or just simply a word Healer, and was supposed to reveal speaker’s location," he explained. "So, they could come and heal anyone who used it. It felt out of use when St Mungo's was built and Floo became popular, but it didn't stop some people from remembering that it once existed and how it could be used."

"True," Sirius nodded pensively. "But it wasn't widely used..."

"He was planning to build a series of anchor points all over the country," Regulus interrupted him harshly. "It might not have been widely used at the time but that doesn't change the fact that it was used and that's why few members of the Order of the Phoenix and few Aurors had lost their lives," he muttered grimly. "And the Dark Lord himself might be out of commission but not all of his followers were locked in Azkaban after he had fallen, some of those people weaselled their way out of it and some of them remember it. So, do all of us a favour and shut your bloody gobs when you
"I'm not calling him the Dark Lord," Sirius shook his head just as Harry said, "I'm not calling him You-Know-Who."

"I told you to call him Dark Wanker or Wanker if you must just stop saying his name," hissed Regulus angrily. "I don't want to test the extent of the wards here because you two are too careless."

"Alright, Wanker it is," sighed Sirius.

"Weren't only his followers supposed to call him the Dark Lord?" Harry asked pensively, trying to recall from whom he first heard it but coming up blank. "And who are Death Eaters?"

"Knights of the bloody Walpurgis," spat Regulus. "A supposedly secret clique of Tom Riddle's old school colleagues. Mostly Slytherins, but they were recruited from all houses equally, even out of other wizarding schools. Generally pure-bloods, at the very least half-bloods of pure-blood descent and ones with magical parents. People who believed in the superiority of wizards, who wanted to purify wizarding race by killing any Muggles, Muggle-borns, and blood-traitors they could they get their hands on. Their long-term aim was conquering magical Great Britain and achieving a global dictatorship under the magical regime, preferably theirs."

"And in return for their loyalty they got a set of black robes, a mask and a license to kill anyone they didn't like," added Sirius grimly before he turned towards Regulus and said, "Walpurgis?"

"It's not a fucking coincidence," huffed Regulus. "She was, what, a year ahead of him? And always very vocal with her believes."

"Well, fuck," Sirius grumbled and he hid his face in his hands.

"It could have been worse," sighed Regulus.

"Worse how? He named his original clique after our bloody mother," muttered Sirius.

"He could have been our father," Regulus dead-panned.

"No," Sirius facepalmed.

"Had our mother been more susceptible to his charms and looked past his pitiful upbringing," Regulus continued. "Heir of the Slytherin or not, he was still a half-blood and one of the lesser varieties. Grandpa Pollux might have considered that match as favourable, but you know our dear old mum, only a proper pure-blood would do."

"Which is why she married, her own second cousins," Sirius grumbled as he hit his face again. "Which in return makes us both brothers and third cousins."

"Told you that it could get worse," Regulus snickered.

"Got any other shocking revelations up in your sleeve?" Sirius muttered into his hand as he watched Regulus through his outstretched fingers.

"If it's any consolation it would have freaked me too," admitted Harry. "But look at the bright sight. He's not your father," he added with as much cheer as he could muster.

Sirius looked at Harry as he arched his left eyebrow at him.
"So how did he get from Knights of Walpurgis to Death Eaters?" Harry asked as he looked at Regulus.

"Through careful selection of the former," Regulus explained.

Harry arched his left eyebrow at him.

"Really," chuckled Regulus. "His oldest and most loyal, for the lack of the better word, friends formed the inner circle of Death Eaters and carried his brand," he added as he rubbed his left forearm. "Time passed, they procreated, their heirs provided next wave. They used to sign their kills with his brand, a snake emerging from open mouth of a skull. The spell used to conjure it was Morsmordre. It derives from French mort which stands for death and mordre which stand for to bite. Death biting. The few survivors left who heard the spell being cast provided the further derivation into Death Eaters, the name attributed to the Dark Lord's most loyal servants."

"And how did you learn all of it?" asked Harry curiously. "Did you interview him by any chance? Please Mr Riddle could you clarify something for me.." he started.

"No," Regulus interrupted him and he shook his head, shrugged, crossed his arms and uncrossed them again. "He interviewed me," he sighed heavily.

"And what you told him?" Harry asked, not really wanting to hear the answer but he couldn't stop himself.

"That I want in," Regulus said slowly as he placed his left arm on the table and rolled up his sleeve to his elbow.

Harry's blood turned into ice. There he was, in the same house with Voldemort's follower, trading barbs and laughing at the idea of Voldemort fathering, well, anyone. More than that, he was kidnapped by that man.

Against all instincts, which screamed at him to run, he looked closely at Regulus's forearm. The mark was barely visible, like a light smear of ash on the otherwise pale skin but it was evidently there. He could see the skull and the snake getting out of its mouth.

This was a mark of Voldemort, on his follower, on his kidnapper... and a man who taught him Mathematics in primary school. Was it another of Voldemort's plots? If he somehow survives, locate Potter and keep an eye on him? Teach him even, in a Muggle primary school of all places? Sure, Voldemort was barking mad but even he wouldn't be able to find anyone willing to endure teaching people they considered inferior for years on end.

"So, you got in," Harry finally said. "Did you like it?" he asked pointedly.

"At first," Regulus sighed heavily. "And then I realised that I made the second biggest mistake of my life other than not listening to that infernal hat."

"Really?" Sirius mumbled. "Please do tell me that it wanted to place you in Gryffindor."

"Ravenclaw," retorted Regulus. "Not that it would help me in the long run because Bella was very persuasive and not someone I wanted to cross on her good day, let alone a bad one. But," he shrugged "there's no use crying over spilt milk. What matters is that finally I realized how wrong I was and how deep in shit I found myself."

"And what? You handed over your resignation letter?" snorted Harry.
"You don't hand a Dark Lord a resignation letter," snorted Regulus. "Not if you want to live afterwards," he shrugged. "So, I disobeyed a direct order, got a price put on my own head and proceed to thoroughly fuck up his long-term plans and few of his followers that came after me. Fucked myself up in the process too, but in the end, I emerged victorious, something the Dark Lord won't be once I will take care of his Horcruxes..."

"A what?" Harry asked over Sirius's sputtered echo of the word.

"He has a Horcrux?" whispered Sirius before Regulus had a chance to answer. "A bloody Horcrux? Strike that, Horcruxes, Horcruxi? As in more than one?"

"What's a Horcrux?" asked Harry, already feeling that it was something bad if it caused such reaction from Sirius, who looked at Harry as if he suddenly grew a second head.

"It's Dark Arts," Sirius said after a moment of uncomfortable silence. "One of the darkest parts of already dark branch of magic," he added with a sigh. "The term itself is used to refer to any object in which a person has concealed a part of his or her soul."

"So?" Harry asked curiously.

"So, he says," Sirius shook his head. "His parents would castrate me..."

"No, his mother would castrate you while his father would simply have a heart-attack," Regulus said simply. "James was allergic to any kind of mention of dark magic."

"You aren't helping," Sirius growled at him.

"To create a Horcrux, by definition the spell-caster must have split his or her soul into fragments, so that one fragment can be implanted within the Horcrux while the other is retained in the spell-caster's own body," Regulus clarified.

"How one can split his soul into fragments?" asked Harry pensively.

"By committing a murder, Harry. That's why Horcruxes are considered as dark objects. Committing a murder rips the soul apart. There is also a spell and some dark ritual involved but even we, with our quite superior knowledge about Dark Arts, don't know it," answered Regulus grimly.

"So, the purpose of a Horcrux is to protect the given bit of soul from anything that might happen to the body of the person to whom the soul belongs," said Sirius slowly. "While the Horcrux is kept safe, the person will continue to exist even if his or her body is damaged or destroyed. That makes a sense because Vol... Wanker doesn't have a body... I was there Harry, I saw it... In the place he probably stood was a small pile of ashes and rags, nothing more."

"So that's why he managed to come back," Harry mumbled to himself.

"Excuse me? Did Vol... Wanker came back after the attack at Godric's Hallow?" asked alarmed Sirius.

Harry gulped, he knew that he shouldn't say that out loud, but he had.

"Is there something which you are not telling us?" asked Sirius firmly.

Harry sighed before he started explaining what had happened during his first and second year. When he'd finished, he glanced at two men. They looked very grim.
"Tell me that it wasn't a Horcrux, Reg," mumbled Sirius.

"It was. Sounds like a Horcrux..." Regulus confirmed quietly. "That makes three if not more," he mumbled after a moment.

"Three?" Harry and Sirius breathed out in unison.

"At least," muttered Regulus. "I bet that there are more than three of them. To tell you the truth, I would be seriously surprised if they were only three, which technically gives use four pieces of the Dark Lord's soul. Three in Horcruxes and one which technically remains the Dark Lord."

"So, he can't be killed?" Harry whispered numbly.

"Technically, yes," Regulus grimaced. "Until all of his Horcruxes are destroyed he is pretty much immortal. I'm sorry, Harry," his voice sounded like he was really sorry.

"It's not your fault," Harry said, still numbly.

"Tell me how on earth you guessed that he was using Horcruxes?" Harry heard Sirius asking.

"The Dark Lord made a tactical mistake," said Regulus with a heavy sigh. "He entrusted one of the Horcruxes, a Slytherin locket, into hands of a house-elf, he brought him to the cave on the coast and hid the locket inside it. What he didn't realise at the time, and hopefully it didn't occur to him later, is that the master of said house-elf told him to come back home as soon as the Dark Lord won't require his services."

"So?" Harry and Sirius asked in almost perfect unison.

"So," Regulus drawled out. "I know that at least one of you knows that house-elf's highest biding is his master request. The house-elf in question was Kreacher and he told me everything."

"Oh, bugger," muttered Sirius.

"I told him to lie low and don't leave the house until it was really necessary. That's when I realised that I was stupid. Stupid enough to join, stupid enough to get myself in deep shit and all of it for that filthy, manipulative, homicidal half-blood," Regulus spat.

"Reg!" Sirius barked.

"I'm telling the truth..." muttered Regulus. "The Dark Lord is a filthy half-blood and the fact that he is the heir of Slytherin is an insult to Slytherin."

"Weren't the heirs of Slytherin evil?" Harry asked suddenly.

"They weren't evil, just mad," sighed Regulus. "Inbreeding caught with them a lot earlier than with the Blacks or the Potters."

"What?" Harry breathed out.

"I'm myopic and I used to have a sixth toe in my left foot. Sirius ended with two sixth toes and scrawny knees..."

Regulus said but he was cut off by Sirius outraged exclamation, "Reg!"

"What? I'm telling the truth," Regulus said with a shrug. "As for the Potters, guess who you can thank for being nearly blind?" he asked. "Top it with your hair and general scrawniest and you will
end with inbreeding between pure-bloods. The Blacks, the Prewetts, the McMillans, the Longbottoms, even the Weasleys just to name few families you're distantly related to."

"In fact, you're our second cousin," added Sirius. "You see, James's mother Dorea..."

"A frivolous wrench," Regulus interrupted him.

"… was our grand aunt," Sirius finished.

"And a very lousy mother from what I've heard," grumbled Regulus.

"So lousy in fact that the only maternal thing she ever did for him was giving birth to him," added Sirius. "James was raised by his paternal grandparents, Euphemia and Fleamont Potter. They were good and kind people, devastated by the premature loss of their son, Charlus, James's father. He died about six months after his wedding to Dorea and about three months into her pregnancy. A mugging gone wrong from what I remember."

"That was the official version," snorted Regulus.

"You know a different one?" Sirius asked pointedly.

"Actually, I do," nodded Regulus. "Unlike you, I had to soldier on through family gatherings and listening to various relatives venting their spleen. One of Grandpa Pollux's favourite subjects was Great-grandpa Cygnus's bout of insanity which initially led him into allowing Charlus Potter marry Dorea in the first place."

"Really?" Sirius muttered.

"Really," Regulus drawled out. "Charlus James Potter was a young, rich and handsome pure-blood with his family potion imperium behind him. He was very amenable and charismatic, a perfect future politician, in need of some guidance..."

"And let me guess, said guidance was supposed to come..." Sirius interrupted him.

"From the Black family, yes, you guessed correctly," nodded Regulus. "At least that was the image of Charlus Potter which Great-grandpa Cygnus got. An excellent, somewhat neutral match for his ageing old maid daughter."

"But?" Harry asked curiously.

"But that was just that, a picture," Regulus shrugged. "Sure, the Potters were loaded, not as rich as the Blacks but they built their fortune on a very lucrative field of potion making and Fleamont and his father Henry struck gold when, actually I think it was Fleamont, but I might be wrong, when they invented Sleekazy Hair Potion," he explained.

"But?" asked Sirius. "Because there's a but in there."

"It is," nodded Regulus. "Fleamont and Euphemia had an only son whom they loved dearly, as much as, they spoiled him rotten. Nothing Charlus wanted wasn't out of his reach. Literary anything, he wanted his parents gave it to him as soon as they could get it. From what I know they raised James the very same way."

Sirius nodded slowly.

"What his parents, blinded by their love for him, couldn't see or didn't want to consider was that
their sweet, amenable and charming son was a very manipulative bastard with very little scruples," continued Regulus. "He didn't want to head the family business, so he convinced his father to sell the company and live from royalties and patents. It was a very impressive sum, mind you, because Charlus could sell anything with little effort and to anyone when he needed money very badly, actual money to settle his gambling debts."

"It couldn't be a common knowledge," Sirius said.

"It wasn't," Regulus shook his head. "How do you think he eventually ran into Dorea and where?"

"At one of Knight of Walpurgis meetings?" Harry asked pointedly, suspecting that that was the case.

"Exactly," nodded Regulus. "Ten points to Gryffindor."

"How did you.." Harry started but quickly shook his head and added, "Never mind."

"Dorea wasn't a beauty and at the time she was slowly nearing what even wizards consider as the age-line of being old maid even though she would be physically capable of conceiving and carrying a child for next twenty-five to thirty years," Regulus continued.

"How old was she?" Harry whispered at Sirius.

"She was forty years old when James was born so that makes her about thirty-eight, thirty-nine at the time," Sirius answered quietly.

"They no longer explain the biological differences between wizards and Muggles to Muggle-borns, do they?" Regulus asked pointedly.

"I don't know," Harry shrugged. "I'm not a Muggle-born and if there was any meeting that explained such differences I wasn't invited to attend it," he clarified.

At the Sirius and Regulus exchanged glances and something heavy settled in the air.

"Where I was..." Regulus said suddenly.

"At Dorea being not a very pretty old maid with a substantial dowry," Sirius said quickly.

"I didn't say that it was substantial," grumbled Regulus.

"You're forgetting that before they switched to you after I got myself sorted into Gryffindor our parents raised me as an heir of the family," muttered Sirius. "I've seen the legal documents which settled the exact height of Meda's, Cissy's and Bella's dowries. They were very generous, each of them upon marrying would receive 200 thousand galleons, 100 thousands to be paid directly into their husbands family accounts while the other 100 thousands would be placed in a trust fund in their own name only as a safety deposit in case some unfortunate circumstances had befallen on their husbands families."

"We are operating in millions of pounds, aren't we?" Harry asked curiously.

"Yes," Sirius and Regulus said in unison.

"And in dowries only," Regulus added after a moment. "By the time of my supposed demise the worth of Black family accounts was around five to five and a half million galleons and we're talking only about actual, physical money in them. Mind you, I'm not including jewellery and other
valuable objects, various estates in and out of the country."

"That would be another five to five and a half million," muttered Sirius.

"What you can do with that big amount of money?" Harry sputtered. "That's about..."

"54 to 55 million pounds sterling?" Regulus finished. "As for what we do with them? Well, what all pure-blood families do. We mostly gather them through securing valuable marriages to other wealthy pure-blood families. We invest them in various companies or politicians. Generally, we sit on them, so we can pass them on for future generations like all pure-bloods do."

"It's stupid," Harry grumbled.

"I know," sighed Regulus. "Don't you think I realise that? As a teacher in the primary school, I make about 19 thousand pounds a year. That's about 3815 galleons and that's the amount of money our mother used to spend on a small shopping spree," he grunted. "The idea that I'm an heir to a family that could buy out entire Little Whinging, bulldoze it and build it right back from scratches without making a serious dent in the family vaults pisses me off to no end," he grumbled.

"Well, technically you're supposed to be dead," mumbled Sirius.

"I know," snorted Regulus.

"But I'm not," smirked Sirius.

"Technically you're supposed to be an escaped convict," Harry pointed out.

"To wizards," Sirius beamed at him. "Not to goblins. Here's the funny thing about goblins, they like money, gold, and valuables."

"Everybody knows that," Harry rolled his eyes at him.

"Yes," chuckled Sirius. "But what everybody seemingly forgets is that they benefit from goblins' hoarding nature. Every single branch of Gringotts is an independent bank on its own globally connected with other branches. They make money from everything, transfer fees, conversion from galleons to pounds or other currency and back into galleons, and that's without touching the curse-breaking part of the business," he explained.

"Well, currency rate in each country is set by the government of the said country," Regulus said pensively. "Depending from the government it's either very Muggle friendly or not."

"But here's what wizards very often forget," said Sirius with a smirk. "Goblins are, well, goblins. To them, the money is what's the most important and they don't give a flying fuck where it came from, what matters is that it was made, that what they invested came back to them with interests."

"Right," Regulus nodded. "And wizards, even pure-bloods, especially pure-bloods are ignorant..."

"Mostly ignorant," Sirius interrupted him. "Our great-great grandfather Phineas Nigellus was famed in the family for two things. Being the worst Headmaster Hogwarts ever had and quadrupling the family fortune by giving the goblins free reign with making their investments."

"So, what they did?" Harry asked.

"Believe it or not, they invested it in Muggle manufactures, very carefully selected Muggle manufactures," chuckled Regulus. "During the Victorian era when Muggle industry had literally
"Majority of pure-blood fortunes were built like that," Sirius nodded. "The more ignorant the head of the house the better, doesn't ask questions, gets happy with money his family gains, pays handsomely for the services, everybody wins."

"And how it applies to your status of a fugitive?" Harry asked.

"Well, the goblins don't like parting with their hard-earned money and they gain an interest rate, a very substantial interest rate for every year at least a certain amount of money spends in the vaults or in investments," Sirius said pensively. "They will only part with any given fortune and turn it over to the Ministry of Magic if they were legally obliged to do so and by legally obliged, I mean their way of being legally obliged."

"Which translates pretty much to a thorough wipe-out of an entire wizarding family," Regulus added. "And by wipe-out I mean total wipe-out, no heirs, no very distant relatives. Just an entire family tree of dead people. Happens very rarely and usually to very careless pure-bloods."

"Why careless?" Harry asked curiously.

"Because they don't want to give Ministry of Magic money without getting anything in return," Sirius shrugged. "Sure, there are taxes which everybody pays and there are bribes but the point of a bribe is giving money to someone for a favour. An appropriate law here or there, a new tax aimed at a specific group of people."

"Allowing Ministry of Magic to get their hands at a pretty substantial amount of money literally for nothing?" Regulus said in a mockingly offended tone. "Unacceptable. They should work for it like everybody else does."

"How that applies to you?" Harry looked at Sirius.

"Technically," it was Regulus who answered, "Sirius is the last heir of the Black family. He's both a male and comes from the main line of the Black family which is the legal requirement for receiving the entirety of Black family fortune."

"Patriarchy at its finest," Sirius muttered.

"Don't complain because there's the inheritance law that allows women to receive the inheritance..."

"After every single male in the line dies out, up and down, left and right, sideways and slant-ways," snorted Sirius. "For the record," he looked at Harry, "if that happens, she is legally obligated under the pain of death, to never take her husband's name, and never allow their children to carry his name."

"Cost of the survival of the family name," muttered Regulus.

"Yeah, under the pain of death," nodded Sirius.

"Fugitive," Harry said pointedly.

"Yes," Sirius nodded. "But here's the thing," he smirked in a way which made Harry shudder slightly, "I was imprisoned but I never had a trial, even more, I wasn't even properly questioned. There's no official paper trail on which I signed my own name. Ministry could have produced anything but for goblins to accept anything as legal by their standards..."
"... is for the paperwork to pass a very thorough goblin screening and by thorough, I mean painfully, anal-retentive screening," Regulus finished. "For any document to be considered by goblins as legally binding it needs to be signed by the subject willingly and in blood and magic with a blood quill and they have their own way of checking whatever or not the subjects signed the documents unwillingly."

"As well as nasty consequences for those who try to cheat," added Sirius. "Ministry of Magic can petition Gringotts all they want, they can't size the Black family fortune for as long as I'm alive and remain uncharged, with any crime by goblin standards."

"So, they pretty much shot themselves in a foot," shrugged Regulus. "Speaking of which at some point you need..."

"To update my last will and testament?" Sirius asked. "That's pretty easy, don't you think?"

"Harry..." Regulus stated.

"... and you, though I have to find a way around the fact that you're supposedly dead," finished Sirius. "You might consider rising from the grave for the duration of that meeting."

"Not gonna happen until the Dark Lord perishes again," Regulus objected firmly. "Speaking of which," he added as he looked at Harry. "Did Dumbledore ever tell you why the Dark Lord wanted to kill you in the first place?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders and shook his head before he said, "No."

At that Regulus and Sirius exchanged glances again, it was the same sort of exchange he saw between Mrs and Mr Weasley last summer when he spent the end of his vacation at the Burrow. It didn't happen a lot and usually when the twins were up to something, but it did happen and it felt as if the two of them were having an unspoken conversation. That the same thing happened with Regulus and Sirius unnerved him.

"Well, he promised me that he will tell me eventually..." Harry added quickly. "When I'm older, ready to hear it."

"How... considerate of him" Regulus started softly but quickly his voice gained this tone that reminded Harry very much of Snape at his most livid. "Pray tell, did he also tell you when that's gonna happen?" he added harshly.

Harry shook his head quickly.

"How... convenient," muttered Regulus. "Did he tell you anything at all?" he asked curiously.

"Plenty," shrugged Harry. "About the stone. The Flamels. How he hid the stone inside the Mirror or Erised."

"Oh yes, the mirror," snorted Sirius. "How convenient it was that he was there when you ran into it."

"Not at first," Harry objected. "And well, the fact that I ran into it and remembered how it works helped me in stopping..." he paused for a moment to weigh which moniker he should use to describe Voldemort., "Wanker from returning, that time."

"Yes, it had," grumbled Regulus. "Doesn't change the fact that you were an eleven years old boy with literally no prior magical training when that happened. Doesn't change the fact that you were
supposed to be under the care of one of the most powerful wizards of our era. Doesn't change the fact that his so-called protections set around the stone were so bloody weak that not only they failed to stop the Dark Lord from passing through them, they failed to stop three eleven years old from passing through them."

"Let's not forget the best questions of all," added Sirius grimly. "Why Dumbledore felt the need to move the stone into Hogwarts in the first place?"

"Because he was worried that Wanker was going to try and steal it in order to regain his body," Harry pointed out.

"Isn't that curious that he became so concerned with the safety of the stone that he had to take it into the castle in the very same year you were supposed to start your magical education?" asked Sirius.

"Coincidence?" Harry offered.

"That would be his fifth name," snorted Regulus. "No, Harry, there's no such a thing as coincidence when Albus Dumbledore is involved," he shook his head. "Did you know that he was the leader of the organisation called Order of the Phoenix? Their main purpose was aiding Aurors and the Ministry of Magic in opposing the Dark Lord. They usually operated on the fringes of the law, spied on people who were suspected of being Death Eaters or who had extensive contacts with Death Eaters..." he looked at Sirius pointedly.

"It was never that much simple, Reg," snorted Sirius. "Yes, trying to foil Wanker's plans and keeping tabs on known and suspected Death Eaters was part of it but the main purpose of the Order was ensuring continued safety and survival of people who dared to oppose him."

"Like a counterweight to Knights of Walpurgis?" Harry asked.

"Essentially, yes," nodded Sirius. "It worked on the very same principle, just on the different side of the conflict. Recruitment tactics were similar, people of similar views to Dumbledore's, that Wanker and his Death Eaters need to be stopped or at the very least curbed slightly. But the Order was nowhere near as ruthless as Death Eaters, the dirty work was always left to the Aurors because you can't have the civilians killing people," he shook his head. "And I was both, an Auror and an Order member, so I know that side of the Order pretty well."

"Let me guess?" asked Regulus. "Blanket ban on killing?"

"It wasn't that bad," sighed Sirius. "The same restrictions that applied for the Aurors. Only if they refuse to surrender and you really have no other choice but to kill them. Which is how and why we lost some pretty good people," he added grimly. "Dumbledore abhorred unnecessary bloodshed and was always very disappointed when we had to resort to killing rather than capturing them."

"You got into his face?" asked Regulus pointedly.

"Once or twice," shrugged Sirius. "My own life I didn't much care about. But when the lives of other people were in the picture? Well, all bets were off. I'm not going to beg to surrender someone who fails to do so after I issued the first order for them to surrender themselves. Not when they already killed someone and are threatening to kill someone else. Especially if their victims are still in the very same room. My oath as an Auror was to protect and serve."

"And look where it got you," muttered Regulus.

"And where it got you?" Sirius pointed out.
"The same place," shrugged Regulus. "And that once or twice seemed to be enough for him to let you rot in Azkaban without a trial."

"What he could have done?" asked Harry quickly.

" Anything," Regulus shrugged again. "Literally anything. You see, Harry, at the time Sirius was arrested and sent to Azkaban without a trial or even proper questioning under Veritaserum – a powerful truth potion used to interrogate unwilling suspects charged with the worst kinds of crimes – Dumbledore was Chief Warlock of Wizengamot, the most important person in our justice system."

"All he had to do was reviewing the case file and ordering a thorough questioning under Veritaserum," muttered Sirius.

"And he hadn't?" whispered Harry. "But why?"

"I don't know," shrugged Sirius. "Because my usefulness ran out? Wanker was gone and without him, his followers were much easier to catch. Because as a free man I was nothing more than an inconvenience for him? I'm your godfather, your parents were dead, and their last will and testament appointed me as your legal guardian. Someone responsible for your upbringing, your safety, and your continued survival."

"And where you ended?" asked Regulus pointedly.

"With the Dursleys," mumbled Harry.

"Exactly," nodded Regulus. "With the least suitable guardians, you could have ended. You vanquished a Dark Lord. Nobody knew how you did it, but you had. You were raised by Muggles and as a Muggle. I know more about your family history than you do."

"And I hazard a guess that I know more about the state of the Potter family affairs and estates that you do," added Sirius pensively. "And it wasn't that I listened very intently to the subject when it was brought up. I was far more concerned with how the knowledge that he was raised by his grandparents instead of parents affected your father. Because you see, up until their last will and testament was opened James believed that Euphemia and Fleamont Potter were his parents and considering that both his parents predeceased them..."

"But what he could gain from..." Harry started.

"A saviour of wizarding world unblemished by wizarding upbringing," Regulus interrupted him. "And with guardians like the Dursleys? One that would be eager to belong to the world he was born into. One that would do anything to stay there, to save it, again."

"Now imagine that instead of the Dursleys you were raised in wizarding world," said Sirius with a heavy sigh. "Imagine growing in a place where you are loved and cared for. By people whose primary concern is your safety and continued survival, by people who would do anything to protect you from harm."

"Like telling you why the Dark Lord wanted to kill you in the first place," supplied Regulus. "Like making sure that you will be prepared if he will try to go after you again. Which he had and when it happened all you had behind you, were your friends and knowledge of how Mirror of Erised works."

"Maybe some rudimental first year level defence training," added Sirius.
"Taught by a teacher who had a Dark Lord stuck on the other side of his head?" asked Regulus pointedly. "I don't think so," he shook his head. "He might have gone with the barest minimum required to not raise too many suspicions and that's not much."

"Let's not forget the Basilisk," muttered Sirius. "One of the deadliest dark creatures known to mankind and where was Dumbledore?"

"Lucius Malfoy chased him away from school," Harry answered quickly. "You can't expect..."

"One of the most powerful wizards in the world to know better?" Regulus supplied. "To do something about something that slithers through the school he was sworn to protect? For people, he was sworn to protect? To hire a properly trained wizard for Defence Against the Dark Arts post?"

"Instead of setting private score with a pompous git with a penchant for memory spells?" Sirius added quickly. "You might not trust me completely, but you can trust me with this. Dumbledore knows plenty of people who owe him favours. Quite a lot of them, are more or less, well oriented in certain aspects of Defence Against the Dark Arts. He knows people who are capable of taking this position..."

"Even with the curse on the position being true," muttered Regulus. "For all that we know Dumbledore was sitting in his tower, or who knows where, twirling his thumbs and doing absolutely nothing to stop the Slytherin monster."

"You really hate him, don't you?" asked Harry pensively.

"Not him personally," Regulus answered with a shrug. "I hate his type. Manipulative bastards that use other people to achieve their own ends under the guise of whatever appeals more to their audience, be it either pure-blood supremacy or so-called greater good. I served one and I saw what serving another had done to my brother. They're both worthy of each other and being locked in together, somewhere far away from the civilisation, under state of the art heavy anti-apparation wards."

"You know that it would only create a power vacuum, don't you?" Sirius asked pointedly.

"Yeah," nodded Regulus. "You remember that old Ravenclaw adage?" he added as he looked at Sirius. "I'm sure you do, you had Ravenclaw and house-misplaced Ravenclaw friends."

"Knowledge is power, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely so let's study hard and be evil?" Sirius quickly making Harry snort at that. "Except," he continued, "it doesn't work like that."

"But it does," Regulus protested. "In theory at the very least. Who builds pretty much every government?"

"Charismatic people with financial backup," answered Sirius.

"Well educated, intelligent and charismatic people with financial backup," Regulus clarified. "There's only as far as one can get on charisma alone, at some point you hit a glass ceiling..."

"What about Fudge?" Harry interrupted him. "He is a Minister for Magic, an idiot and one that sits in Lucius Malfoy's pocket."

"True," nodded Sirius. "He is a biscuit short of a pocket."
"And whose son he is?" Regulus asked pointedly. "I'm sure you remember," he nodded in Sirius's direction.

"Aurelius Fudge, the royal pain in our father's arse, his and pretty much every single head of the family that aligned themselves with Knights of Walpurgis," Sirius said pensively. "He was also a thorn in Dumbledore's side, not a big one, mind you," he nodded at Harry "but a thorn nevertheless."

"The Fudges, and by the Fudges I mean Cornelius' forefathers, subscribed to the philosophy of neutrality. They believed in peaceful coexistence between wizards and Muggles, after all, prior to the founding of the Statue of Secrecy wizards and Muggles coexisted in local communities and each side benefited from other side's knowledge. They lived together, they worked together," explained Regulus.

"But here's the problem with neutrality, any kind of neutrality," Sirius interrupted him. "At least in wizarding world. It's seen as cowardice, as lack of courage to proclaim more radical believes, whatever it is pure-blood supremacy or openly Muggle friendly believes."

"Doesn't change the fact that it still exists," Regulus continued. "Or the fact that quite a lot of people subscribe to that kind of philosophy. Neutrals believe in the preservation of wizarding culture and at the same time they want to enrich it with innovations developed by Muggles or Muggle-borns."

"Which in eyes of pure-blood supremacists makes them radical Muggle loving fools," muttered Sirius. "Even though they really aren't. And in the eyes of openly Muggle friendly individuals, it makes them..."

"Pure-blood supremacists," Harry finished.

"Which means that one way or the other they're screwed," added Regulus. "But patient and persistent. Occasionally a very charismatic neutral made to a Minister for Magic, but they had to be very cautious and political mood had to be right for them to get elected. I don't know what became of Aurelius, but I believe that he was considered as Bagnold's replacement..."

"Dragon pox, at his age," said Sirius slowly. "In late 1987 or early 1988, hence Cornelius' election. Millicent Bagnold wasn't young when she was elected in 1980. I think she was fifty-five at the time, at least not younger than fifty-five," he added pensively.

"And even though wizards live longer than Muggles the job of a Minister for Magic when the Dark Lord was at the peak of his power was a dangerous one," added Regulus.

"Yeah," Sirius nodded. "Guess why Bagnold was elected?" he looked at Regulus.

"Because Minchum was finally successfully assassinated?" Regulus asked. "I'm actually surprised that he lasted that long."

"Well, Bagnold was better," Sirius snorted. "From what I remember Wanker gave Minchum three months before first assassination attempt?"

"Three and a half," said Regulus. "And Bagnold?"

"Inauguration ball," answered Sirius.

Regulus whistled at that.
"Two attempts," added Sirius.

Regulus whistled again.

"Both done by low-level Death Eaters, easily caught," Sirius sighed. "But her security detail, man, it was a bloody horror," he groaned.

"Let me guess, you were a part of it?" asked Regulus.

"I was," muttered Sirius. "At inauguration ball," he added grimly. "Foiled first assassination, drank that bloody poisoned champagne instead of her. I barely managed to recover from poisoning thanks to the bezoar I always carried with me and delegated someone to catch the poisoner before they struck again, with a steak knife of all things."

"And let me guess, you got it too?" chuckled Regulus.

"Right into the liver," sighed Sirius.

Regulus howled with laughter.

"Keep laughing, you weren't the one who had to regrow nearly entire liver," chuckled Sirius. "I tried to bow out of further security details, but it turned out that I had the most impressive survival rate out of all Aurors that were appointed to it."

"If you were that close with current Minister for Magic..." started Regulus.

"I wasn't," sighed Sirius heavily. "I had beater's reflex and plenty bezoars in my pockets which made me a valuable bodyguard," he grimaced. "But you know how it works, if it won't work one way, it will work another. Everybody has a weak link, the only problem is finding it and taking care of it," he sighed heavily.

"He found it?" Regulus asked quietly.

"Bella did," Sirius muttered grimly. "We were at the peak of the war and no such a thing as mental health days existed," he snorted. "I've might have gotten a little roughish after that. It didn't suit the image of a model bodyguard, so I was empathetically asked to step down, which I did quite eagerly because it put me back in the field and on the streets," he shook his head. "And I needed it to screw my head back the right way, change my priorities, take care of things and people that mattered the most."

"But it didn't work," suggested Harry.

"It worked for some time," Sirius grimaced. "I threw myself into work, both in the Auror Office and in the Order. It used to drive your mum nuts," he added with small smile. "Made your dad complain that she worried about me more than about him," he smiled again. "I'll worry about you if you will start working one of the most dangerous jobs known to wizard kind and start pulling all-nighters in the Order after coming down from double duty," he added in a higher, slightly annoyed voice. "He barely eats and when he eats, he eats garbage food, he lost a stone in the span of a month. I don't know when he sleeps because he looks like death barely warmed up, wrung out and hung out to dry," he continued. "The only time he isn't moving is when Harry manages to fall asleep on him and even then I'm not sure how our son stays asleep with all these jitters and bouncing."

"Well, he adapted," Regulus said fondly. "And also absorbed some of it through osmosis," he chuckled.
"Hey! I don't bounce and jitter," Harry protested.

"You're forgetting that I taught you, aren't you?" Regulus chuckled again. "You weren't a genius, I never met a student who would fit the criteria of a genius. But once you understood the material, applying your knowledge in practice came easily to you. You grew bored easily. Your grades were uneven, your classwork was exemplary, as was your homework even if you turned only parts of it, you constantly underperformed on official tests. And I know why."

"I wasn't allowed to get better grades than Dudley," Harry sighed.

"I know," Regulus said softly. "Trust me, I know. I saw it, I kept trying to do something to change it but every single of my attempts to change your situation was foiled and by the same man."

"Who?" Harry asked quietly.

"The very same man who left you with the Dursleys in the first place, Albus Dumbledore," said Regulus lividly. "Every single call made to Child Protective Services when you were involved went either ignored or had been erased from existence and people who were working that case had their memories altered. But more importantly, you had your memories altered," he added fiercely. "There were incidents that would warrant your immediate removal from the Dursleys care and your relatives' long-term imprisonment. For heaven's sake Harry, once you turned at school with four broken ribs, a punctured lung, and a ruptured kidney. Once you passed out in a classroom because those bastards sent you to school with pneumonia. One day you turned at school with every single bone in your right arm broken. And I won't count every single god-damn time you turned at school bruised like a peach."

"They weren't..." Harry started.

"Abusive?" Regulus hissed.

"Well, I got hit with a frying pan once or twice," Harry shrugged. "But they didn't..."

"Abuse you?" Regulus supplied harshly. "Merlin, once you ended up in the hospital because you were bleeding from your ears. The nurse was worried about meningitis, but it turned out that you had to be hit on the head so badly that you were bleeding into your brain. Another time you collapsed because you developed a sepsis due to an untreated bite."

"That's it," Sirius muttered darkly. "I'm going to kill Albus Dumbledore."

"Get in the fucking line," hissed Regulus.

"Godfather," Sirius retorted.

"Absent godfather," grunted Regulus.

"Otherwise occupied," hissed Sirius.

"Ipso facto godfather," muttered Regulus.

"Merlin," groaned Harry. "Aren't you supposed to be on the same side?" he asked pointedly. "Allegedly mine?"

Both men looked first at him and then at each other before they burst out in laughter.

"How I'm supposed to take that?" sighed Harry. "Is it a good sing or not?"
"You'll get used to it," chuckled Sirius.

"The Blacks are naturally headstrong," shrugged Regulus with a small smile. "Manners of kings and obstinacy of a deaf mule, like our paternal grandmother used to say," he shrugged again. "When it comes to family loyal to a fault even if every now and then you get a rotten apple," he glanced at Sirius. "Until it turns that the rotten apple was right all along," he grinned at him

"I will accept your apology in steaks," Sirius said lazily.

"So juicy that they're still mooing?" asked Regulus sweetly.

"Better not because I'm not going to clean after them," muttered Harry making them both howl with laughter and after few moments he joined them.

"You're fitting perfectly," Regulus smiled at him. "Like a glove."

"Gee, thanks," mumbled Harry. "Can we come back to what you so harshly judged Dumbledore for? You know, why Wanker wanted to kill me in the first place?" he asked curiously. "Because it seems to me that he might have become quite fixated on me."

"Yeah, it's not like you run head-first into danger," snorted Regulus.

"We need to do something about it, but we can take care of it later," added Sirius with a sigh.


"What you know about divination, Harry?" asked Regulus after he calmed down.

Harry thought about it for a moment before he answered, "That it's an elective subject available to third year students and that it teaches different techniques of foretelling the future."

"A bland and incomplete definition but so is the subject," sighed Regulus. "Divination is a branch of magic that involves attempting to foresee the future or gather insights into past, present and future events, through various rituals and tools. It's a very inexact science and requires of its user's certain kind of sensibility and sensitivity," he explained.

"It's not a subject for anyone," grimaced Sirius. "A lot depends on interpretations of effects of those rituals or techniques and these interpretations can be very wrong."

"Depending from the users," nodded Regulus. "Especially once you factor in the fact that while you can teach even a trained monkey to use divination techniques said monkey would only be able to parrot what it learned," he snorted. "Divination that is taught at Hogwarts is nothing more but parlour tricks. Crystal balls, reading from tea-leaves, palmistry, tarot cards, dream interpretations..."

"It's nothing more but a way for some people spending their money on something that might or might not work in their favour," added Sirius. "Not to mention, truly gifted people in this field are very rare."

"I don't know who teaches it now. I'm hazarding a guess that it isn't the same teacher who taught us because he was complaining about being ready to retire for ages and he might have retired when my year graduated from Hogwarts," said Regulus pensively. "But he was very frank with all of us who made it to N.E.W.T.s. At the last lesson of the term in our seventh year he told us that he spent five years teaching us parlour tricks and ways to pass our time or ways how to swindle money from
"idiots who believe that everyone is capable of foretelling the future."

"I didn't get that," muttered Sirius.

"Because you got a Troll on your O.W.L.s results in Divination, you pillock," snorted Regulus. "Nettle wouldn't let you into Advanced Divination even if you wanted."

"Good riddance, it was a waste of precious time," snorted Sirius.

"Anyway," Regulus rolled his eyes at him. "Like the troll over there said," he pointed at Sirius, who snorted again, "truly gifted people in divination are very rare. They are the ones capable of making actual predictions that have a chance of becoming true. Those people are called seers and quite a lot of them are unaware of their future foretelling abilities, some of them even detest divination and its techniques with a fiery passion."

Harry raised his left eyebrow at him.

"The predictions that seers make are called prophecies," continued Regulus. "Ministry of Magic has a department called Department of Mysteries, one of its divisions is devoted to storing all prophecies that were ever made all over Great Britain and Ireland."

"How do they do that?" asked Harry curiously. "If some seers even don't know that they're seers?"

"The spell that locates and records all prophecies is similar to Taboo," explained Regulus. "It's attuned to a particular brainwave, a magical current which all seers exude when they go into a trance and are about to make a prophecy. It's ward-based and anchored to anchor points that are scattered all over Great Britain and Ireland and all of them are connected to the Hall of Prophecies."

"Like houses to power stations?" asked Harry.

"Sort of," nodded Regulus. "Except in reverse, the current flows from the seer into anchor points then to the Department of Mysteries, not the other way around."

Harry nodded that he understood.

"Like each prophecy must be made, each prophecy needs to be heard," continued Regulus. "Some of them are made in private, told to nothing but an empty room and they would have been lost if it wasn't for the system that was designed to alert an Unspeakable on duty, the Department of Mysteries employee, that a prophecy is being made."

"Aren't they supposed to not touch them?" asked Sirius pensively.

"They are," Regulus agreed. "The only people who can remove the prophecy, any prophecy, from the shelf are people who said prophecy concerns and because they usually don't know that such prophecy had been made the prophecies stay on their shelves."

"For posterity?" asked Harry sceptically.

"Somewhat," grimaced Regulus. "You see, not even Unspeakables are capable of telling in advance whom the prophecies concern. They can only guess whom they might concern in retrospect, through careful study of history, annals, old diaries, old letters..." he shrugged. "It's a tedious job and to some, it seems pointless but in a way it's fascinating," he shook his head.

"But?" asked Harry pointedly.
"But someone has to do it," sighed Regulus. "Just like someone has to hear them. Sometimes when a prophecy is being made other people, then an Unspeakable in the Department of the Mysteries that witnesses the recording, are present in the close vicinity of the seer. Their presence usually helps in discerning who the prophecies refer to, sometimes, not always."

"And?" prompted Harry.

"And..." Regulus started but just as he said he closed his mouth again and shook his head.

"Reg?" prompted Sirius.

"I was an Unspeakable on duty," Regulus started again. "Technically I wasn't even a full Unspeakable, just a trainee and one that at the time very seriously questioned his life choices, being an Unspeakable amongst other things," he shook his head. "But it was a bloody Halloween night and I pulled a short straw, I was single, childless and newbie" he chuckled mirthlessly. "I was there when it was recorded," he added and fell silent.

"What?" Harry asked curiously.

"The prophecy that foretold the fall of the Dark Lord," whispered Regulus.

"What does it say?" Harry asked, suddenly afraid of what he might have to hear, but at the same time knowing that perhaps it was his only chance to find out what the hell was going on around him.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies ..." Regulus said in a quiet voice.

"What does it mean?" Harry whispered.

"It means that the Dark Lord may be vanquished for good only by one person, by someone who was born as the seventh month dies to people who defied him trice already," answered Regulus quietly. "The prophecy concerns him and a child that would have been born at the end of July of 1980 to people who managed to escape him three times."

"Me?" Harry whispered.

"Possibly," answered Regulus grimly.

"That's why they went after Lily and James," Sirius whispered and he hid his face in his hands. "And Frank and Alice," he groaned. "Because of a stupid..."

"Longbottoms?" asked Regulus pensively.

"Their son, Neville, was born on 30th July," whispered Sirius. "In theory, there's a difference of a day but in reality, Alice and Lily gave birth literally an hour apart," he added grimly, and he lowered his hands, slamming them against the table. "At least it explains why that stupid bitch and her merry bunch of fuckwits went after them after the Dark Lord had fallen."

"Who?" whispered Harry. "The Longbottoms? Who went after them?"

"Bellatrix Lestrange," spat Sirius. "Her husband Rodolphus, his brother Rastaban with another little
fuckwit called Barty Crouch Junior."

"Fuck," groaned Regulus. "When did this happen? What did they do to them?"

"Late January, early February. I don't remember exactly," grimaced Sirius. "All that I remember is that Azkaban was one giant ice-cube at the time," he shuddered. "And you know Bella, remember what she liked the most."

Regulus closed his eyes and put his right hand over his face.

"They were tortured under Cruciatus Curse to the point of insanity," whispered Sirius. "Round upon round upon round upon round, poor bastards. I don't know what happened to their son. The only reason I learned anything at all was because one of the arses who brought them to Azkaban remembered Bella's maiden name. Called it a family reunion."

"Family reunion?" asked Harry quietly.

"Bellatrix Lestrange was, is, our cousin," mumbled Regulus. "All around bitch and the Dark Lord's most loyal servant, also an occasional whore," he grimaced. "Doesn't surprise me that she went after him."

"Really?" sneered Sirius.

"Really," nodded Regulus. "It's hard to explain to a pure-blood wizard."

Sirius glared at him as he said, "You're a pure-blood wizard."

"I was a raised as a pure-blood wizard to be a pure-blood wizard," retorted Regulus. "You're forgetting that I spent the last twelve years as a Muggle," he sighed. "And to exist as such I had to gain education of a Muggle. I passed my GCSE, A-Levels, I have a bachelor's degree in mathematics and Postgraduate Certificate in Education..."

"Good for you?" offered Sirius sceptically.

"... and as a teacher I'm contractually obliged to continue further my education," finished Regulus. "Mathematics comes easy to me, always had from the earliest years and seeing that a lion share of Arithmancy is, in fact, mathematics ipso facto I was studying Arithmancy ahead of normal schedule. Quite unevenly, I should add. But once Vector got her hands on me, she set me on the right course. I had to attend normal lessons but after classes, she continued pushing me further towards first O.W.L.s levels and later on N.E.W.T.s levels."

"Into Third Class Mastery I presume?" asked Sirius pensively.

"Third Class Mastery in Arithmancy in many ways is like bachelor’s degree in mathematics, except with, you know magical aspects," continued Regulus. "Granted there are some differences here and there, but they weren't big and I was literally learning what I already knew and got a degree at. So, in order to not bore myself to tears, I used some of the time which my Muggle peers spent at studying what they didn't know to learn more about Muggle world. That's how I stumbled first into psychology and later on, in pedagogy which is how I got into teaching. Both of them fascinate me until this very day..."

"But how it applies to Bella?" muttered Sirius.

"Bella is an example of what psychiatry and clinical psychology describes as a psychopath," answered Regulus. "It's a personality disorder that is characterized by persistent antisocial
behaviour, impaired empathy and remorse, and bold, disinhibited and egoistical traits. Psychopathic individuals also are prone to violence."

"English, please," sighed Sirus.

"Lacking restraint," Regulus rolled his eyes at him.

"You know that from where I'm standing..." started Sirius grimly.

"We have been raised as psychopaths?" suggested Regulus. "By psychopaths?"

"Yes," said Sirius with a grimace.

"I would like to remind you of something called remorse which I know that you've got, as do I. As well as a certain degree of empathy," Regulus said pointedly. "Something which Bella was incapable of showing for as long as I can remember."

"Snuffles," muttered Sirius.

"One of the examples," grimaced Regulus. "Now," he continued, "take this psychopathic individual that's very prone to violence and throw into the mix an arranged marriage to another rich pure-blood psychopath that's far less..." he paused and grimaced again, "talented, intelligent than her. Oh sure, he does have some learning curve otherwise she would surely find a way to get rid of him and quite quickly on that."

"But he has a redeeming quality which is his connections to Knights of Walpurgis and the Dark Lord himself," said Sirius thoughtfully. "Who is far more fascinating, educated and talented than her own lousy husband. Oh, now I can see that."

"Charismatic, powerful, unbeatable and as much of a psychopath as she is. Hence eternal devotion to him and his cause," added Regulus. "Now throw into the mix the prophecy that foretells his fall..."

"Now, wait a minute," Sirius interrupted him. "Because something isn't adding up," he grimaced. "The...," he started and chewed on his bottom lip for a moment before he decided. "The Dark Lord knew about the prophecy when he went after Lily and James which means..."

"... that someone told him that it was made?" supplied Regulus. "Yes, someone did," he nodded. "But it wasn't me. When the prophecy was made, I already decided that I was bowing out of that party. Your due date was running out on 2nd November because Bella didn't want you to live to your twentieth birthday and the prophecy was made on 31st October. Yet at the meeting on 1st November the Dark Lord knew that a prophecy concerning his fall has been made."

"That seer," mumbled Sirius slowly. "Was there someone else with her?" he looked at Regulus.


"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," Sirius groaned and slammed his left hands against his forehead.

"Who?" asked Harry quickly. "What these letters stand for?"

"Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore," Sirius spat angrily before he lowered his hand and slammed it against the table.

"He told..." Harry started. "He couldn't have..", he choked out. "He was supposed to be against
Vol… the Dark Lord," he finally mumbled furiously, saying the Dark Lord instead of Wanker or Voldemort because all of this 'the Dark Lording' which got to Sirius finally got to him too.

Regulus grimaced before he said, "If it's any consolation, he wasn't alone."

"Now you're saying that?" Sirius spat out furiously.

"Think about it, Sirius," sighed Regulus. "It was Albus Dumbledore, leader of the Order of the Phoenix, someone who openly opposed the Dark Lord."

"And the Dark Lord had a tail on him," groaned Sirius and he shook his head before he asked, "Did you got their initials?"

"Unfortunately, no," grimaced Regulus. "That's the problem with the recordings. The magical signature of the listeners records as literally the last thing of the prophecy. Whoever was tailing Dumbledore didn't get the whole prophecy. My guess is that Dumbledore's tail didn't get past the part about the power the Dark Lord knows not otherwise the Dark Lord wouldn't be as relentless and careless in his pursuit of the one who will vanquish him as he was."

"How can you be so sure?" asked Harry quickly.

"It was the last meeting I attended," sighed Regulus. "And the Dark Lord was livid. So livid that he killed outright two pairs, married pairs of idiots who admitted to having sex within last three days and he issued a ban on procreating until after Christmas."

Harry stared at him.

"Biology, which I'm sure you had," Regulus pointed out. "But then again, I dropped quite a lot on your shoulders, so there it is. Typical pregnancy last around forty weeks, ten months. The length of it might vary depending on various factors of course. But essentially any child born towards the end of July has to be conceived between very late October to mid-November."

"Great," Harry groaned. "He's going to try again?" he asked grimly. "I will have to find a way to kill him otherwise he will kill me before he will take over the world and it will have to be me because one of the most powerful wizards of our times, the only one the Dark Lord fears, just does nothing to stop him."

"Nor does he do anything to prepare you for it," added Regulus grimly.

"Oh, I didn't forget that," Harry hissed lividly. "What he's thinking? That one day I will just wake up with the power the Dark Lord knows not? And up until that day, I will continue being just poor, old, plain, boring Harry? Is he out of his bloody mind?" he bristled out. "Does he want me dead?"

"Well, we know the answer to the last one," sighed Regulus. "Since he left you with the Dursleys you came pretty close to dying there several times. And since then..." he looked at Harry pointedly.

"He did nothing to stop him," Harry spat out. "Aside from checking whatever or not the Dark Lord managed to kill me this or that time," he huffed. "And how I'm supposed to stop him? By boring him to death with Gilderoy Lockhart's trivia? He can't touch me without hurting whatever body he brought along for the ride, but he doesn't need to touch me in order to bloody try and kill me. And I'm supposed to just stand there?"

"No," said Sirius firmly as he looked at Harry. "You won't just stand there," he shook his head. "I won't allow it," he added vehemently. "We are going to seriously curb your tendency to run head-first into certain danger and we're going to train you. The Black family style, Auror style. So, when
you will meet him again..." he paused and narrowed his eyes. "And you won't go looking for him..."

"I won't," Harry protested vehemently. "He always finds me," he grumbled.

"You will be prepared, the best I can get you prepared and with my knowledge," he looked at Regulus and added, "our knowledge of the Dark Arts and defensive spells, which is pretty extensive mind you, you will be ready when the time comes."

"At the same time, we will sort out the Dark Lord's Horcruxes. How many of them he really has? What are they? Where are they? We will find a way to destroy them to make sure that your next meeting with him will be his last meeting with you," added Regulus earnestly.

Harry felt the yawn coming and he barely managed to stifle it. He was tired as hell but still, he was curious about few things, like why Sirius was in Azkaban, how he escaped and few other things.

"How you can destroy a Horcrux?" asked Harry.

Regulus scratched his head as he said, "You see, technically I don't have a bloody clue. I know that there exists at least one way to do it but... I hoped that Kreacher found a way to destroy the locket because I didn't."

Harry gulped nervously, it wasn't good.

"You used Basilisk fang to destroy the diary and I'm afraid that destroying other Horcruxes would require very powerful magic," Regulus added.

"Are you tired?" Sirius turned to Harry suddenly.

"No," Harry yawned heavily.

Sirius looked like he was contemplating something for a moment before he said, "We can continue this discussion tomorrow. Right now, all three of us are too tired for that. It's got to be three o'clock in the morning at least."

"Nearly four," yawned Regulus. "I could keep going but you..."

"We are going to bed right now," Sirius said with a yawn. "Trust me, nothing good ever came out of sleep deprivation."

"I would disagree," sighed Regulus. "But I really don't have the energy for that."

Harry smiled at that softly.

"Up with you," said Sirius as he stood up, started shooing the other two out of the kitchen. "Did you by any chance manage to clean more than your bedroom?"

"My bedroom and your bed," yawned Regulus. "Not very thoroughly, mind you. I think mine is a little bit better. The bed is thoroughly cleaned at the very least," he added. "Plus, I'm sure that you aren't very keen to let Harry out of your sight."

"Damn right," grumbled Sirius.

"The bed is big, so is the window-seat and I can sleep there while you two will take the bed," added Regulus.
Harry nodded sleepily and let them lead him upstairs to the room where he woke up a few hours before.

Using the bathroom outside of the room he quickly changed into his pyjamas and nearly snorted when he saw other two changed into pyjamas with Slytherin emblem.

"There was never a Black who wasn't in Slytherin until Sirius came along," explained Regulus as he laid down on the window-seat. "And I need to go shopping for his stuff anyway," he yawned. "There's only as much of Slytherin colouring as he can stand and I'm afraid that he already hit the limit. He really abhors pure-blood sense of fashion."

"Too damn right," snorted Sirius as he waited for Harry to climb on the left side of the bed before he climbed on the other side.

"As do I and all my clothes are back at home to which for now, I can't return," continued Regulus sleepily. "Any special wishes?"

"From me?" mumbled Harry sleepily. "I'm alright."

"Your school uniform might be," snorted Regulus softly. "Everything else is at least five sizes too big if not more."

"I don't want to cause trouble," Harry sighed.

"Trouble, he says," muttered Sirius. "Having clothes that fit you is, or at the very least should be, considered basic humans rights," he added firmly. "Reg, take his measurements from his school uniform and adjust them accordingly."

"Yes, Mum," yawned Regulus.

"Aren't you supposed to be wizards?" Harry asked sleepily. "Ever heard of transfiguration?"

"Heard?" snickered Regulus. "Sirius has Third Class Mastery in Transfiguration."

"And as a Third Class Master, I have an authority to tell you that transfigurating clothing will never be as good as normal, not transfigurated clothing. Also, transfiguration done hastily and without a lot of effort and concentration from a wizard tends to fail, usually at the worst possible times," explained Sirius. "Doing it the right way so it won't fall apart is very time and power consuming, so it really is just easier to simply buy clothes."

"Okay, Mum," yawned Harry. "I'm not arguing anymore," he yawned again and suddenly remembering something he added quickly, "He's at Hogwarts."

"Who?" asked Sirius quickly.

"Neville Longbottom," Harry explained. "He's in Gryffindor with me. I think he lives with his grandmother," he added before he yawned again. "You will explain more, won't you? The stuff you didn't manage to finish explaining tonight?" he asked sleepily.

"Of course," Sirius said earnestly.

He let Sirius tuck him in and before Harry knew he was fast asleep.

Secrets & Keepers : Keep Us
Sirius Black, 12 Grimmauld Place, 7th August, early morning

He wasn't a Master of Occlumency, at the very least he never considered himself as one because true mastery of it required out of its practitioners not only superb ability to compartmentalize the world and events around them but also an enormous degree of self-restraint to consciously not show any kind of emotion. That said he did his best to learn Occlumency from the very moment he stumbled into the tiniest paragraph that described it. He made a conscious effort to learn more as fast as he possibly could because his sanity, his very life depended on it. But then came James Potter, Hogwarts and being sorted into Gryffindor.

Gryffindors wore their hearts on their sleeve, James most certainly did, the kid had no restrain and Sirius quite seriously doubted that his beloved parents ever punished him in any sort of way.

Lucky bastard.

James had a very easy-going nature and very contagious enthusiasm for everything even remotely funny. It fascinated Sirius and more often than not he found himself quickly pulled into this or that prank. Later on, he reasoned with himself that for being sorted into the Gryffindor there will be a hell to pay anyway so he might as well have some fun from life before that will happen. So, he let himself go, let himself unwind, uncurl. It was a funny year, joyous and relaxing but he knew what waited at its end for him.

That pattern continued over the years. Ten months in heaven followed by two in hell until he couldn't bear it anymore and he escaped from this hellhole. The year that followed his escape? Well, that was a different kind of hell. Seeing James and Remus, and even at times, Pettigrew, in and out of the classes, at meals in Great Hall and not being able, allowed to, speak to them until spoken to was unbearably painful. They even went as far as forbidding him from sleeping in their dormitory, so he quickly found himself another place to stay which was bloody inconvenient but really, he was lucky that he was allowed to still attend Hogwarts.

And remembering the price he had to pay for that he kept his head down, went to his detentions, threw himself into his studies and wormed himself into Third Class Mastery programs in Transfiguration and Defence Against the Dark Arts. Slughorn along with the help of his Ministry friends and Hogwarts colleagues organised these for particularly gifted or at the very least determined enough students that wanted to achieve their masteries faster for any given reason and because unlike official courses out of Hogwarts these were taught for free there was always at least one individual in every year of it in any given field.

One day it became evident to him that other people parents weren't like his own parents and weren't supposed to be like his parents. From that very moment in his head crystallised the idea that he wanted to do something about it, to make sure no other child would suffer the same way he did. That led him into leafing through Auror program which one of the upper year students had left behind on the table. From that point forwards he knew who he was going to become after his N.E.W.T.s and he devoted himself into studying the subjects required for future Aurors.

Hence a Troll in Divination and Acceptable in History of Magic. He also sat O.W.L.s in Care of Magical Creatures even though he didn't attend it, growing up the way he did he knew half of the course anyway and if there was something, he didn't know he always had Remus, who was taking the subject, as a sounding board. He still got a well-deserved Exceed Expectations for his efforts which supposedly amused Kettleburn to no end. Another effortless Exceed Expectations he got was from Astronomy which bored him to tears and was very happy to leave behind. For Exceed Expectations in Ancient Runes and Muggle Studies though he had to work, and he decided to keep
both on advanced levels, the later because Muggles fascinated him and the former because he found it meditative.

From the remaining subjects which were required in Auror training, he got Outstanding in each, with the exception, of Herbology in which he got Exceed Expectations. He had been told by McGonagall that it would be enough, but he didn't buy it during his career advice meeting and he didn't buy it again at the beginning of the sixth year when she handed him his lesson plan. He was so bloody determined to get into Auror program on the top of the list of applicants that he was even willing to share Third Class Mastery classes in Defence Against the Dark Arts with Snivellus.

It was an awful and exhausting year but weirdly that year was also the best thing that could have happened to him. Away from distractions that inevitably came when James and Pettigrew, who adored him back then, were involved he found himself again.

He found within himself small, terrified boy, who against his own terror and unavoidable pain that followed protected his baby brother from harm at all cost. That boy still existed within, seared with scars and painful memories but he emerged from the hell he was put through victorious, alive and finally free from the shackles that bound him.

He also let go of his disillusion, accepted the painful and bitter truth that his beloved friend would never look at him the same way he looked at him, the same way James looked at Lily Evans. He accepted that he might never regain his friendship, his or Moony's because let's be frank he never particularly cared for Peter.

He came back to meditation, to Occlumency he regularly practiced, and he had Padfoot. He also had other friends, not as good as James or Remus but friends he either let go once he found James, friends he could have made earlier if he wasn't as fixated on James as he was. And those people liked the man he became away from the Marauders. He liked the man he became.

Even Lily Evans after that entire Evan Proudfoot fiasco warmed up to him. Granted leading her to an empty classroom where her boyfriend was surely busy with fucking whichever girl came up to him and spread her legs was cruel but so was stringing another girl along. Sirius might not have been a fan of Evans since James fell for her, arse over tea-kettle but even he couldn't deny that someone as intelligent and kind (mostly to others, not necessarily the Marauders) deserved to be with someone who truly appreciated her.

And Lily Evans' taste in boyfriends was as atrocious as Bathsheda Babbling's. Really, what was wrong with some of the most brilliant, intelligent and aesthetically pleasing women that made them fall for idiots and jerks? Blessedly Mirzam Verascez, Bathsheda's room-mate and best friend, and Sirius's one-time childhood friend – from the summer before everything went to hell in a handbasket – wasn't like them and upon once being asked what kind of boys she liked she simply answered, 'Mature'.

As he was falling out of love with James inevitably, he was falling in love with her. In her quiet, reassuring presence. In her sarcastic sense of humour that went hand in hand with her headstrong but still slightly gentle nature. In her intelligence, in her resilience and dedication to achieving her dreams.

One day he just looked up from his book at her and thought, 'I want to grow old with you'. Just like that. No prior warnings, no growing certainty which he had with James. Just one day he found himself staring into her hazel green eyes and he was completely and utterly lost. For an eternity.

Oh, he tried to fight it, with himself. He had enough of unrequited love to last himself a lifetime. Once was bad enough and women like Mirzam Verascez did not fall for men like Sirius Black,
period. She would eventually find someone worth of her and he, Sirius, like a good friend he was, would be happy for her, for them. He would bear it. Maybe even at some point he would manage to fall out of love with her or continue to love her until he would grow old and eventually die.

That she fell in love with him too took him by surprise. It took time, years of friendship, of mutual friendly teasing and working together and a bloody near-death experience but finally they were there. Happy and in love, making tentative plans at growing old together.

And then she was gone. Gone on the very day he knelt before her and asked her if she would do him the honour of becoming his wife. Gone on the very day he learned that they were going to have a child together, a son. Gone because he traded with her Diagon Alley duty that day because he needed time off to take care of something for the Order.

Bellatrix got to her. Oh, Mirzam managed to drag the bitch away from her original target, a group of first year Muggle-born students and even though well-educated and quite fierce dueller she was no match for Bella.

In the end, all that was left of her was her wand and an engagement ring that fallen off her finger because it was slightly too big for her. Bella had to use the darkest of the Dark Magic to literally erase Mirzam out of existence, for there was no body, only a huge magical backlash in a place Mirzam once stood.

He wasn't even allowed to grieve her openly. Okay, no one forbid him from doing so but he just couldn't bring himself to show the depth of his overwhelming grief. Not when the summons to come to St Mungo's because Harry – at that moment still Euphemius Fleamont Potter – was being born came literally minutes after Healer Wilcox, St Mungo's Medical Examiner, had left him and Bathsheda in the morgue so they could have few minutes alone with what was left of the woman they both loved.

And to the Potters he went. Blessedly because within an hour since he arrived James somehow managed to poison himself with a calming draught. Lily was not amused even though she welcomed the distraction with a grim smile, the birth itself was difficult, long and tedious and James was so nervous and jittery that he was essentially maddeningly unhelpful.

Once James was taken away to recover from poisoning – and on Lily's request was supposed to be dosed with a mild sleeping draught to get him out of the way until after the birth – Sirius took his place. He let Lily squeeze his hands as hard as she could whenever she wanted. He walked with her around the room between contractions. He even accepted several hexes which came his way in lieu of James.

He was there when small, scrawny red-faced, black-haired and mostly covered in slime bundle was placed in Lily's arms. It was also him, and not the apprentice Healer who was helping with the birth, who realised that something was wrong with Lily and that the birth might not have gone as it was supposed to. After running out of the room he fetched more competent Healer and slightly groggy James who literally stumbled into him.

It was only once Lily had been taken out of the room for emergency surgery, followed by mortified James while he was left alone with Harry in his arms when it hit him.

He was never going to experience it himself. The woman he loved was gone and the baby boy they could have was gone with her. There would be no teasing over names. No, I can give you Leia but I'm not naming any son of mine Han Solo, forget it. No, bugger off, summer child, you aren't naming any child of ours after that bloody book, you don't even like it.
He will never have that. He will never see Mirzam again. He will never hold his son in his arms. Never he will wake up for a night feeding. Never he will change a nappy. Never he will have a chance to teach his son Astronomy or how to ride a bike or fly a broom or...

So, he wept, along with little, still, Euphemius Fleamont. Over Mirzam, over himself, over his unborn son whose name with his mother they just started to agree on, albeit jokingly. Han Solo might have gotten a no, but Harrison Ford Black had them both collapsing in giggles.

It was never going to happen. He was never going to have that. The closest he would come to, in being a father, was being a godfather for James's and Lily's kids. Maybe one day Moony's too if he would get over the fear of passing lycanthropy to his possible children.

So, he spoke softly of Harry, of what he will never have, things he will never have a chance to witness. The first smile, first laugh, first footsteps, first words… He spoke and wept, wept and spoke. It was cathartic. The weight in his arms of the boy that was not his son calmed him down. A bit, little by little until he was no longer talking about Harry but singing softly to the child that was falling asleep in his arms.

He only allowed himself small and wistfully whispered 'Oh, Harry' when Lily wheeled by James came into the room. He immediately tried to cover it by poking fun at Euphemius Fleamont and how miserable his life as such would be when Lily surprised him, and James too, by saying that her baby boy was not going to be named Euphemius Fleamont. Apparently, James had lost naming rights somewhere along the way. James obviously tried to object but he really didn't seem to have a standing ground and in the end, he shrugged when Lily suggested that Sirius should suggest something.

Harrison flew out of his mouth before he could stop himself. Harrison James to be exact to placate frowning Prongs. It was also followed by a suggestion that while Euphemius Fleamont is not a good name for a first born it might be a good one for a younger brother.

Lily liked it, granted she tried few other variations of Harry, from Henry to Harold as well as few others Sirius had no idea how she came up with but by the naming day she was back to original suggestion of Harrison James.

As for Sirius. He immediately threw himself into work, into chasing Bellatrix, evading capture and hiding who the fuck knows where. He took down few of stupider Death Eaters and literally threw himself into work. When he wasn't on duty he was working for the Order of the Phoenix and when he wasn't working for the Order he was on duty.

Between work he was with the Potters. Supposedly resting and charging his batteries but nearly always worrying, about Voldemort, about a spy within the Order that was working for Voldemort's benefit. About James and Lily and Harry. About having to constantly move them nearly every fortnight from one safe house to another. It was wearing him thin, making him harsher, rougher with anyone who wasn't James or Lily or baby Harry.

In brief moments of being alone with Harry – under the pretence of putting the boy to sleep or changing his nappy or bathing him to relieve his slightly frazzled and tired parents because Harry was very active and curious child – he allowed himself to voice his worries and fears, to grieve what he lost.

Being in Harry's company calmed him down, centred him again, gave him strength for another day and he needed it, needed to draw that strength from somewhere.

Realisation that the worst had happened, and that Pettigrew betrayed them threw him off kilter. He
forgot the obvious, logical things, like altering someone, anyone of the change before hurrying to Godric's Hallow. Like allowing himself to linger in that ruined house instead of removing Harry, surprisingly alive Harry from that place. Oh, he placed strong enchantments around that room to keep the roof from collapsing on Harry's head but instead of picking Harry up and leaving the house he stupidly wondered around it looking for Harry's clothes, toys, family pictures, Lily's and James's trinkets.

The shock of what he witnessed, the loss of his friends caught up with him in Lily's small study where he collapsed under the avalanche of grief and strain of a panic attack. He might have blacked out for few minutes or maybe even hours, he wasn't sure.

The only thing he was sure was when he regained consciousness was that Harry wasn't in his bedroom. After a frenzied search, he found him again in Hagrid's arms and he tried to talk Hagrid out of taking Harry with him. It didn't work, and he wasn't going to risk harming Harry by attacking Hagrid. He let it slide for now and he even gave Hagrid his bike.

Then he went after Pettigrew, he was going to hound that bastard down even if it bloody killed him. Which it nearly did. But instead of dying he found himself at the bottom of Azkaban prison, with no trial, no official questioning just Moody's 'Take him straight to Azkaban lads' after Crouch issued order to 'take that piece of shit out of my sight and throw him where the sun doesn't shine'.

Azkaban was pure hell. Between Dementors which brought to the forefront of his mind his worst memories – and he had plenty of them – and the wardens and their singing lessons interchangeable with torture sessions where he was beaten and stabbed multiple times. They didn't let him die too, he was lousily healed after every single one of them before he was thrown back into his cell. Supposedly he was more funny alive than dead.

He barely remembered the first year. He had memories of few days of clarity, too brief and too far between and nearly always bad, followed either by the bad news he received like what happened to the Longbottoms or new torture sessions.

He nearly died several times during that year but something stopped himself from letting go, from doing something as stupid as attacking one of the wardens which would grant him either swift death at the hand of his victim or a Dementor Kiss. Both were welcomed. Both didn't happen because something held him back from doing so.

And deep inside he knew what or more precisely who it was.

Harry.

His sweet little Harry, the only thing he had of James and Lily. Harry, who was somewhere out there, supposedly under Petunia's care but Sirius wasn't sure about the quality of that care. Harry, who was growing up without his parents because he, Sirius, was too stupid, too careless, too…

Harry, whom he found again, grown up neglected and abused by Lily's jade of a sister and her oaf of a husband. Harry, who was smart and quick on his feet and so very Harry.

Only some remains of iron will that got him through Azkaban kept him from immediately hugging the boy right away. Harry didn't trust him, didn't trust them both, with good reasons, after all, he was kidnapped and held against his will.

Then they started talking, both him and Regulus defusing the situation, bit by bit proving Harry that they weren't going to harm him. The more they talked, the more they all learned from each other, the more mortified Sirius became. And the harder it became for him to not show it.
Never before today, he occluded as hard as during their conversation, he managed to slip up several times but the last remains of his iron will kept him from rushing out of the house in order to find Albus Dumbledore and bloody kill him like he fucking deserved.

He could feel his control fraying towards the end of it and he readily welcomed the excuse of Harry's exhaustion before he herded them all upstairs into Regulus's bedroom.

Blessedly, Harry fell asleep quickly, curled in the middle of the bed rather than on the side he climbed on but then again the room wasn't very warm. Only when he was sure that Harry was sleeping soundly and Regulus's breath on the window-seat also evened out he allowed himself to finally stop occluding.

The world came crashing around him. The illusion, that with Pettigrew captured he would be able to convince Dumbledore to let him take care of Harry and remove him from Petunia's care, had collapsed too. No, Dumbledore would never let it happen because Harry wasn't just Harry, he was Dumbledore's bloody weapon against Voldemort and Dumbledore will continue to use him until like Sirius, Harry's usefulness will have ran its course or until Voldemort succeeds in killing Harry.

He didn't know when the first tear rolled down his face but after it did, he couldn't stop the others from following it. He wept soundlessly, like back when he was a little boy and his father was done with him and was finally out of his room. He wept again over James and Lily. But most of all he wept over Harry, over whose head was hanging a terrifying destiny, one that no one tried to stop from happening.

He was so focused on not making any sound that he didn't realise that the bed dipped slightly, and covers had shifted until – over Harry's sleeping form in the middle of the bed – a long-fingered hand reached his and squeezed it.

He took a deeper breath and tried to stop himself from crying, but the tears continued to fall.

"Don't stop," Regulus whispered softly. "You need it."

Sirius snorted softly through tears.

"When I was studying for my postgraduate certificate in education, I had a professor whom we called Quoteman," Regulus said softly. "There was literally no quote he didn't meet, didn't like or didn't use."

Sirius remained quiet and he closed his eyes.

"He once said one, that I think you need to hear right now. It's one of Washington Irving, beats me who he was, I'm a mathematician, but the quote had stuck with me through all these years," he added and after a brief pause said, "There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness but of power. They are messengers of overwhelming grief and of unspeakable love."

New tears rolled down Sirius's face.

"I've never seen you crying, Sirius," Regulus continued. "Not once, not a single time. Not even when you had very good reason to. Not in front of me at the very least. I used to weep in front of you countless times..."

"Oh, Reg, you sweet summer child," Sirius whispered. "You have no idea."

"I have some," mumbled Regulus. "I'm sorry that I wasn't there for you when you needed me the most. I can't change that. But I'm here now, for you, for Harry. Please, let me..."
Sirius opened his eyes and looked over Harry's mop of hair at his brother. The room was dark, but he could still see Regulus's face and his eyes. Dark brown like their mother but unlike hers, they well full of warmth and concern.

"When..." Sirius started. "When James and Lily made me Harry's godfather, I swore them that if anything will happen to them," he paused, "that I will take care of him, that I will protect him..." he paused again, for a longer moment this time. "How am I supposed to protect him not from one but two most powerful wizards of our era?"

"To the best of your abilities," answered Regulus softly.

"What if it won't be enough?" whispered Sirius.

"You will find a way," Regulus's other hand under the pillows and over Harry's head found Sirius's and squeezed it hard. "We will find a way."

And he had, it suddenly, it just became evident, even if Harry will be unhappy about it.

"He's not going back to Hogwarts," said Sirius with a sniff.

"I was going to suggest that too," nodded Regulus. "Dumbledore proved that he's bloody useless, and a manipulative old coot on top of it. We can train him better than them. You will take over Transfiguration, I will teach him Charms and both of us will teach him the rest."

"Duelling with two wands," Sirius added. "I'm not liking what Ollivander has said about his wand being the Dark Lord's twin. I'm sure that you can find a suitable wand somewhere in here."

"Lots of them," Regulus snorted softly. "Thank Merlin that no one in this family believed in abiding age restrictions, and that they hoarded the wands of the deceased family members."

"Yay," muttered Sirius. "Speaking of which whose wand I'm using?"

"Your namesake's," answered Regulus. "Just like I'm using mine. I lost my own when I was recovering the Horcrux but his was always my alternate wand and I blessedly managed to stash it along with few knick-knacks in that old tree stump on the edge of Alphard's secret farm..."

"Love shack you mean," mumbled Sirius. "He used to hide in there with his lovers."

"So that's why it was a secret," mumbled Regulus.

"Reg, really, for someone so bright and intelligent sometimes you can be so bloody dim," chuckled Sirius.

"At least I didn't have a talent on walking on people," retorted Regulus.

"Yeah, that was my hidden talent," snorted Sirius. "Bloody inconvenient one too," he sighed tiredly. "I mean what's so special about sex? It can kill you. Do you know what the human body goes through when you have sex? Pupils dilate, arteries constrict, core temperature rises, heart races, blood pressure rockets, respiration becomes rapid and shallow, the brain fires bursts of electrical impulses from nowhere to nowhere, and secretions spit out of every gland, and the muscles tense and spasm like you're lifting three times your body weight. It's violent. It's ugly. And it's messy. And supposedly if some greater power hadn't made it as fun as it's supposed to be, the human race would have died out ages ago. Men are lucky they can only have one orgasm. Did you know that women can have an hour-long orgasm?"
"Yeah, imagine that I did have sex," chuckled Regulus. "And I heard something similar from a school nurse that was hitting on me," he paused and after a beat asked, "You had sex, didn't you?"

Sirius shrugged before he answered, "I had, I know funnier ways to pass the time, really."

"Oh man," mumbled Regulus. "All these good looks," he chuckled.

"I know," mumbled Sirius. "I have been informed multiple times that I'm a blind idiot who cannot see the obvious. Well, I saw the obvious but really," he shrugged. "There's nothing special about sex."

"You know that it's okay too?" asked Regulus softly. "To not like it and to not want to have it?"

"Yeah," nodded Sirius. "I.." he started and took a deep breath before he finished, "I had a very considerate partner of a similar drive. We did have sex several times but more often than not we just ended cuddling."

"What happened to them?" whispered Regulus.

"Bella," muttered Sirius.

"I'm sorry," sighed Regulus.

"Don't be," mumbled Sirius. "It wasn't your fault," he sighed. "But enough about me. Tell me about the nurse."

"Nothing came of it," shrugged Regulus. "My prick might have been interested but my head wasn't in it."

"Where it was?" asked Sirius curiously.

"Where it always had been," Regulus shrugged again and he raised his left hand, moving it to lay over Harry's arm. "Here," he added softly.

"You care for him," whispered Sirius.

"You doubted until now?" Regulus rolled his eyes at him as he rubbed Harry's arm gently.

"No," Sirius shook his head. "But you have an interesting way of showing it."

"You have no idea," sighed Regulus heavily and he closed his eyes. "My adaptation into the Muggle world was slow and even though I powered through the intellectual side of it rather easily I was struggling. Especially after I learned what happened to you," he sighed again. "I couldn't believe it. In any of it. You being, the Dark Lord's right hand. Being responsible for all these deaths of those poor people. I just couldn't," he shrugged and opened his eyes, they were shinning.

"I'm sorry," whispered Sirius. "That you had to go through it all alone."

"But I wasn't," whispered Regulus. "I had Mum and Dad and their overwhelming, unwavering support. At the same time, I never felt so bloody alone as I felt back then. There was only one person in the world that mattered to me and I was stuck in a useless, broken body, with no magic whatsoever and I couldn't do anything to help you," he shook his head.

"Not your fault," Sirius reminded him.

"I know," he sighed. "Intellectually I know that there was nothing I couldn't do for you. Except for
one thing," he paused. "I was skulking around when Evans received that letter from her parents in which Petunia's marriage to a Vernon Dursley was announced," he added with a sigh. "I remembered his name and after regained some strength and some degree of mobility I had one of Dad's friends track him down. I fed her some pitiful lie and the whole thing was done under the table."

"You found them?" asked Sirius softly.

"Yeah," Regulus nodded and closed his eyes again. "I found them, alright," he mumbled and screwed his eyes even more. "I couldn't get that sight out of my brain," he added after a moment and he opened his eyes, they were bright with tears. "It was the summer of 1982, late August. Hot like in hell. I saw that jade with them on a walk. She was pushing a single stroller with that tiny pig in a wig inside it while that poor thing," he squeezed Harry's arm gently, "was trying to follow her as fast as he could but for fuck's sake..." he choked out.

"Reg," whispered Sirius. "It's over. He's safe now."

"He was two," Regulus whispered fiercely as new tears rolled down his face. "Two and so bloody tiny. So poor and defenceless," he shook his head. "It angered me, I literally wanted to beat her to death with my crutch. Barely stopped myself from doing so because I finally saw his eyes," he shook his head again. "It wasn't the colour that got to me. It was the look in his eyes. I knew that look and it chilled me to the very bone, I couldn't move, I could just stand there and watch them how they passed me by."

Sirius silently placed his hand over Regulus's and gently squeezed both his hand and Harry's arm.

"I thought that it was a trick of the light," sighed Regulus and he sniffled. "But I saw it again next day when I returned. It was there, this bone-chilling, blood-curdling look of complete resignation," he sniffled again. "No child is supposed to look like that. He looked so much like you and he was the only thing I had left of you. Him and few stupid knick-knacks."

"Reg," Sirius whispered softly.

"I saw it, Sirius," Regulus whispered as new tears rolled down his face. "When you thought that you were alone. When you thought that I wasn't looking. You were fast but there were times when I was faster. For me, you had a brave, smiling face but that smile never reached your eyes," he paused. "Not here, not with us. The only times I've seen you truly happy was when we were at Hogwarts..."

"Reg," Sirius echoed.

"God, how I hated James for that," Regulus mumbled with a sniff. "You were my fucking brother, my best friend growing up and nothing I did to make you smile again, smile like that again..." he shook his head.

"It was never your fault, Reg," whispered Sirius. "You were my baby brother, my responsibility. I..." he choked on words. "I couldn't..." he tried again. "I couldn't let you know the truth," he choked out. "I knew that you would blame yourself for it and if you knew..." he choked out again. "You would try to stop it..." he felt a tear rolling down his face. "And he..." he whispered. "I couldn't bear it if he went after you."

"Father..." Regulus whispered as he squeezed both his hands. "What did he do?"

"He..." Sirius started but the words couldn't leave his mouth. "Remember that stupid vase you
"When I was six and you were about to turn eight? The one you took the blame for because I was freaking out?" Regulus mumbled out. "He told you that he's going to make you pay for it."

"He did," nodded Sirius. "I paid for it. Dearly," he whispered softly. "He took me back to my room. Told me to strip off my pants and lie face down," he paused, choking on words. "I thought, another belting, wouldn't be the first, won't be the last," he shook his head feeling new tears rolling down. "But it wasn't..."

"Sirius," Regulus choked out.

"He raped me," finally Sirius whispered the words that were choking him up for so long. "Told me that if I will breathe a word to anyone he would go after you. I couldn't let it happen. I just couldn't. After that," he shook his head. "He hardly needed an excuse and if he had..." he paused.

"Sirius..."

"I took it," Sirius was on a roll now. "The blame, the responsibility. Every single god-damn time. Every tiny excuse. Every lingering look. If he ever tried to lay his hands on you..." he shook it again. "I could bear it, blank it out, ignore the pain. But you.." he choked out. "I couldn't let him take away from you, what he took from me."

"Sirius..." whispered Regulus with a sob.

"You were so young," whispered Sirius. "So innocent."

"So were you," mumbled Regulus.

"I was," sniffled Sirius. "Innocent. Stupidly naive when faced with a blatant lie," he shook his head. "It was only after he took me out of Hogwarts after that stupid..." he shook his head again. "Oh, he made sure that I could go back," he snorted softly. "But he made me pay for it, in the only currency he knew."

"You were with him alone for a week," sniffled Regulus.

"I was," nodded Sirius. "And outside of going to the bathroom twice a day, I didn't leave that bed through the entire week."

"That's why you ran away," Regulus whispered.

"No," sighed Sirius. "I ran away because I realised that the man before me was a coward. I ran away because I realised that he was never going to touch you and if he tried..." he shook his head. "You were about to turn fifteen and if he tried to touch you inappropriately, you would defend yourself. Then you would make sure that Mother would know and he was scared of her."

"I would," sniffled Regulus. "She should have protected you too."

"She should," Sirius agreed. "She didn't," he shrugged. "It doesn't matter anymore."

"Does to me," mumbled Regulus. "You were my brother. I never stopped loving you..."

"I know," mumbled Sirius. "I love you too."

"After what I heard tonight, I would never doubt it again," whispered Regulus. "I'm so proud of you," he added before he yawned.
"And I of you," Sirius smiled sleepily at him. "Man, what a pair of idiots we make."


"He never took me to this room," answered Sirius and he yawned.

"I'm sorry that I brought you here," whispered Regulus.

"Don't be," mumbled Sirius. "I can handle it. He's dead. You're here, Harry is here. I'll be fine."

"Are you really?" asked Regulus gently.

"Maybe, not at all times," admitted Sirius. "Maybe there will come days when I will have to withdraw myself, maybe destroy a thing or two... I can handle it. Give me some peace but don't let me stew in this funk for too long. Try to keep Harry away for few hours when that happens. I'll come around," he yawned.

"I promise," mumbled Regulus sleepily as he closed his eyes.

"Thank you," added Sirius sleepily.

When the sun finally rose over the city of London some time later all three occupants of the bedroom were deeply asleep and for the first time in a long time finally at peace.

*I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love.*

*Mother Theresa*
Chapter 02 - He is What?!

Chapter Summary

The news that Harry Potter is missing gets out. Meanwhile, Harry, Sirius, and Regulus have a meeting with Kreacher.

Chapter Notes

**Disclaimer:** I don't own Harry Potter or anything you can recognise from any books or TV series or movies. I do however take liberties with the plots or mentions provided by JKR or other writers. The only profit I'm getting out of it is improving my English.

**Title:** Secrets & Keepers – Keep Us

**Rating/Warnings:** R/M [AU; Manipulative Dumbledore (therefore not Dumbledore friendly); profanity; canon-typical violence; frank discussion of past child abuse (Harry but not only) and of past child abuse of sexual nature (not Harry); not very detailed descriptions of torture (not Harry); Black family feels; not beta read].

**Additional warnings:** Descriptions of drowning and panic attacks.

**Chapter summary:** The news that Harry Potter is missing gets out. Meanwhile, Harry, Sirius, and Regulus have a meeting with Kreacher.

**Word count:** Around 20 000 words.

**Author's note:** Before anyone points out that Snape most definitely wouldn't do what he did in this chapter I would like to direct you to Prisoner of Azkaban and the confrontation in the Shrieking Shack. Snape goes in there alone, with no backup and without alerting anyone. Granted he's focused on revenge but the important part is that at that moment he acts like a house-misplaced Gryffindor, with a vendetta. So, yeah, he's not going to hear the end of it for a while.

*Dedicated to all of my readers who stuck with me for so long. Thank You, I hope that You will find this story enjoyable. I would be the most grateful for constructive criticism.*

*I'm in dire need of a beta reader. This chapter was proof-read, spell-checked and checked with Grammarly but this is really the best I can do without help.*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#).
When dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but creatures of emotion.

~Dale Carnegie

Secrets & Keepers – Keep Us

Chapter two: He is What?!

He had been waiting for an appropriate moment for what seemed like an hour, but it could as well have been twenty minutes, maybe half of hour, it was hard to tell. Usually he was perfectly capable of telling how much time had passed without as much as casting Tempus or looking at the clock. Except when it come to these things.

To think that he could have been in Telavi right now. Or Sighnagi. Or Gurjaani. Eating mcwadi with that great tkemali sauce. Drinking home-made wine. Wondering around these little magical villages with no name, listening to the discussions about ten or more variations of the same potion, each of them accurate for their brewers. Picking his own ingredients. Relaxing in a bathhouse.

But no, he had to get himself tied with this bloody symposium, in Beijing of all places and especially now. He had nothing against Beijing or China or magical community in there, China was a big, very interesting country for the most of the time, full of interesting, intelligent people. No, it was their weird luck or lack of thereof with organising any kind of conference. No matter the field or the size of any academical meeting in which parties from beyond Asia were supposed to participate something always had to go wrong. If the problem wasn’t the wrong day or even worse wrong month then it was wrong location. If it wasn’t either of the two then the problem was with the guest list, someone who was supposed to attend the conference wasn’t on the list of guests, it worked backwards too, a supposed speaker never made it to China or worse didn’t even receive an invitation.

He participated in enough of them to know better and he tried to politely decline every invitation for one of these things whenever it came from China but there were times when he just couldn’t get himself out of them. Like now. International meeting of First Class Potions Masters during which he was supposed to represent both himself and Dumbledore turned out to be an international meeting of aspiring Third Class Potioneers.

Pathetic waste of his precious time. Four days wasted on listening to things he knew by heart, stuff he learned before he even received his Third Class Potions Mastery and that was fifteen years ago. And he couldn’t even bow out of this thing because it was improper and he was representing
Hogwarts so he had to stay put.

On the bright side, he had only a day and half of it left. He already managed to reschedule his departure from International Floo Network Office from noon on 10th August, two days after the end of the symposium to 8th August 10:30 PM as soon as he realised what he landed himself into. Granted rescheduling rather than straight to London would take him to Moscow but Poliakowic, who was in charge of Russian International Floo Network Office owed him a pretty big favour and from Moscow he could get wherever he wanted, whenever he wanted.

Like straight to England. Or maybe to Georgia, Poliakowic would be grumbling about opening that connection but screw him really. Severus needed to get out of this unsupervised travel the most he could get. An entire day and a half in Georgia would do him good. Maybe if he will start thinking about good enough excuse for Dumbledore he wouldn’t even need to come back to England until 15th August.

Yes, a few days in Georgia would do him good, he decided. Seeing Bathsheda again without needing to skulk around Dumbledore would definitely improve his mood. She has been coped up in David Gareja Monastery Complex since the term ended.

Seven solitary weeks. Six of brewing and an entire week of trying to convince Dumbledore that hiring Lupin while Black was still on the run was the worst idea that could have come to Dumbledore’s head. He even went as far as conceding that the werewolf could have been a decent defence instructor at any other time and that the students would most definitely benefit from his extensive knowledge when it came to dark creatures. Admitting that was hard to swallow, but he had, in hopes that Dumbledore, for once would listen to him.

Maybe Black was caught, and maybe, if Severus was really lucky, Lupin was the one who helped him escape. It would have been nice. Two birds killed with one stone and he was staying out of it like he promised Dumbledore that he would.

The news might not hit the press just yet and Chinese weren’t overly interested in what was going on the other side of the globe, they had their own problems. But who knew? Maybe this lousy week would eventually turn to be a good one.

Finally the moment he was waiting for arrived, Neuberg finished his tirade on metallurgy or more precisely ‘Short Treatise on the Importance of Proper Density of Cauldrons’. People around Severus started clapping earnestly and while they were focused on Neuberg, he pushed down his left sleeve slightly to take a look at his wristwatch – he always wore one when he was attending any kind of conference, checking time on it was far more subtle than casting ‘Tempus’ – 2:20 PM. Good time for lunch.
Predictably, an hour long lunch break was announced, attendants were of course invited to use the buffet or if they didn’t want to they could go to one of the restaurants in the neighbourhood. Severus chose neither of the options. He made a quick walk to his hotel around the corner, ordered continental lunch to his room, grabbed some newspapers – the ones that appeared to be written in anything but Chinese – from the news-stand and made his way to his room.

Russian edition of The Daily Prophet was the same one he read three days ago, four days old by now. Der Tagesprophet was two weeks old. La Gazette du Sorcier only one week old. La Gazzetta del Profeta was from yesterday. Finally The Daily Prophet was from…

HARRY POTTER MISSING!!!

Harry Potter, 13, has been found missing from his Muggle relatives this morning. It appears that he didn’t return to their home last night. As of right now it is unclear whatever or not The Boy-Who-Lived left his relatives voluntarily or not. If anyone should see him please contact Aurors immediately.

That was it. Headline that was bigger than the whole article next to photograph of Potter that appeared to be taken some time last year because Lockhart’s arm was wrapped around Potter’s shoulders.

Feeling as if he was hit with something heavy right into the solar plexus, with slight ringing in his ears, Severus looked at the date. 7th August 1993. He looked at his wristwatch, it was 2:40 PM in Beijing which meant that in England it was 6:40 AM which in turn meant that Potter was missing for about twelve to ten hours. With Sirius Black, who was out to get him, on the loose. Merlin…

The walls around him tilted dangerously and he took a quick, harsh breath as he tried to steady himself. Out of all idiotic things that imbecilic child could have done this… This was worse than Potter’s disappearing act when Ginevra Weasley had been taken to the Chamber of Secrets. At least back then they were sure that the little cretin didn’t leave school grounds and was somewhere inside the school. With Weasley and his broken wand, and Lockhart…

And Albus… That twinkling bag of lemon sherbets, that mad as the bag of ferrets bloody wazzock, rather than listening to Severus’s sound advice of removing Potter from his relatives as soon as the news of Sirius Black escape reached them allowed the boy to stay there.

Granted with the Weasleys in Egypt the only place where Potter could be taken was Hogwarts, to
which Black was heading but Black needed to get there first and the castle was full of capable wizards ready to defend him if Potter’s and Black’s trails ever crossed also Potter would be behind Hogwarts wards. For fuck’s sake Dumbledore was in there, so was Severus, Minerva, Filius, Kettleburn wasn’t gone yet as he promised to stay to help Hagrid with curriculum for Care of Magical Creatures. Between the six of them there were capable of keeping tabs on one child.

Screw it, he was capable of keeping tabs on Potter single-handedly, granted he will have to see the idiot day in and day out from the moment Potter left Gryffindor tower until he was marched back to it after dinner. But there was always something to do in the classroom or in the stores. Occupied Potter would have been a grumpy Potter which in turn would make Severus grumpy but at the fucking least the imbecile would be safe. If not with Severus, then with Hagrid, who was half-giant and as one was immune to most hexes and jinxes and with Hagrid’s beef against Black Potter stood a chance to survive potential meeting if it ever took placed.

Merlin.

He need to leave for England, right now. Screw propriety and good manners, the symposium could go on without him, especially since he already given his speech. He took few deep breaths feeling the strength and equilibrium returning to him.

First off, packing and sending a short note to the organisers of the symposium that he was leaving early. Then he needed to go to International Floo Network Office and if he had to bribe anyone on his way to get ahead of the queue in order to get back to England he would do it. Hopefully within an hour maybe two he would be back on English soil.

Two hours later he was still in Beijing, sitting at the dirty curb in front of Chinese Ministry of Magic, with his wand stuck in his left nostril after being unceremoniously dumped there by Ministry Police. Apparently they were very sensitive about having they workers bribed, especially by foreigners. While he was being thrown out he had been informed to report to the first Ministry Policeman he could find on 10th August, his original departure time, at 11:30 so he would be escorted to International Floo Network Office from where he would be send straight to London.

Well, bugger, he yanked his wand out of his nostril, wiped it into his robe and tucked it into his holster as he sighed heavily. What a rotten bit of luck. He was allowed to leave in three days time, in the meantime Potter might be found, maybe alive or maybe not. Albus, the twinkling bag of rat droppings, didn’t contact him yet and maybe he wasn’t even planning to contact him. How he was supposed to keep Potter alive when everything was working against him.

He was a wizard, damn it, and not a slouch like Longbottom, who struggled with pretty much everything that required any kind of magical output. He was powerful, not as powerful as
Dumbledore or the Dark Lord but he had extensive knowledge in a variety of subjects as well as three First Class Masteries in Potions, Arithmancy and Defence Against the Dark Arts.

And there he was sitting on the curb like a wazzock.

Wait a minute. He was a bloody wizard, he could aparate and disapparate, granted Chinese Ministry frowned upon having foreigners apparatting all over the country and long distance apparation was exhausting… But he was young, healthy and powerful enough to swing apparation beyond China borders and if he pushed himself far enough he could even make it to Europe.

With that thought at the forefront of his mind, he stood up, dusted off his robe and gathering all of his power and determination to leave China with clear destination in mind he disapparated.

When his feet slammed against the stone floor of the entrance room for wizarding visitors at David Gareja Monastery Complex he knew that he screwed up, big. While all of his limbs seemed to be accounted for they felt as if they were filled with lead. His lungs were straining for a breath, his heart was racing and he felt as if he was going to pass out.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the guard, who was usually welcoming the visitors, hurrying towards him with a concerned look on his face.

“Bathsheda Babbling,” he rasped out. “I need...” he managed to mumble in Georgian before his body gave up struggling and he simply passed out.

When he opened his eyes again first thing he saw was the stone ceiling of a dimly lit room. Potter! He immediately shot up into sitting position regretting it immediately because the sudden movement caused his head to hurt as if someone put it in a vice. He closed his eyes against the pain and immediately found himself pushed down firmly back on the bed.

“Lie down you daft pillock,” came a sneer and the hand on his chest retreated only to come back a moment later with a vial of potion that was pressed against his lips.

He smelt almonds. Poison? Ah, hellebore, so not poison. Then it had to be Draught of Peace or…

“Restorative potion for those imbeciles who managed to deplete their magical core,” harsh female voice said.
... or that, he realised as the vial was pressed harder against his lips. He opened them and slowly drank the contents of the vial.

“Thank you, Bathsheda,” he whispered when he was done drinking, immediately feeling how his headache started to recede.

“The third one I had to pour down your throat in the span of the last hour,” she said icily. “On the top of nearly every restorative and healing potion the healer on staff could offer,” she added, her voice still as cold as ice. “Every single bone in both your feet were broken, front muscles in your lower legs shredded, one of your fractured ribs punctured your right lung and let’s not forget the cherry on the top of this bloody sundae which was a minor heart-attack,” he was on the roll now.

“Bathsheda...” he mumbled.

“Don’t you Bathsheda me, you humongous prick,” she hissed angrily. “Your heart actually stopped beating for twenty bloody seconds. Do you have any idea what you nearly put me through?” she growled at him.

“I don’t, but I’m sure you aren’t going to waste your time to inform me,” he sighed.

“How about that?” she sneered. “You were supposed to be in Beijing. You weren’t supposed to leave Beijing until tomorrow evening. I distinctly remember receiving a missive this very morning that instructed me to discard any plans for tomorrow evening that involved leaving this room.”

“Sorry,” he sighed.

“Oh don’t be sorry for that,” she snorted, her voice sounded less strained. “It has been long seven weeks and I’m sharing the guest wing with two pairs of nymphomaniacs. I was actually looking forward to being coated in tkemali sauce and thoroughly licked from head to toe,” she snickered.

“It has been long seven weeks,” he agreed and opened his eyes to look at her.

She somehow managed to tan, as if she spent last seven weeks on a beach instead of being holed up in David Gareja Monastery Complex archives. It looked good on her too, the tan emphasised her
long, curly, dark brown hair, her brown eyes in a warm shade of honey, it brought up as well three freckles over her aquiline nose, usually invisible in moderate British weather, but visible now under high Georgian sun. Vector liked to teasingly call them adorable because their appearance usually took several years of Bathsheda’s face and made her look like a seventh year student. An extremely well developed seventh year student. Severus, not a man who had the word adorable in his dictionary, privately found them endearing and occasionally he found himself overcome with an urge to peck her on the nose.

“What?” she asked sceptically. “Do I have something on my face?”

“Freckles,” he smirked.

“If you kiss me on the nose right now I’ll punch you in the face,” she muttered. “Speaking of noses,” she raised her left eyebrow at him. “Now would be a great time to decide what I’m supposed to tell Dumbledore if you will ever try dying on my watch again. Just in case if you’ll manage to actually succeed.”

“That I was having fun and that it was awful,” he snorted.

“Tread carefully, these seven weeks are about to turn into eight,” she snorted and shook her head. “Really Severus, what were you thinking?” she asked stiffly.

“Potter,” he sighed.

“Potter what?” she asked quickly.

“Went missing from his relatives,” he clarified. “Yesterday night and he still remains missing. At the very least remained missing when morning’s edition of The Daily Prophet went into printing.”

“I’m not seeing the connection between Potter and long-distance apparition from Beijing, China to David Gareja Monastery Complex in Georgia,” she shook her head.

“I couldn’t get through Chinese Ministry’s of Magic International Floo Network Office before 8th August. Even worse, I managed to get myself pushed to 10th August,” he admitted sourly.
“Let me guess?” she asked with that dangerous glint in her eyes that always signalled that she was about unleash her inner Ravenclaw on him. “It didn’t occur to you to ask, politely, to have your destination changed from Moscow or London to Hong Kong which unlike the other two can be accessed via Floo Network without any restrictions every two hours and from where you can Floo to London in a span of two hours?” she asked sweetly.

He groaned and slapped his left hand against his forehead. He didn’t think of that. He was so focused on Potter and getting to England as fast as possible that he totally forgot about finding alternatives.

“And that’s why female Ravenclaws live longer than house-misplaced Gryffindor men,” she snickered.

“I will never hear the end of it, won’t I?” he grumbled.

“Maybe I’ll get bored with rubbing it into your beak before Christmas break,” she smiled at him. “Now, let me guess again, you want me to obtain a Portkey that will take us to England?” she asked swiftly

“You don’t have to come back with me...” he started.

“Oh, I beg to differ,” she snorted. “Your magical core is stable enough to survive a travel via Portkey back to Great Britain but it won’t do you any good if you will collapse right after you land. You need at least another two doses of restorative potion for your core and another of muscle restorative. Your left leg was in pretty bad shape.”

“I’ll be fine, you don’t have to interrupt your research...” he started again.

“Oh, I was done with my research by the time you were departing for China and I know your luck with conferences in China,” she shrugged. “I knew that you will manage to get yourself conveniently lost after it and I was staying only for our mutual non-academic benefit,” she smiled at him. “I didn’t count on you pulling a Gryffindor but I can pack while you will be eating lunch after I will get us a Portkey. Now try to lie still and let the potions work their magic,” she added as she stood up and started walking out of the room

“Yes, Mother,” he called after her weakly.
“I was going to eat that, you feathered thief,” Remus Lupin growled after the owl, which after collecting its fee for delivering his Daily Prophet flew to the pan he just a moment ago removed from the fire, stole the solitary slice of bacon out of it and flew away through the open window.

Well, there went his meat of the day for today. At least he still had eggs for breakfast and a weak vegetable soup made from squash for lunch and dinner. As well as some bread, he took a closer look at it and realised that it went bad.

He shook his head in disgust. Now he definitely needed to head to town. Without coffee, unlike bread, he could get by and when he did drink it he usually drank sludge anyway. It was so terrible that even Sirius, used to Auror Office sludge, winced every time he had to drink coffee at Remus’s place.

Remus could practically see him there, standing in his kitchen, leaning against the counter, with a mug of coffee in one hand and a toast in the other, wincing every now and then after each sip of coffee.

He shook his head again. Sirius never set a foot in this house, nor he knew its whereabouts because Remus only obtained it nine years ago, after Sirius was already locked up in Azkaban. Azkaban which Remus could see from the top of the roof, a tiny dot on the horizon, visible only on a very clear day, which happened rarely.

He tried to not think about it for the most of the time. His small, derelict one-bedroom cottage located between Robin Hood’s Bay and Ravenscar was just like many other all across Great Britain. Small, functional, if a bit cold at times and most important the rent was cheap. After few years there he managed to buy it with the help of his father's savings.

It didn’t matter that if one went down south to Scarborough, then to the port and then into small, seemingly unused storage shed located behind a derelict fish procession plant then one could access visitor entrance to Azkaban, a fireplace with Floo access to guards’ tower.

Except it had. Remus lost count how many times he found himself staring at the door of that shed. He knew what lied beyond it and on the other side of the fireplace. It should have been easy to walk in there, Floo to Azkaban, find the nearest warden and request a meeting with Sirius Black. His request might even be granted, with some fuss but even Sirius – back when he was still an Auror – agreed that while Ministry of Magic frowned upon such visits as long as the visitors complied with all necessary security requirements there was nothing they could do but allow the
visit to take place, under a very strict observation.

He told himself countless of times that he could do that. He could go to Azkaban, get through all security requirements without fuss and finally, finally what he always wanted would be in his reach.

The truth.

Oh, surely Sirius would try to lie his way out but Remus was counting on Dementors having some effect on him to unhinge him just enough to slip something.

Sirius used to be resident charmer and a good liar, he always had an excuse prepared when they were caught doing something they weren’t supposed to be doing. And the rest of them didn’t usually think about it as long as Sirius, along with James, who followed Sirius’s cue – after enough of tight spots he learned to let Sirius start talking their way out of trouble before jumping in – managed to talk their way out of tight spot.

They should have. It became evident after Sirius sent Snape into Shrieking Shack. Oh, they didn’t have a chance to talk with him right after the incident because his father removed him from Hogwarts for the rest of the school year but Sirius showed up on James’s doorstep day after Hogwarts Express returned to London and stayed with the Potters for the rest of the summer.

They had to talk at some point, maybe even more than once and it wasn’t a pleasant talk for James because when Remus informed him as soon as he found him on Hogwarts’s Express on 1st September that he never wanted to see Sirius Black ever again James only nodded and said, ‘Okay.’

And it was James, not Remus, who was behind Sirius’s removal from Gryffindor tower. He was the one who suggested it and the one who carried it out. Remus, for the sake of his sanity, wasn’t present during that conversation when James told Sirius that he wasn’t welcome in their dormitory anymore.

It was also James who initiated what was later on dubbed by pretty much the rest of the school as the Marauder Divorce. He told Sirius in public that he didn’t want to be friends with him anymore, that he didn’t want him to speak to them anymore and most certainly he didn’t want to sit with Sirius anymore. Remus, still too angry with Sirius to not say something he would later regret, kept nodding along, as did Peter.
For a brief moment when James started talking Sirius looked like a deer caught in the headlights of the incoming car before his expression quickly morphed into a hurt look which was even faster was replaced by the look of boredom.

Remus nearly gave up, then and there but from the corner of his eye he spotted Snape at the Slytherin table, glowering at them. The realisation that Sirius nearly killed another student while using him, Remus, as a murder weapon slammed into him again and with such force that it nearly fainted.

No, Sirius deserved everything that was coming his way, all of it. They were all sixteen, in a span of few months they would be turning seventeen and they should start acting like young, responsible adults. They should take responsibility for their actions and it was a wonder how Sirius was still allowed to attend Hogwarts.

Under unanimous disdain Sirius relented. He never came back to the dormitory and as far as Remus could tell also to Gryffindor common room. It was a mystery where he was sleeping. He ate his meals separately. He was removed from the Quidditch team and wasn’t allowed to partake in any club activity. He sat alone in classes and when they were supposed to be partnered in a class he always waited until the class partnered itself to go to the other not partnered student or was partnered with a teacher. As far as Remus could tell Sirius spent first month in detention, day by day, everyday until the end of the month and through the rest of the year he spent every weekend from breakfast to dinner – with a break for lunch – in detention.

It changed him, on the surface for the better. His grades had never been higher and he avoided getting in trouble like plague. As the time passed he started hanging around other students, mostly with Ravenclaws with an odd Hufflepuff thrown into the mix. By mid-October he managed to worm his way into Slughorn’s good graces enough to attend an odd Slug Club meeting which annoyed pretty much everyone but Slughorn. More so, which Remus much more later learned, he got himself into Slughorn’s project for students interested in receiving Third Class Masteries and picked Transfiguration and Defence Against the Dark Arts.

And when Christmas break came around Sirius didn’t put his name down on the list of students that were planning to stay in the castle. He left for somewhere and when he came back in January he looked different. Taller, straighter and thinner. Gone was the Sirius from before Christmas break, who tended to keep his head down and his shoulders slouched. His skin grew thicker too, things that made his hackles raise in the autumn didn’t bother him anymore, at best they went ignored, at worst they gained that ‘are you done’ look.

It was that more mature version of Sirius and not the idiot from the year before that finally reconciled with the rest of the Marauders after Easter break (for which he was once again gone from the castle). First with Remus, who conceded to one on one meeting, worn out by Lily’s pestering during prefect rounds (she has been wondering at loud where Sirius had been staying
since September). Sirius apologised earnestly for telling Snape to go to Shrieking Shack, but shrugged when Remus pressed him for a reason why he done it and Remus, missing Sirius’s presence and his ability to rein in James, simply accepted that he wasn’t going to get the truth out of Sirius. He knew that he should have pressed harder but he didn’t.

Then after few days came Sirius’s meeting with James and while neither of them ever mentioned to Remus or Peter what they talked about that evening James said that he wanted Sirius to move back to the dormitory.

There was no meeting with Peter, Sirius later reasoned, with all of them present, that their mutual beef had been between Sirius and Remus and Sirius and James and that Peter was caught up in it and didn’t want to lose his friends over Sirius. Which was okay with Sirius.

So they patched it up and life went on. Except nothing really changed, Sirius used to disappear at odd times, continued to talk with other people. He flat out refused invitation for the summer to the Potters before James even finished speaking but still he managed to get himself invited for lunch on Sundays. Supposedly he had prior arrangements he was planning to honour and when pressed by James to reveal something about them he didn’t budge, just kept shrugging and smiling at them.

Instead, he talked Remus into entering Slughorn’s Third Class Masteries project, in Defence Against the Dark Arts and Charms. He knew which strings to tug with Remus to get him to agree and he even offered to help him catch up.

It was only during one of these catch up with the rest of the program meetings, at Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlour when Remus learned what sorts of prior arrangements Sirius had been honouring. That day, after the meeting, Sirius denied heading with Remus over to James’s place, he claimed that he was seeing someone and curious about who Sirius was meeting Remus said his goodbyes and left.

He waited five minutes around the corner before he sneaked back inside but he hadn’t found Sirius at the table they were occupying previously. In fact it seemed for a moment that Sirius left Fortescue’s using the other exit until Remus’s eyes fell on the waiter that came to their table and started wiping it.

Tall, thin, with short black-hair and Fortescue’s apron tied around his middle and without turning his back trading barbs with the girl who was handing out the ice creams to the clients. At some point he turned around, over his left shoulder so he didn’t see Remus and barked with laughter at what the girl was saying to him.
It was Sirius.

Not really knowing what to do other than knowing that he shouldn’t interrupt him while he was working Remus left Fortescue’s and headed to James’s place. He didn’t mention what he saw to anyone, hoping to have a chance to talk to Sirius about it before he was going to tell James and Peter.

That chance seemingly came sooner than he imagined, late morning on the very next day when James, using the old ruse of ‘Send Remus Out On An Errand and Get Him To Keep the Change’, sent him to Zonko’s to pick Fanged Frisbee. Remus was browsing through Pep-talking Mugs when he heard someone say, “Black, leave what you’re doing I need you to run an errand.”

Out of reflex Remus turned around and nearly dropped the mug he was holding. There, by one of the older clerks, dressed in Zonko’s uniform, was standing Sirius, listening intently to what the other man was saying before he picked small parcel from the man and with a small smile walked through the backdoor.

Remus waited for him to return but he didn’t met him again that day. So he resigned himself to wait for next catch up meeting that was supposed to take place in three days. In the meantime he himself was supposed to start working at magical branch of Cadbury to save up some money for the books he needed to finish his project in Charms. They were pricey, he needed them and he really hated asking his father for additional money. That’s why he picked the position of a night worker at the Cadbury, that way he would be getting more money for the same amount of work.

“Lupin, I’m needed elsewhere so I will keep it short,” told him the night manager. “Your job is absurdly simple. You are supposed to help in logistics. Go through that door to the warehouse,” he pointed at the door in front of him, “find the frazzled looking black-haired beanpole and he will explain you the rest,” he said before he hurried in the direction they came from.

“Okay, boss,” Remus called after him before he shrugged and headed inside.

Frazzled looking black-haired beanpole with a clipboard in his hand turned out to be, who else, Sirius.

“Padfoot?!” Remus called out. “What you’re doing here?”

Sirius raised his head and stared at him before he answered, “Working, as apparently should you,
Moony. Come on, give me a hand with these boxes.”

He kept directing Remus through next four hours. He taught him organisation system, what differently coloured labels meant. Oh, he worked just as hard as Remus did, if not harder because when the time for their break arrived Sirius practically fell into the chair and yawned heavily.

“Coffee?” Remus offered sympathetically.

“Yes, please,” mumbled Sirius as he waved at the counters behind his back. “And thank you,” he added after a moment, “for saving my hide.”

“How?” asked Remus as he headed for the counter and from the upper cupboard pulled two mugs and instant coffee.

“By coming in here to work tonight,” sighed Sirius. “Normally this place has ten night-shift workers. Except two got pregnant and had to be moved to day-shift and lighter work. One recently retired. Two just quit. One has a day off because he’s brother is getting married and he’s the best man. And the other three decided to get royally pissed.”

Remus poured the water into the mugs and added instant coffee into it. He placed both mugs at the table and sat in front of Sirius before he asked, “What about you?”

“Me?” Sirius asked with a stupid look on his face. “What about me?”

“Did you decide where you’re working?” asked Remus pointedly. “Here? Fortescue’s? Zonko’s?”

“Oh that,” nodded Sirius, understanding slowly downing at his face. “All of the above,” he answered as he reached for his mug of coffee.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” protested Remus. “Come on, Padfoot. Which one?”

“All three,” shrugged Sirius. “At least for now,” he grimaced.
“Why?” asked Remus.

“Why does a bear shits in the woods?” asked Sirius with another shrug. “In case it somehow escaped your notice, Moony, I’m no longer depending on the good-will and hospitality of people who call themselves my parents,” he added grimly. “And while my dearly departed Uncle Alphard left a decent bit of gold it I already used it up.”

“On what?” asked Remus.

“I bought a flat,” sighed Sirius. “Strike that, flats. Three of them, tiny as fuck but enough for me, I’m renting out two and living in the third.”

“And you work three jobs,” Remus pointed out.

“In case it also escaped your notice,” Sirius drawled it out. “I outgrew two uniforms in the span of a year and the last one is getting too flimsy to keep transfiguring it. I also need books, lots of books, tons of books, pricey books. I also need furniture because while I managed to sparsely furnish other flats my own flat only has a toilet, a shower and suspiciously looking kitchen cupboards. I keep sleeping on winter robe transfigurated into a mattress.”

“Okay, you got the point across,” Remus interrupted him. “You need money. But why all three?”

“Zonko’s uses me primarily for testing their products, errant boy and helping hand during the breaks. They pay well enough. So does Cadbury. As for Fortescue’s?” he shrugged. “They were a pair of experienced hands short and I worked for them last summer. Money is money, I’m not going to frown at additional income,” he shrugged again.

They worked together through the rest of the summer. Remus managed to catch up with the rest of the program, at least in DADA, he was still a little too far behind in Charms than he liked but he owled Lily Evans, who promised to help him catch up as soon as they returned to Hogwarts.

They had an occasional lunch or dinner at the Potters, with Mrs Potter complimenting them both for how tall they both got. It always caused James to roll his eyes, because while he grew up over the sixth year and was still in fact growing he had yet to hit a major growth-spurt like Sirius, who seemed to be done with his. Later on it turned out that he wasn’t because Sirius managed to grow additional two inches during the seventh year but at least by then James was no longer coming to his chin.
Then seventh year started and things came back to normal, they were all friends again. Granted with upcoming N.E.W.T.s and in some cases Third Class Masteries they had less time for each other and for pranks but that was expected.

Peter was practically buried under History of Magic books and when he wasn’t studying History then he was studying Muggle Studies and Charms.

James, between being both a Head Boy and Quidditch Captain and wooing Lily, the Head Girl, still managed to stay on the top of his studies, although it was Lily’s influence and his parents’ constant reminders that there was never a Potter that had failed any of the N.E.W.T.s that he or she was taking that kept him firmly on track to pass the subjects he was taking with at least Exceeded Expectations – Transfiguration, Charms, Defence Against the Dark Arts and Muggle Studies – even though with his plans to play Quidditch professionally he didn’t really need them.

Remus carried a tad higher load, with Transfiguration, Charms, DADA, Ancient Runes and Astronomy but he was additionally studying for two Third Class Masteries in Defence Against the Dark Arts and Charms.

Sirius’s load was the highest of the four of them. He was taking Transfiguration, Charms, DADA, Potions, Herbology, Ancient Runes and Muggle Studies. On the top of that he had masteries in DADA and Transfiguration.

The only other person, at least in Gryffindor, who had more subjects than Sirius did was Lily, who was planning to become a healer. She took the same subjects as Sirius, minus Muggle Studies but plus Arithmancy and Ancient Studies and on the top of Third Class Masteries in Charms and Potions.

She also became a permanent fixture in their dormitory, which, weirdly, was supposedly quieter than her own dormitory. How she arrived to that conclusion Remus didn’t know and preferred not to ask because at any mention of her room-mates in relations to studying always made Lily’s left eye twitch slightly.

According to the grapevine, female seventh year Gryffindors were all going through nervous breakdown of some sorts, no one got into details but according to female Hufflepuffs, who heard it in from female Slytherins the girls were seriously reconsidering their priorities. Well, all of them with the exception of Lily, and maybe Mary MacDonald.
What kind of priorities they were the Marauders learned when nearly all Gryffindor girls, with the exception of Lily and Mary MacDonald started hitting on Sirius, more insistently than they used to hit on him before. Kind ‘I’m not interested’ didn’t work on them, neither did harsher versions of it. They only slightly buggered off after Sirius started walking around the school with someone on each of his arms. He used different permutations of; James, Lily, Remus himself, Mary MacDonald or one or both of the Ravenclaw girls from their year; Bathsheda Babbling and Mirzam Verascez. Weirdly Sirius never used Peter as his bodyguard.

That should have been another warning sign, one that went unnoticed at the time. But Peter didn’t mind, usually he was walking with his head in history books and was so focused on them that he himself needed occasional push, pull or prod in the right direction. Oh, Sirius was friendly towards Peter and Peter was equally friendly towards him but it seemed as if whatever friendship they managed to developed over the years didn’t survive the sixth year unscathed.

Much more later, after… Remus found himself wondering whatever or not Sirius and Peter were friends in the first place... They were never very close. Sirius confided in him, but not as much and not with as important stuff as he confided with James or Remus. He also found himself wondering whatever or not he, himself was Peter’s friend in the first place… Oh, he befriended Peter on Hogwarts Express because the other boy looked like he could use a friend but.. But as soon as James and Sirius adopted him and Peter he often found himself venting his spleen not to Peter who was his first friend but to James or Sirius. James, who never failed to cheer him up or Sirius, who better than the other two understood frustrations.

But then along came N.E.W.T.s, followed quite quickly by job interviews. James was officially invited to try out for a chaser for Puddlemere United before they even sat N.E.W.T.s, which he did, almost immediately right after the exams and within a first month he made the first string.

Peter, who failed History of Magic instead of heading towards Ministry to take the position of any clerk there went to The Daily Prophet to work as an errand boy – he claimed that they were paying him more than the Ministry would and really if his mother wanted to have a Minister for Magic in the family then she should try to work there herself.

Remus started with Borgin & Burkes, later moved on to Flourish & Blotts and on and on and on.

Lily and Sirius started Healer and Auror training respectively. Both were highly demanding and intense. The only difference between the two was that Healer training unlike the Auror training hadn’t been changed by Voldemort’s raise to power and was supposed to last three years while Auror training had been cut down to one year. Through the first six months of it they hardly saw Sirius outside of Sundays or an odd breakfast or lunch at Diagon Alley.

During that time, Lily, after the death of her mother, got inducted into the Order of the Phoenix.
Very quickly she convinced James to join and together they convinced Remus and Peter to join too. Sirius initially refused joining the Order, claimed that until he was done with theoretical part of the training he won’t have time for more than eating and sleeping. He joined in eventually, about two months after them, after James’s and Lily’s wedding and he dove right in. At least on the surface everything seemed to be fine.

After graduation James moved from the Potter Manor to small cottage in Godric's Hallow, he tried to convince Sirius and Remus to move in with him but Sirius flat out refused on the grounds of having his own place and Remus only conceded to spending few days around the full moon in there. They both knew that it was matter of time before Lily would join James and they didn’t want to interrupt their time alone. As predicted Lily moved in before summer ended, after unpredictable death of her mother. She claimed that she couldn’t stand living in that house anymore and that Petunia and her husband were planning to sell it anyway. There was a brief period of time, about two weeks long when she was considering finding a place of her own but by the time she started looking for it James already decided to propose. She tried to protest at first, that they didn’t know each other that well and that the brief time spent as room-mates didn’t mean that they would work well as a married couple.

But James was adamant, to the point of being ready to forego traditional wizarding bonding, which was far more harder to break than plain Muggle marriage. He loved Lily and Lily loved him, he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her and hoped that she would want to but if she wasn’t sure they would hold off with proper bonding until she was certain. In the end they had proper wizarding wedding, with Sirius as the best man, although he grumbled that if they decided to hold off with the wedding for another month instead of being the best man he would be able to officiate the marriage.

The date of the wedding stayed fixed. James later told Remus that it was for the better, because he wasn’t planning to find out few years down the line that Sirius played a prank on him and that he didn’t marry him and Lily after all.

Few months after the wedding, in the spring of 1979 dragon pox took James’s parents away, they died within three days of each other and although they deaths were expected – at their age they had minimal chances of surviving it and Lily prepared everyone for it. What no one was able to prepare James for was what was revealed in his parents’ last will and testament.

The will revealed that James wasn’t Euphemia’s and Fleamont’s son rather than grandson. It revealed that his father, Euphemia’s and Fleamont’s actual son, Charlus, died before James was born and that his mother Dorea Potter nee Black signed off her parental rights to Euphemia and Fleamont two months before James was born. It also revealed that Dorea died sometime in the spring of 1977, not even once through James’s entire life setting her eyes on him.

For a while James was an inconsolable ball of conflicting emotions: grief, rage and gratitude. He
lashed out at pretty much anyone, even Lily, who gave him a day to calm down before she proceed to set him straight. But as soon as she did another hell broke out loose, after having some time to think things through James reached the conclusion that Sirius knew the truth all along.

The following argument with Sirius was disastrous for both participants. James accused him off knowing the truth all along and laughing behind his back. Sirius called him an imbecile and an ungrateful berk for not recognising how much people James considered as parents loved him and protected him. Some more hurtful words were thrown from both sides and the argument had ended with Sirius storming out of Godric’s Hallow. Outside of occasional Order meeting they hadn’t seen him for ten weeks.

Both Remus and Lily tried to get them to reconcile, more Sirius than James. For their efforts instead of prompt reconciliation they got a strong reprimand from Sirius, who quite frankly told them both to bugger off and to try and to not get themselves caught between two Blacks having an argument. Supposedly it never ended well for anyone who had. He also mentioned the Black family obstinacy and inability to change their views once they made them. He also told them that while James was half-Black by birth he was also half-Potter and raised as such by two wonderful people who loved him very much and sheltered him as hard as they could. He told them that until James would recognise how lucky he was by not being raised by the Blacks then two of them had nothing to talk about.

Then someday in June ashen-faced Mirzam Verascez, Sirius’s partner in the Aurors, came to the Godric’s Hallow to inform them that Sirius was currently lying at death’s door in St Mungo’s and that his Healers were worried that he wasn’t going to last the night. According to Lily she also said some other things, which didn’t bear repeating and she also said that never before she had seen Verascez so furious.

Sirius made it through the night, and the morning. By afternoon his Healers claimed that if he lasted as long as he did then he was going to fully recover in a matter of few days even though he still didn’t wake up until day after – Lily speculated that he woke up at midnight, said that she had her reasons to believe it that but refused to divulge why.

What Remus knew for certain was that after that incident Verascez became a quite frequent dinner guest at the Potters and that Lily never failed to arrange and rearrange the sitting arrangements until Verascez was seated by Sirius. Another thing which Remus knew for certain was Sirius’s vehemence against Lily’s gentle prodding to induce Verascez into the Order. No one seen any public displays of any sort affection between the two of them but they could see that Sirius never failed to brighten up when Verascez was in the room. In the end they all decided that if anything was going on it was going on at the peace both parties had wanted and that was that.

Time flew by, they worked for the Order, they worked they day jobs. In her second year of Healer training Lily got pregnant with Harry, who at the time was supposed to be named in honour of
James’s grandparents. She managed to finish her second year of training with flying colours before she decided to take a year off from work to have more time for Harry.

Then Harry was born and for some reason Voldemort fixated himself on James and Lily. They started moving around, every two weeks. At first they moved through the Potter family properties but by the time winter came they switched to the Order’s safe-houses. Sirius, who oversaw each of the moves was looking more and more haggard, he lost a lot of weight, he barely ate and when Remus, between his own Order duties, managed to come around to the Potters he often found Sirius sleeping wherever he managed to pass out.

James and Lily worried about him, as did Remus and Peter. James, knowing Sirius for as long as he did and as well as he did came to the conclusion that if Sirius wanted to talk about what was bothering him he would talk to them when he will feel ready. Lily, to the contrary, was far more vocal in her worries, it worried her that she hadn’t seen Verascez since before Harry was born, it worried her how sickly and anxious Sirius looked. Oh, Sirius tried to placate her but it wasn’t working very well. Remus, too, tried to talk with Sirius about what was bothering him but Sirius usually shrugged and kept changing the subject of the conversation.

It was Remus who found out the truth, at least what he believed at the time was the truth. It was a small obituary notice at the bottom of the last page of *The Daily Prophet* from 30\(^{th}\) July 1981:

**MIRZAM VERASCEZ**

Aged 20

Auror.

Lost her life in a line of duty while protecting a group of first year Muggle-born students from a Death Eater attack on 30\(^{th}\) July 1980.

May her soul rest in peace.

Family and friends

Doing the first thing that came to his mind Remus rushed to Sirius’s place. When he found him he was glad that it didn’t occur him right away to contact James and Lily.

The tiny flat looked like a tornado tore through it. Pieces of glass, porcelain and chips of wood crunched under his feet. The contents of kitchen cupboards were on the floor. One of the upper cupboards was missing a door, another two were hanging by one hinge instead of two. He passed through the kitchen into the open room which served as everything else, dinning area, living room and the bedroom and found Sirius passed out on what remained from the couch, surrounded by six empty bottles of the cheapest Firewhiskey.
Remus rushed to Sirius’s side and to his intense relief found him still breathing, if stinking like a drunken skunk. Not sure what to do – other than making sure that Sirius wouldn’t chock on his vomit if he threw up – Remus repositioned him and decided to clean up the mess Sirius made.

It took him a long time. In spite of the tiny size of the flat the damage was extensive. The walls were intact, as were the front door and the door that lead to the bathroom. But everything else? What furniture wasn’t broken was at the very least toppled over and had it contents lying on the floor, mostly torn into pieces. Books, notes, photographs, pieces of parchment but also clothes and stray plants.

It was photographs that got into Remus the most. Of Verascez, alone or with Sirius or with Babbling or Babbling and the little girl hardly older than Harry or with all of them in various permutations. Sirius in the park, with the little girl sitting on his shoulders, both grinning and playing with leaves. Verascez with the same girl seated on the couch, opening a present that looked suspiciously like a teddy bear wrapped in paper. Sirius passed out on the couch, with the sleeping girl in his arms and Verascez looking at them wistfully from the armchair. Sirius carrying laughing Babbling bridal style. Sirius again, this time with Verascez in his arms, much more sombre and loving photo. Sirius being chased around the table by a toddling girl before scooping her into his arms.

Remus saw nearly the same photograph at James’s and Lily’s, but with Harry instead of the girl and they weren’t chasing each other around the table but rather around the armchair.

Another photograph of Sirius and Verascez, with Sirius’s left arm wrapped around her shoulders, gazing at each other with the same kind of love and devotion Remus saw in James and Lily. The depth of their love for each other was so blatantly obvious to Remus after seeing that photograph that it unnerved him. They never showed it when they were together with the rest of them. But they showed it to each other, he reminded himself, and she was gone. For over a year.

And Sirius? He looked at the passed out lump on the couch. Sirius was alone, alone with his grief while his friends celebrated the birth… Then he remembered that at some point, few weeks after Harry was born Lily relayed to Remus and Peter play by play of Harry’s birth, leaving out the gross parts but underlying James’s unfortunate poisoning and Sirius’s calming influence and quick thinking.

Harry was born on midnight 31st July, Verascez died on 30th July, protecting a group of first year students and their chaperoned visits were usually scheduled for afternoon which meant that between one and the other Sirius had at best few hours to recover… if he had few hours to recover. How one recovers from the loss of someone they love so deeply? How one can bring oneself to maintain the facade that everything is alright, at least enough to not have his distracted friends
noticing that something is wrong?

And then what? Not a single word to anyone. No death notifications, no mentions of a funeral. James most certainly didn’t heard a word and neither did Lily. Verascez was dead, gone for a year and through that entire year Sirius carried his grief within and never showed even a hint of it.

It was a long night for Remus. Spent at Sirius’s side, examining and putting back together pieces of Sirius’s life with Verascez, life in which she wasn’t anymore, life from which she was abruptly torn away.

Eventually Sirius woke up, by eleven am, bleary-eyed, pale and still drunk. He barely managed to make it to the bathroom where he threw up. Remus followed him with a vial of Pepper Up and sobering potion he managed to find unscathed in the destruction.

When asked about work Sirius claimed that he had taken both days off because he knew that he wasn’t going to recover within one. After that statement Remus threw him under the shower while he went to the kitchen to prepare breakfast.

The conversation that followed was one of the longest and most sincerest, at least at the time, conversation Remus ever had with Sirius. The depth of Sirius’s grief was as big as his love for Verascez, if not bigger. He spoke of them as children, her the Muggle-born who was spending summer holidays with her grandparents in London, seven years old at the time. Of telling her that she was a witch, of teaching her about Hogwarts, about magic. Of missing her after she was gone and then again when she never returned back to London. Of hoping to see her again at Hogwarts. Of seeing her again at Hogwarts, sorted into Ravenclaw. Of his tries to rekindle their former friendship. Of making an ass of himself and a bully in her eyes which resulted in lack of rekindling.

He spoke of working together with her at Fortescue's in the summer before sixth year. Of tentatively rekindled friendship. Of going to talk with her when the atmosphere at the Potters became too heavy to stand it. He never got into the detail what he and James talked about that summer.

He spoke of spending majority of the sixth year in Ravenclaw tower, of coming to her as Padfoot and sleeping under her bed, of her finding him in the shower, when he thought that both she and Babbling were gone from their dormitory. Of the stern talk that followed it. Of being allowed to stay in there. Of hiding from Babbling, who didn’t know that he was an Animagus and pretending that he was Verascez’s very independent dog.

He spoke of listening to her advices and following them. It was Verascez, with Babbling’s help,
who convinced Slughorn to let him into Third Class Masteries program. He spoke of making friends with other people, not as best as the Marauders or her but still people who treated him normally.

He spoke of falling in love with her over books. Of fighting with himself, convincing himself that at best he would be her friend but nothing more. Of careful dances, long conversations, mutual teasing. Of how much he missed having her hand running down his fur. Of how glad he was to help her whenever she asked, with whatever she asked.

He spoke of Auror training, about working together again. About how scared for her he was when they were ambushed. About waking up in St Mungo’s to see her seated at his side. About just blurtling everything out.

He spoke about proposing to her on the day she died. He showed Remus the engagement ring, hanging on a thin silvery chain, which he later learned like the ring itself was platinum – so it won’t tarnish or wilt – with two pearls sandwiching a small diamond, white and black, for wisdom and protection. He got stuck at it for a while and kept coming back to how it was his fault that she was on duty that day. How it was supposed to him and not her.

He continued to come back to this or that point and kept bursting in tears every now and then. And Remus listened, with his heart breaking at times, but always no further than an arm’s length away from Sirius. He listened until Sirius eventually talked himself into uneasy sleep.

They both missed Harry’s first birthday, and Remus missed Order duty, but this was more important, this was Sirius, his friend, practically a brother, who for the first time in a year was finally openly grieving the loss of the love of his life.

Three months later when Voldemort killed Lily and James Remus was away on an order duty and he didn’t get the news until the dust had settled, until James, Lily and Peter were dead and Sirius, the one responsible for their deaths, was in Azkaban.

He couldn’t believe it at first, it had to be some cosmic misunderstanding. Sirius hated Death Eaters and knowing that his younger brother died as one annoyed him to no end. Sirius loved James and Lily and Harry, he might not love Peter but he was friendly with him. He just couldn’t…

Except he had, the facts spoke for themselves. Voldemort killed James and Lily and tried to kill Harry, the cottage in Godric’s Hallow was supposed to be under Fidelius Charm and Sirius was supposed to be the Secret Keeper. Voldemort got in there which meant… it meant that Sirius had to reveal the secret to him.
But why? Damn it, why? Why would Sirius ever betray the people he loved?

But Sirius also loved Verascez, still, even a year after her death. She was the love of his life and she was brutally torn away from him, by Sirius’s own cousin, Bellatrix, a known Death Eater and Voldemort’s one of the most faithful servants. What if…

What if Sirius went to Voldemort in an act of revenge? What if he offered the secret for the price of Bellatrix’s head?

It didn’t work out because even though Voldemort was gone Bellatrix was still at large, at least until she got caught after the attack on Alice and Frank Longbottom, but that came much later on.

It kept eating Remus so much that he made a request to Dumbledore to receive Sirius’s personal effects he was stripped from when he was sent to Azkaban. It took some time and required out of Dumbledore calling on several favours but eventually the small box ended in Remus’s possession.

The ring wasn’t in there and Remus doubted that Sirius was allowed to keep it. It was too fine piece of jewellery, too pricey to be allowed. But there were other things in there. Sirius’s Auror badge. Sirius’s wands, original Ollivander wand and another, Auror, wand, both snapped in two. Simple Muggle wallet with several old pictures in it: one of smiling Sirius at Hogwarts platform, with his arm wrapped around Regulus’s shoulders, with Regulus looking far less happy than Sirius; one of the Marauders at the end of their first year; another taken at Lily’s and James’s wedding; the copy the photograph of Sirius and Verascez Remus saw before; as well as one of the little girl sleeping on Sirius’s chest; it was followed by the last one, this time with Harry, sleeping on Sirius’s chest like the little girl.

Remus didn’t know what to do with them, other than locking them and the box away. It didn’t make a sniff of a sense. On one side Sirius sold the Potters to Voldemort and killed Peter and twelve innocent Muggles, on the other when he was caught he was carrying with him the mementos of the people he supposedly loved.

It made his head hurt and it made the wolf within restless. Rationally Remus knew that Sirius done what he did, there were god-damned witness, then there was Dumbledore who claimed Sirius was the Potters’ Secret Keeper.

But the wolf within Remus didn’t believe in what was said. It believed in what it saw. He saw Sirius’s love for the Potters, his devotion to little Harry, he saw his grief over Verascez. The wolf
remembered Padfoot, his persistence, his loyalty, his regrets.

And the wolf grieved the loss of his pack. James, Lily and Peter were dead, Sirius locked away, just as was little Harry, whom Dumbledore sent to Lily’s sister Petunia, urging Remus to not approach them, for Harry’s safety.

The first years that followed their deaths were hard, his transformations were brutal, punishing. It was only after he first rented his cottage, after spending last few years in Ireland, and had his first transformation there, in the earth cellar at the back of the property, when he realised that Moony calmed down a little.

It was pathetic. He was pathetic. Strike that, his inner furball was pathetic, but then again his inner furball was de facto him then ergo he was pathetic.

Selling James and Lily to Voldemort, killing Peter and all those innocent people and even after nearly twelve years he couldn’t move on. Couldn’t, on a primal level, get past the fact that Sirius was no longer part of his pack, maybe even wasn’t one from the very start.

It annoyed him just as much as Sirius’s ghost that started to haunt this place since Sirius escaped from Azkaban.

He nearly fainted when, day after Dumbledore offered him the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts professor and a supply of Wolfsbane Potion to make his transformations safe and bearable, he discovered Mad-Eye Moody on his doorstep, with that grim, too bloody familiar ‘I’m about to deliver bad news’ look on his face.

His first thoughts flew to Harry, that something happened to him and he found himself unable to breath. Not Harry, anyone but Harry, he might have not seen the boy since he was a bit over one year old, per Dumbledore’s request but Harry was the only thing he had left of Lily and James except photographs and few mementos. Losing other friends or distance acquaintances he could stand but the idea of loosing Harry was too much to bear.

In the meantime while Remus was working himself into a panic attack Moody slipped inside and started inspecting the cottage, without hiding what he was doing. Finally when he was done with it he steered Remus from the door into solitary armchair by the fire.

“Do you have any idea why I’m here, son?” Moody asked grimly.
“None whatsoever,” Remus whispered weakly. “Did..” he started but couldn’t get the words out of his mouth on the first try. “Did something happen to Harry?”

“Potter?” Moody asked sceptically. “Why would it?”

“You’re here,” Remus pointed out. “And I cannot imagine any other reason why..”

“I would come here if it wasn’t for Potter?” Moody finished and he frowned before he asked, “You really have no idea why I came here?”

“No,” Remus shook his head.

“I came here out of courtesy to both you and Dumbledore,” Moody said. “I remember you from the old crowd, you were young but dedicated, always loyal to Dumbledore, which back in these times was sometimes hard and always dangerous. Your heart used to be in the right place and I’m hoping that it’s still there. So answer me one thing, Lupin.”

“Anything,” Remus breathed out.

“Where is Sirius Black?” asked Moody sternly.

“In Azkaban,” answered Remus. “Where he has been for past nearly twelve years,” he added quickly.

“Really?” Moody frowned before he added harshly, “You know that aiding and abetting fugitive is punishable by law, don’t you?”


… harbouring Sirius Black somewhere in here, his mind supplied what his mouth couldn’t finish. Why would he? How could he? Merlin, what a nightmare. That was it, he was dreaming. This wasn’t happening. He just needed to...
“You look a little pale, are you alright?” Moody asked sceptically.

“Am I?” snorted Remus. “I’m having a nightmare, a very convincing nightmare...” he snarled angrily.

Moody sighed and shook his head before he said grimly, “Count your fingers, Lupin.”


“Just do it!” barked out Moody.

Remus looked at his hands, quickly counted, the number didn’t change since he remembered, with the exception of that time when he allowed Peter to experiment on him the new spell for a prank.

“Ten,” answered Remus. “Five at each hand,” he added simply.

“Then you aren’t dreaming,” Moody shrugged.

“I should know better whatever or not I’m dreaming,” Remus protested vehemently.

“In dreams people tend to have additional fingers,” Moody explained. “They also aren’t supposed to feel this,” he pointed his wand at Remus and cast a stinging hex.


“And he’s back,” Moody snorted.

“Oh, I’ll be back, just wait until I will find my wand,” grumbled Remus as he started standing up.
“Stay,” drawled out Moody and Remus froze mid rise. “Sit,” he added after a moment and out of shock Remus sat down. “Roll over,” he added with a smirk.

“You bastard,” growled out Remus. “I’m a werewolf, not a bloody dog.”

“And yet you listen to commands,” Moody snorted. “Now, Sirius Black,” he added more sombrely, “do you happen to know his current whereabouts?”

“Yes,” shrugged Remus. “Azkaban, a wizarding prison, I believe a top security cell, which from what little I know about Azkaban means the very bottom of it,” he added quickly.

“Are you certain?” Moody asked.

“Very,” nodded Remus. “As certain as that I’m having a bloody nightmare,” he added.

“You aren’t and he isn’t,” sighed Moody tiredly.

“That’s a good one,” snorted Remus. “But try again, Mad-Eye. You’re forgetting with whom I spent my teenage years. There isn’t a joke, no matter how tasteless or stupid I didn’t hear, at least once.”

“Yes, I know with whom you spent your teenage years, Lupin,” Moody snorted. “Which is why I’m here. Giving you a chance to explain to me how Sirius Black managed to escape from Azkaban.”

“I have no idea,” mumbled Remus. “No clue whatsoever.”

“You sure?” Moody pressed.

“Dead certain,” nodded Remus. “Sirius was quite powerful and skilled wizard, in the very same way most wizards at that age become,” he shrugged. “You know, when your magical core matures and stabilises itself. As for his skills he used to be a bloody Auror so I’m sure you know what he knows better than I do.”
“And what I do know is that no one ever escaped Azkaban,” Moody snorted. “Until last night,” he admitted grimly, “or last day, it’s hard to point out when. The only thing we know is that he was present at one headcount yesterday and that he wasn’t present at another one today. We know what he’s after...”

“Then why won’t you go there?” asked Remus sceptically. “If you know where he’s heading...”

“That’s the problem,” grimaced Moody. “We want to catch him before he gets there. Dumbledore frowns upon using children as bait and privately I agree with him, the kid suffered enough because of him. There’s no need to get him involved in it.”

“What kid?” whispered Remus.

“Potter,” sighed Moody. “Who else?” he shrugged. “He’s the one who brought down the Dark Lord and Black… you forgot what he had done to Pettigrew or those poor Muggle buggers?”

“He..” Remus started but stopped himself from saying that Sirius wouldn’t hurt Harry.

Because there was a time when Remus could say that Sirius would never betray Lily and James, but he had.

“What do you need?” Remus said finally.

“Your cooperation would be nice,” Moody admitted. “Black is a lunatic on the loose and without a wand. He will try to get one. Sure there’s a number of his former Death Eater pals to whom he could go but they might not be very happy to see him. For various reasons. And you?” he shrugged, “you live alone, in a remote place which happens to be quite close to Azkaban. I would like to keep an eye on you.”


“Yes and no,” grimaced Moody. “We’re short-staffed, too many people retired, too few people joined in. But the shit is about to hit the fan globally and we will have support of Muggle law enforcement once it does. Until I can’t arrange for you Muggle scout to skulk around I will guard
“you personally.”

“And who will be guarding Harry?” asked Remus.

“Dumbledore has the old crowd on him,” Moody shrugged. “Once the Muggle law enforcement will start cooperating they will be monitoring the streets in his town.”

“Doesn’t seem enough,” grimaced Remus.

“It’s not enough,” snorted Moody. “But Dumbledore doesn’t want to worry the kid. I disagree but I won’t go against Dumbledore’s wishes. So?”

“I’ll cooperate,” admitted Remus. “I can’t lose Harry too.”

“You have a funny way of showing it,” Moody muttered. “Have you seen the kid lately?”

“No,” Remus shook his head.

“Why not?” Moody asked pointedly.

“Security reasons,” sighed Remus. “Dumbledore has installed some kind of blood ward on their place. Didn’t divulge the reasons, at least back then. But he claimed that the only way for Harry to grow up safe was to let him grow at the Dursleys. And Petunia,” he grimaced, “she agreed to take him in on the grounds that no wizard or witch will ever set a foot in Little Whinging. If they do, they might as well take Harry with them. She wrote him quite a harsh letter.”

“And you complied?” Moody asked.

“How couldn’t I?” snorted Remus. “He’s the only person I have left in this world outside of my dad. Yes, I hadn’t seen him since he was a mere toddler but his safety matters to me the most. I won’t go against Petunia’s wishes just to assuage my longing. He’s too important to me.”

“I’m not alright,” muttered Remus. “I won’t be… not until this is over.”

“Hopefully it will be over soon,” nodded Moody. “See you later,” he added and he left the cottage.

That was a week ago.

Since then, Remus could hardly sleep and when he did, he was plagued by nightmares, of Sirius, of Lily and James, of Harry. He dreamed of Sirius bending in front of Voldemort, whispering how he would give him the Potters in exchange for Bellatrix’s head. He dreamed on lunging after Snape, only to be stopped by James, but unlike the last time James wasn’t quick enough. He dreamed of Harry, dead by Voldemort’s hand, with his parents in Godric’s Hallow, he dreamed of Harry now, thirteen and trusting, of being accosted on the street by Sirius and stabbed right through his heart. More often than not he found himself screaming his throat raw into wakefulness.

And deep down he knew that until Sirius will get caught these dreams won’t stop. If only Sirius’s ghost would stop haunting him.

He shook his head again, unrolled The Daily Prophet and the headline jumped right at him:

HARRY POTTER MISSING!!!

Harry Potter, 13, has been found missing from his Muggle relatives this morning. It appears that he didn’t return to their home last night. As of right now it is unclear whatever or not The Boy-Who-Lived left his relatives voluntarily or not. If anyone should see him please contact Aurors immediately.

Remus gasped, feeling his heart constrict painfully in his chest as he felt cold sweat running down his spine. Merlin, Harry. He tried to take a deep breath but his lungs didn’t seem to work properly. As did his hands because they started trembling so badly that he couldn’t even hold the paper. The world greyed around the edges and he fell to his knees, trying hard to catch a breath. His heart hammerered as if he ran a mile at the top of his speed. Something heavy settled in his stomach and he fell forward on his hands, dry heaving and grasping for breath he couldn’t get himself to catch. The world was tilting and greying even more and…

The last conscious thought that went through his head before his hands and knees gave out and he fell to the floor was: please Merlin, let Harry be safe.
Harry woke up slowly to the feeling of being wrapped in a very warm cocoon between two blasting furnaces. It was a pleasant feeling, the weather in last few days was lousy and the Dursley house was never warm, at least his room wasn’t.

Except he wasn’t at the Dursleys, his mind supplied sluggishly. He ran away from the Dursleys and ran into an escaped convict Sirius Black and his supposedly dead brother Regulus, whom Harry knew as Martin Green, his Mathematics teacher from primary school.

He opened his bleary eyes and saw a mass of black hair on the pillow in front of him. Ah, Sirius, at least he was at that side of the bed when Harry fell asleep. Very slowly Harry also became aware of the weight on his left arm, it was heavy but concentrated in one place, slightly above the elbow. An arm probably, Sirius had to reach for him during the night.

It felt good too. As if he had someone who cared for him and what happened to him. Strike that, not as if, Sirius broke out of Azkaban because he realised that he, Harry, was in danger and Regulus… Regulus spent his later childhood looking after him.

He closed his eye again.

He remembered it now, much more clearer that just the face of his former teacher. He remembered his soft smile and the way long-fingered hand ruffled his hair when his mathematics teacher saw that he was done with his task. It was back in the early days of primary school, before the Dursleys...

He remembered interventions ran by him, summoning either Harry or Dudley or someone from Dudley’s gang during recess. Sandwiches which appeared in his backpack even though Harry was certain that Aunt Petunia didn’t put them in there, sweets too, nothing bigger than few candies but definitely there.

And this face. At first warm, open and smiling and then as the years passed more blank, reserved until blankness gave way to the nearly permanent frown or sneer, usually directed at Dudley and his gang.

He had a family, family other than the Dursleys, family that cared about him and what happened to
him. Family that was royally pissed with Dumbledore, just as Harry was. What a twinkling bag of rat droppings and to think that he, Harry, fell for it. For Dumbledore’s kindness, his warmth, his concern.

It was a lie all along. Dumbledore never cared for him personally but about that bloody prophecy and fulfilling it. Why would he bother with trying to stop Volde... the Dark Lord on his own, better let Harry do it and if he dies in the process? Well, the prophecy said that either must die at the and of the other for neither can live while the other survives. If it would be the Dark Lord, then it would be good for everyone and if it would be Harry... Well, it wasn’t as if he had someone other that two friends to cry after him.

Well, now Dumbledore could stuff himself with that prophecy and if he really needed the Dark Lord defeated then he should do it all by himself. Because not only Harry was supposed to be expelled from Hogwarts, something which suddenly didn’t feel as daunting as it felt yesterday, but even if he wasn’t, he had a feeling that both Sirius and Regulus will have plenty things to say against his return to the supposedly the safest place in the wizarding world.

Strike that, this was the safest place in the world. Yes, it looked grim and dark, gruesome even, with all of this house-elves’ heads in the corridor and lack of proper lighting but that could be fixed and it wasn’t what made this place safe. It was...

Something creaked quite loudly and quite close. Harry frowned but decided that the house was old and when he was at the Burrow last year everything was creaking at odd times. 12 Grimmauld Place seemed to be no different than the Burrow, well a distorted and dark version of the Burrow, built by a bunch of pure-blood supremacists.

He burrowed deeper in the warmth and sighed. Surely Sirius and Regulus wouldn’t mind if he slept a little more, seeing that both of them were still sleeping.

Something creaked again, this time much more closer and it didn’t sound like a creak of wood, more like creak of a spring. Well, the house was old, so was the furniture inside it, Harry decided.

Something creaked again and this time something brushed against his leg. It made him frown, Sirius and Regulus never said anything about an alive pet that could be skulking around but it was better to be safe rather than sorry and Harry opened his eyes and started turning around, dislodging the tangle of arms that was lying over him.

He barely managed to raise himself slightly on his elbow as he looked at the foot of the bed. His gaze travelled over the coverlet until it registered a pair of thin legs, then up the small torso,
covered with a dirty rag, then further up to intruder’s face. He barely managed to take in bald head, with quantity of white hair growing out of large, batlike ears and bloodshot, watery grey eyes, fleshy nose that was large and rather snout-like, and mouth curled in disgust.

House-elf, went through Harry’s head just as the elf swung over its head something that looked like one of the frying pans. That was aimed at his…

He probably screamed, he couldn’t be sure if he did but what he was sure of was that some sort of sound left his mouth because before the pan managed to connect with his head he found himself hauled into a seating position and pushed firmly against the headboard. With Sirius’s and Regulus’s shoulders and heads obstructing his view slightly, with both had their wands out and pointed at the elf, the tip of Sirius’s wand was glowing slightly. The pan was suddenly nowhere in sight.

The elf looked around and Harry was surprised to see so many emotions crossing its face. The first expression of disgust was morphing to one of pure surprise and adoration, followed by blank look that could mean anything before it settled on disgust again.

“Kreacher,” Regulus croaked up, with barely disguised relief. “Don’t you ever try this kind of wake up call again,” he added with a heavy sigh as he lowered his wand.

“He looks like Master,” the elf grumbled. “He sounds like Master,” the elf grimaced. “But Master is dead, Kreacher saw him dying. He can’t be Master, but why Kreacher feels the need to obey...” the elf mumbled.

Meanwhile as the elf was muttering Regulus was climbing out of the bed to stand up before the elf. He looked slightly dishevelled, his hair previously held by some sort of a tie was falling around his face, sticking out slightly in every direction.

“You feel the need to obey me because you’re bound to serve the members of the Black family, because I’m your Master, Kreacher,” said Regulus, gently but firmly, like a teacher he was explaining a problem. “As is Sirius,” he added and after a brief pause continued, “as is Harry, whom you were trying to give a concussion. He’s the grandson of Dorea Black and last time I checked the family law included grandchildren as family members to whom the Black family house-elves were supposed to serve.”

“Master Regulus?” Kreacher croaked out. “Master is alive?”
“In the flesh,” nodded Regulus. “Ugh..” he managed to grunt as the elf lunged for him and hugged him tightly around the neck.

“Kreacher was so worried. Master got swallowed by that lake and he didn’t make it back home and Mistress, oh, poor Mistress was devastated… Kreacher saw the tree, the tree says that Master Regulus is dead,” sobbed the elf.

“The tree is enchanted to track magic within blood,” muttered Sirius which made the elf pull away slightly to glare at Sirius. “Seeing that somehow this house-misplaced cretin,” he nodded in Regulus’s direction, “managed to rupture his magical core to the point of being completely drained of even a sniff of magic the tree decided that he had to be dead. Also, he’s still not very forthcoming with details of how that happened,” he stared at Regulus.

“That’s a lie,” Kreacher snarled. “Kreacher feels magic...”

“Now, you feel magic now,” Regulus interrupted him. “Sirius is right, for a while after the lake,” he grimaced, “I was a squib, a very miserable squib,” he grimaced again.

“And what you were doing in the lake in the first place?” asked Sirius.

“Drowning. I don’t recommend it,” Regulus dead-panned.

Sirius and Harry snorted almost in unison. After a moment so did Regulus.

“It’s funny now,” he grimaced. “Wasn’t funny when it was happening,” he sighed.

“It’s not funny,” objected Sirius and Harry nodded.

“It is to me,” shrugged Regulus, moving surprised Kreacher to his hip. “I was never more at peace than back then. Granted I was terrified to the very bone, I really didn’t want to die but after a moment it seemed as if I didn’t really have a choice,” he paused and took a deep breath. “I could see the surface of water, not much of it,” he grimaced. “That bloody lake was full of fucking Inferi and they were dragging me under, I lost my wand somewhere down there. And this was it...”
Kreacher whimpered and hugged Regulus tighter.

“I managed to catch a breath before I was dragged under the surface, not a big one but enough to try and hold it for as long as I could. It wasn’t long and I was trying to struggle,” whispered Regulus. “My head was exploding, the pain was unbearable, not as bad as Cruciatus but constant until I couldn’t bear it anymore and opened my mouth. The water got in, I stopped struggling,” he paused. “The world was greying around the edges and I could no longer see the Inferi...”

“If you will say that you saw the light I’ll punch you,” grimaced Sirius.

“Did you see the light?” asked Regulus pointedly. “When you were...”

“Mizram’s face right before I passed out,” sighed Sirius. “Then nothing,” he grimaced. “And I have been told that my heart stopped beating for two minutes,” he shrugged. “Back at the site. Then again in St Mungo’s, for about thirty seconds. I saw nothing, no light, no shadowy figures, heard no whispers, had no outer body experience,” he shook his head. “Just a lot of nothing. It was oddly disappointing but somewhat peaceful. I was no longer in pain and just... was. I could stay like this forever and wouldn’t be really bothered by it. The revival however?” he grimaced. “That bloody hurt. I remember being disappointed that they brought me back to life.”

“Only you, Sirius,” Regulus shook his head.

“We aren’t talking about me, Reg,” Sirius pointed out. “We’re talking about you. So what you saw?” he asked curiously.

“You,” Regulus answered simply. “Your face to be exact. You were so bloody disappointed with me,” he smiled and shook his head. “And I heard the Sorting Hat whispering: Gryffindor,” he chuckled. “Really, where was my Slytherin self-preservation? Planning ahead? Some contingency plan? Must have left it in my other pants. I had about sixteen bloody hours between my supposed death and going into that cave. Do you have an idea what a man can do in sixteen hours?” he shook his head again.

“Plenty,” nodded Sirius.

“Like accosting my older brother who was a fucking Auror and saying, listen Sirius, you were right all along and I was a bloody idiot but I know a way how to make it up to you and everyone but I need your help, to keep me from doing anything stupid,” said Regulus quickly.
“What stopped you?” asked Sirius pensively. “Granted I wouldn’t come right away, not without some pretty detailed explanations...”

“I panicked, alright,” sighed Regulus. “Served me right,” he shrugged.

“But what saved you?” asked Harry curiously.

“He did,” Regulus nodded in Sirius’s direction and he smiled softly.

“But you said that you went there alone,” Harry protested. “With Kreacher,” he added after a second.

“I was never alone,” sighed Regulus. “Like you were never alone with the Dark Lord when he tried to kill you to take the Stone from you,” he paused. “I didn’t realise it at the time, and in fact didn’t realise it until you told us what Dumbledore told you about why Quirrell couldn’t touch you, until...” he paused again and took a deep breath. “Dumbledore is as mad as a bag of ferrets manipulative old cot but he was right on the one thing.”

“Power of love?” asked Harry pensively. “But how did it work?”

“I have no idea,” mumbled Regulus. “What I do know, is that I grew up here,” he waved his free hand around the room. “Raised by people to whom we were means to an end of extending The Noble and Most Ancient house of Black. We were taught proper values, proper manners, we were clothed, fed, we got everything we bloody wanted....” he mumbled. “Except one thing that a child will always need the most.”

“Love?” whispered Harry.

“We were raised by a house-elf nanny, Lola. She took care of us when we were little. Out of duty but while duty obliged her to see to our physical needs it didn’t oblige her to see to our emotional needs. She didn’t have to console us when we cried, didn’t have to cheer us up when we were sad, didn’t have to hug us...”

“Be kind to us,” whispered Sirius wistfully. “She was more of a mother to us than our mother ever
“She build a foundation, taught us to love each other, to look after one another,” added Regulus, his eyes were shinning. “Told us that no matter what we should always have each other. That because our parents were weird in that way, it didn’t mean that we had to be like them. So we loved each other as hard as two children starved of love can love one another.”

“Fiercely, jealously,” sighed Sirius.

"Deeply,” whispered Regulus. “I didn’t realise how deeply until recently,” he whipped his eyes with his free hand.

“Reg..” started Sirius heavily

“It was that depth that saved me,” mumbled Regulus. “That reminded me that he was out there opposing the Dark Lord openly and there I was, dying, with a job that could help him half done,” he shrugged. “It was enough to give me hope, some spark to try and get out,” he paused. “So when my back hit the bottom of the lake, I gathered all the magic I had and I disapparated,” he paused again. “Through the Dark Lord’s Anti-Apparition wards. It didn’t work exactly as I planned.”

“That’s an understatement,” muttered Sirius. “You ruptured your magical core, drained yourself dry.”

“Let’s not the fact that I was de facto drowned on the top of it,” added Regulus cheerfully. “I apparated myself right into the middle of Spring Street, London. Luckily it was very late and probably no one saw me, got myself ran over by a Muggle ambulance. Which was good because they took me straight to the hospital, which was just around the corner, or two, either way not too far...”

“Merlin, Reg,” groaned Sirius.

“Hey,” shrugged Regulus. “It’s been long time and I’m fine, good as new, really.”

“Excuse me,” mumbled Sirius, as he stumbled out of the bed and hobbled out of the room, closing the door firmly behind himself.
“I… overdid it,” mumbled Regulus.

“A bit,” agreed Harry as he looked at the door. “Question. irrelevant to the subject,” he added as he looked back at Regulus.

“Shot,” said Regulus.

“Do I have to develop a flair for dramatics under your care?” Harry asked sceptically.

Regulus burst out laughing and he was laughing so hard that he had to set Kreacher on the bed and place his hands on his thighs, leaning forward quite heavily. It took him some time to calm down.

“You mean your own is not enough?” he asked finally when he stopped laughing.

But before Harry had a chance to protest the door opened and Sirius walked inside.

“What is not enough?” he asked sceptically.

“Harry’s flair for dramatics,” answered Regulus.

“Oh,” mumbled Sirius before he looked at Harry. “Is running after a basilisk with nothing more than Ron Weasley, his broken wand and a Gilderoy Lockhart as a backup not dramatic enough for you?” he asked sourly.

“I...” protested Harry.

“I couldn’t find a teacher even though I hid myself in a staff-room where I overheard the teachers talking about the Slytherin monster snatching Ron’s sister into the Chamber of Secrets?” supplied Regulus with a grin.

Harry closed his mouth and chewed on his bottom lip. Regulus did have a point. Even though it
seemed like a right thing at the time, in retrospect it was incredibly stupid and bloody dangerous. He should have alerted McGonagall of what he learned from Hermione. In fact, he should go no further than finding the entrance to the Chamber in Myrtle’s bathroom.

Even Snape would do, granted there would be threats of detention and expulsion but after Quirrell Harry learned his lesson. Snape was a certified ass and he hated Harry just as much as Harry hated him but surely Snape cared about Hogwarts enough to bother to check whatever or not Harry was telling the truth about the entrance. McGonagall would have seen reason first, granted it would require some pretty serious explanations but he was surrounded by capable wizards and he never took advantage of that.

“Kreacher,” said Sirius. “Did you manage to destroy the Slytherin locket you took from the cave?” he asked pensively.

“No,” the elf croaked out. “Nothing Kreacher did made any mark upon it. Kreacher tried everything, everything he knew, but nothing, nothing would work,” he moaned. “So many powerful spells upon casting, Kreacher was sure the way to destroy it was to get inside, but it would not open… Kreacher punished himself, he tried again. Kreacher failed to obey orders, Kreacher could not destroy the locket! And his mistress was mad with grief, because Master Regulus disappeared. Master Regulus says that she wasn’t a good mother…”

“She wasn’t,” snarled Regulus. “She was…” he started but Sirius cut him off.

“Reg, take a breather,” he said firmly and when Regulus didn’t move he hissed, “Now.”

“Yes, Mother,” Regulus muttered but he strode out of the room, slamming the door shut behind himself.

“Kreacher doesn’t understand,” the elf admitted morosely. “If Master Regulus was alive for all these years? Why didn’t he call for Kreacher? Why didn’t he come back home?”

“Because it wasn’t safe,” sighed Sirius heavily. “For him, for you, for Mother even. Because she was so set in her ways that she wouldn’t try to understand why he did what he did or the price he had to pay for it. She was kind to you because you obeyed her. Just like she was kind to us for as long as we obeyed her every whim.”

“And what good parents do is protecting their children from harm,” said Sirius sourly. “By any means necessary, at all cost. Good parents don’t encourage their children to follow a homicidal maniac just because other people do that. Good parents do not pretend to ignore that there’s something very wrong happening at home. They don’t keep pretending that everything is fine when it really...” he suddenly turned around on his heel and walked out of the room slamming the door behind himself.

Harry gulped albeit not visibly. He hated dealing with house-elves logic. Dobby while helpful and well-meaning almost managed to finish him off. He wasn’t sure what a more hostile house-elf, like Kreacher seemed to be was capable of.

“Master Harry?” Kreacher asked.

“Kreacher,” Harry said as politely as he could make his voice work. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“Do for Kreacher?” Kreacher stared at him. “Master Harry doesn’t do for Kreacher, Kreacher does for Master Harry. And Kreacher is sorry about the pan. Kreacher was worried that he found intruders and Kreacher shouldn’t be finding intruders inside.”

“Why?” asked Harry curiously. “Sirius said that the house was warded but Regulus didn’t seem pleased with them.”

“If Master Regulus doubts everything Master and Mistress did,” the elf shook his head. “Master Orion warded the house, very thoroughly, like other masters before him. It’s unplottable, as a building and a location. It has wards that repel Muggles so they cannot come to the door like Master wanted. Wards that repel specific wizards. Some others, very complicated, not ones that Kreacher is familiar with.”

“And you were still worried about intruders,” sighed Harry.

“Because wizards magic fails, Master Harry,” said Kreacher. “It’s only as strong as was the wizard who cast it. Master Orion was a very strong wizard but Master Orion has been dead for many years. Kreacher and Una saw what became of Mistress Lucretia house after Master Ignatius passed away and Master Arcturus grew weaker with years,” the elf shook his head. “The wards had failed and Mistress house, that beautiful house, these beautiful gardens, Mistress’s pride and joy was destroyed by these animals with no sense of propriety… and the things they did to poor Mistress
Lucretia…” the elf shook his head. “Una was devastated, she always loved Mistress and her gardens. She tried to help Mistress and rebuild them, she had, but they need constant supervision and then Masters and Mistresses started dying,” he shook his head again. “There are many properties that need maintaining because that’s what we had been told to do.”

“By your Mistress,” said Harry.

“No,” Kreacher shook his head. “Mistress left no orders. Mistress barely left her room for months before she died. Hardly called for Kreacher except for when she was hungry and Kreacher had to prepare everything for her under her supervision. She worried about being poisoned, by Kreacher,” the elf grimaced. “She was fine as long as Master Orion lived, she took potions, even after Master Orion died Mistress Lucretia used to come around every other day to make sure that Mistress Walburga took her potions but then Mistress Lucretia couldn’t keep coming anymore. And then Mistress Walburga started talking at walls, telling things that didn’t make sense. When...” he paused and sighed heavily, “when Mistress killed Lola in front of Master Arcturus, he ordered Kreacher and Una to not take orders from Mistress, no orders past preparing her food for her. Told us Mistress couldn’t be trusted to not hurt herself or us by giving us orders. Kreacher tried to give Mistress her potions but she threatened Kreacher with clothes..” he added mournfully.

“Why would she do that?” asked Harry softly. “You followed orders, you took care of her.”

“Kreacher doesn’t know. Kreacher never knew. Master Orion never explained and Kreacher didn’t dare to ask him. Kreacher was only told to call Mistress Lucretia when Kreacher found Mistress wandering around the house and talking to no one,” the elf shook his head. “We maintain the properties because Ragnok Proudclaw, the family goblin told us to. Kreacher, tried to argue, told Proudclaw that Master Sirius wasn’t going out of Azkaban ever but Proudclaw was adamant, threatened Kreacher with beheading for disobeying Master Orion’s last will and testament. Master Arcturus agreed, said that inheritance can’t be passed up the line or sideways as long as existed one direct heir of Master Orion. Only after Master Sirius would take the mantle of the head of the Black family he could relieve Kreacher and Una from obligations made by Master Orion’s will. Or until Master Sirius died in Azkaban and another heir would have been located.”

“Well, he’s not going to die anytime soon if I have something to say about,” said Regulus suddenly, making both Harry and Kreacher look at him, Sirius was standing next to him with a pensive look on his face.

“But Master Sirius was in prison,” Kreacher protested.

“I was never charged with anything,” snorted Sirius. “Just unceremoniously thrown into a cell, with no trial, no signed confession. By Proudclaw standards there’s nothing standing in my way of assuming the position of the head of the family,” he grimaced. “Great,” he snorted, “that’s exactly
“What I need,” he shook his head.

“What’s wrong with you taking the mantle?” asked Regulus sceptically.

“Considering that even though by goblin standards I’m innocent I’m still fugitive from wizarding law? Assuming the position of the head of the Black family as such will be tedious and will require a lot of tiptoeing the fine line, which means a lot of fine print,” Sirius shook his head.

“And what’s wrong with fine print?” asked Harry curiously.

“Nothing wrong to you two, myopics,” Sirius smiled sourly. “As for me? I recently discovered that small letters started shrinking. And you don’t know goblins, Harry, they are masters of fine print, the tiniest the better.”

“Kreacher, what else Proudclaw told you?” asked Regulus.

“That Kreacher needs to cut expenses,” Kreacher said grimly.

“That Kreacher needs to cut expenses,” Kreacher said grimly.

“Why?” asked Harry curiously.

“Because Kreacher spends too much for one elf,” Kreacher answered. “Kreacher tried everything to destroy the locket. Kreacher tried new things, pricey things. Until Mistress Walburga lived no one complained. But after...” he elf shook his head. “So Kreacher took grocery money to buy things for the locket and asked Una to give him some cooking plants. Kreacher bought a hen and a rooster, they had chickens, so Kreacher sold chickens to Mrs Poultry meat stand.”

“But there’s literally no food in the kitchen,” said Regulus.

“Vegetables are in the garden, Master Regulus,” Kreacher answered. “And the hen...” he shook his head. “Poor thing, Kreacher sold the chickens, the rooster was old so Kreacher made him into broth, few days later a lightening struck the poor thing so there’s no hen. But there are some eggs in the basement.”

“Old wine cellar you mean,” said Sirius. “Preserves?”
“Yes, Master Sirius,” Kreacher answered thoughtfully. “Pears in vinegar, pickled gherkins, pickled mushrooms, pickled peppers, some peaches in syrup, pears too. Pie fillers, cherries, apples, pears again. Quite a lot of it.”

“Meat?” asked Sirius.

“No meat, Kreacher doesn’t eat much meat and what was left after Mistress died went bad,” Kreacher answered.

“We need to go shopping anyway,” shrugged Regulus.

Kreacher stared at him in shock and was about to say something when Sirius interrupted him.

“Clothes, you need to get new clothes, Reg,” said Sirius quickly. “Kreacher will get the groceries, unless you want to argue.”

“Kreacher will do that,” Kreacher said solemnly. “Does Master Sirius wants something specific?”

“Nothing really, usual stuff, meat, milk, some more eggs, flour, bread. Enough for four and to last for a few days, a week maybe. The problem, some problem, at least for you, Kreacher, isn’t with what you get but how and where you get it,” said Sirius. “I need you to buy them in separate shops, the less attention you will draw to yourself while doing it the better.”

“Proudclaw will notice increase in spending,” said Kreacher.

“I’m counting on it,” nodded Sirius. “After you’ll finish with shopping I need you to find Una and told her to come back here,” Kreacher nodded at that. “If you won’t find her today that won’t be a problem. You can try again tomorrow or day after. But tomorrow I need you to go to Gringotts, find Proudclaw, wait for him to be alone, preferably in his office. Tell him that you require his presence here but don’t get into any details.”

“Kreacher will do that,” the elf nodded. “But who will do the cooking?”
“We are self-sufficient,” shrugged Regulus.

Kreacher gapped at him.

“No, seriously we’re capable of making an omelette,” said Regulus. “And there’s cold pizza in the kitchen.”

Kreacher turned to Sirius and said, “Kreacher will do that, after Kreacher will make a meal for masters. Is it fine with Master Sirius?”

“Pizza,” said Regulus quickly.

“That cold thing in cardboard boxes?” asked Kreacher. “Kreacher threw out the litter when he saw it.”

“Damn,” mumbled Regulus. “I was planning to eat it.”

“Don’t worry,” chuckled Sirius. “Think about it this way, Kreacher is taking care of your high cholesterol, Reg.”

“I don’t have a high cholesterol,” protested Regulus. “I’m completely healthy. Just myopic.”

“Yes, yes,” nodded Sirius with a smile. “Keep talking, Reg, keep talking.”

“Will Master Sirius require the locket now?” asked Kreacher.

“Do you need a lot of time to fetch it?” asked Sirius.

Kreacher shook his head.

“Then bring it to the kitchen,” said Sirius. “We will get dressed and head down.”
At that Kreacher disappeared with a pop.

“That was...” Harry mumbled.

“He was alone here for too long,” grimaced Sirius. “I wonder why he never told Mother what happened to you?” he turned to Regulus.

“I told him not to,” sighed Regulus. “You’re right, the guilt, the loneliness, the enormity of the task he was given and lack of success in that regard,” he shook his head. “I’ll need to do plenty glowering.”

“I don’t envy you,” said Sirius.

After dressing up they headed downstairs to the kitchen together, with Sirius assisted by Regulus and after reaching first landing also by Harry.

“What’s wrong with your leg?” asked Harry curiously.

“Old injury,” sighed Sirius. “Or I should rather say, injuries. Nearly got it chopped off at the very beginning of my career, nasty dark curse. Got it broken several times between then and Azkaban too. Got it broken several times in Azkaban too. My caretakers couldn’t be bothered to heal it properly, it wasn’t as if I was going to need it, much. I pushed some of my magic into healing it but I’m not a trained Healer...”

“Arthritis?” asked Regulus.

“I don’t know,” admitted Sirius. “I can predict weather changes with it like you have no idea and on the top of that I strained it during last week. I tried not too but even Padfoot has a limit on three legs hobbling, at some point I had to place weight on it.”

“Three legs?” asked Harry curiously. “Where do you keep the other one?”
At the same time Regulus howled with laughter while Sirius mumbled, “I’m not answering that question.”

“You’re weird,” Harry shook his head.

Then it occurred to him what he said and how he said it which coupled with their reaction made him blush furiously.

“Aww,” cooed Regulus. “He’s getting it.”

“Stop embarrassing him,” muttered Sirius.

“Or what?” teased Regulus.

“Or I’ll tell him about that time when James tried to turn you into a woman,” said Sirius sourly.

“Good times,” snickered Regulus. “I distinctly remember getting him back for it. Tell me how many of them I managed to give him before Madam Pomfrey fixed him?”

Sirius thought about something for a moment before he answered with a chuckle, “That would be seven if I remember correctly. I’m not sure, I was too busy laughing my arse off. But boy, does that give a new meaning to the phrase you humongous prick.”

“Like I said good times,” chuckled Regulus. “Also a great pair of tits. Wasn’t he getting a detention form Madam Pomfrey for showing that spell to the girls in your and mine year?”

“He was,” confirmed Sirius. “Tried to argue but you know Pomfrey. You should have known better Mr Potter. Teenagers are so self-conscious about their bodies when they develop, Mr Potter. Transfiguration is not an answer to everyone’s problem, Mr Potter. Especially if done improperly, Mr Potter.”

“Well, it wasn’t as if all girls in our years tried it,” said Regulus.
“Yes, the intelligent ones didn’t,” nodded Sirius. “Do you remember Magnolia… what was her surname? That wispy blonde thing in your year, was going out with that humongous bell end, also from your year.”

“Do you mean Mrs and Mr Brown?” asked Regulus pensively. “I don’t really remember her surname, I’m not even sure she was using it. I mean she had it and she was called by it for some time. But she had a betrothal contract with Augustus Brown since before they entered Hogwarts. She signed everything she could sign as Magnolia Brown. Speaking of betrothal contracts…”

“I’m not talking about that Burbage fiasco,” snorted Sirius. “The only reason I consented to it at all was because Father was hanging Hogsmeade permission slip over my head. I was as happy to see them go as you were. Mrs Love Black, seriously.”

Regulus hummed under his breath and the rest of the way to the kitchen passed in silence until they deposited Sirius in the chair closest to the door.

“Kreacher, do we have any Skele-Gro?” asked Regulus. “I couldn’t find any yesterday.”

“No Skele-Gro, Master Regulus,” answered Kreacher as he turned away from the kitchen where he was making omelettes. “There was a vial but it went bad few years ago. What Master needs it for?”

“I need to fix his right leg,” said Regulus as he pointed at Sirius. “Fractured breaks, badly healed. Will require thorough removal of every bone below the knee or even above.”

“Above...” mumbled Sirius weakly. “Do you have any idea how many doses of Skele-Gro I have to drink to regrow every single bone in my leg from hipbone down?”

“I don’t know,” shrugged Regulus. “By my estimations at least two vials,” he added pensively. “And...”

“No,” objected Sirius firmly. “You’re not getting close to me with a wand or Skele-Gro. It’s a vile stuff, I’d rather limp. Strike that, I’d rather chop it off and fit it with a prosthetic...”

“You have no idea what you’re saying, Sirius,” Regulus rolled his eyes at him.
“I do,” Sirius said sourly. “There’s no bone in that leg from hipbone down that I hadn’t broken at least once. In fact, at one point I broke every single one of them at the same time. I spent literally fifty hours regrowing them. You aren’t incapacitating me for over two days, period. I’d rather limp.”

“Master Sirius is right, Master Regulus,” said Kreacher as he carried a huge tray with three plates on it towards the table. “Skele-Gro is a vile stuff. We never used it on Masters when Masters had anything broken when they lived here. We gave Masters mild calming potions and pain-reducers before we fixed them ourselves.”

“Can you do that?” asked Sirius hopefully as Kreacher set the tray on the table.

“Kreacher can,” nodded Kreacher. “After Masters will eat their breakfast,” he added before he turned away from the table and a teapot and three cups came flying towards the table.

“Thank you Kreacher,” said Sirius with a smile.

“Master will thank Kreacher after, if Master has strength for it,” said Kreacher. “It’s very painful.”

“Nowhere near as regrowing every bone in my leg like that sadist wants me to do,” said Sirius quickly as he glared at Regulus who rolled his eyes at him.

“We shall see,” muttered Regulus before they all dug in.

The breakfast passed in semi-silence. Harry, too busy with eating the omelette, which was delicious, didn’t talk allowing Sirius and Regulus to bicker between bites over which one of them was bigger disaster on two legs at certain ages (they both were Harry decided). At some point the conversation was switched to the Slytherin locket that was laying on the other side of the table and what could be used to open it. Kreacher chimed in from time to time confirming or denying the use of this or that.

Harry didn’t feel the need to join that conversation, it was obvious that compared to them he knew very little about the world he lived, the world he was supposed to grow in from the very beginning. Fucking Dumbledore.

It also fascinated him how at one moment Sirius and Regulus could be at each others throats and
calling each other names while in the next moment when the discussion turned peaceful they were nearly finishing each others sentences. It seemed weird. At some point he even allowed himself to dream up a scenario in which his parents were alive and having a discussion with his Aunt and Uncle over dinner but he only managed to get as far as having everyone seated at the same table before hell broke lose and his Mum was cursing Aunt Petunia and his Dad was hexing Uncle Venron.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Regulus’s voice tore him from his thoughts.

“They aren’t worth that much,” snorted Harry. “I was imagining how a dinner with my parents and Aunt and Uncle would go,” he grimaced.

“Not well,” Sirius and Regulus said in unison.

“I know that,” shrugged Harry.

“I’m sorry,” sighed Sirius. “It’s my fault they’re dead. I should have been...”

“Omniscient?” offered Harry. “You didn’t kill them,” he sighed. “Vol... The Dark Lord did.”

“He’s right, you know,” muttered Regulus.

“That man, Pettigrew,” started Harry, “how did he betray them?”

“At every opportunity he got,” snorted Sirius. “And he got plenty,” he sighed heavily. “From the day you were born until...” he paused. “I think it was after your first birthday,” he added pensively. “Your parents were chased nearly every fortnight from every house they found shelter in. Didn’t matter whatever it was one of Potter family properties or an Order safe-house. Like a bloody clockwork. They barely managed to unpack before I was hurrying to them and moving them away to another. At some point Lily even stopped unpacking more than your clothes or toys.”

“But you did get them out,” said Regulus pensively. “How?”

“By sheer dumb luck?” offered Sirius. “I’m not sure,” he shook his head. “I knew that Dumbledore
had some contact amongst the Death Eaters but kill me, I don’t know anyone who would have risked the Dark Lord’s wrath for your parents.”

“But I do,” muttered Regulus.

“Who?” asked Sirius harshly and Harry echoed him.

“Does it really matter?” asked Regulus pensively. “For all that I know he might be dead. I think that he was the sole reason behind why the Dark Lord thought about approaching your mother with an offer to join him,” he looked at Harry before he added. “Don’t forget that Lily Evans was a Muggle-born and as such she should have been killed on the spot, but she wasn’t, trice.”

“Who?” pressed Sirius.

“Did Azkaban turn you into a complete amnesiac?” asked Regulus pointedly. “Granted, I know that happy memories would be gone or fuzzy at best but I know that it didn’t remove all of them.”

“I have no memory of any wanna be...” started Sirius before he stopped suddenly and closed his mouth with a loud clack.

Regulus raised his eyebrows at him and Harry simply stared.

“Cokeworth,” mumbled Sirius finally.

“Who?” asked Harry quickly.

“It’s not a person, it’s a place,” said Sirius slowly. “Your Mum grew up there, might have been born too, but I’m not sure,” he paused and tapped the fork against his lips. “Christmas at Cokeworth,” he mumbled. “It was a Christmas Eve,” he said slowly, “I barely moved them there the night before... spent the night, added my own wards on the top of your Mum’s,” he added thoughtfully and paused. “James had a meeting with Dumbledore in afternoon, I was supposed to go with him but Lily was beside herself with worry so Remus offered to go with him and I was supposed to stay with you two,” he said slowly.
He tapped the fork against his lips again and was silent for a very long while.

“I don’t remember,” he whispered finally. “It was a very morose Christmas, they barely managed to get away from the welcoming committee. James barely slept through the rest of the night, Lily didn’t even try and I think the only reason James had was because she dosed him with a mild sleeping draught,” he added pensively. “James and Remus left and I sealed the door behind them,” he continued. “The door was literally sealed and I was the only one who could unseal them. Lily locked herself in one of the bedrooms she turned into a small study, I was with you,” he pointed the fork at Harry, “and then...” he stopped again.

“You weren’t?” offered Regulus. “As if someone got to you with a memory modifying charm?”

“Yeah,” nodded Sirius. “And I know who.”

“He?” asked Regulus.

“No,” Sirius shook his head. “No one got in, no one got out and if he had trust me I wouldn’t escape unscathed and neither would he. I think that he was the one who nearly removed my leg with that curse of his.”

“But?” asked Regulus quickly.

“But I’m missing something,” muttered Sirius. “Some conversation I think, whatever it was after...” he paused. “She was calmer after it, less strained, still worried but as if something or someone took a weight from her shoulders,” he paused again and remained silent for a long moment. “I think it was me, I can’t be sure but there was no one else and someone had to remove it and since you can’t obviate yourself...”


“Of who could offer a safe house for your mother in her home town,” answered Sirius. “Of who would have gone through any lengths to keep her away from harm, even by risking the Dark Lord’s wrath.”

“Who?” asked Harry quickly.
“Her childhood best friend,” said Regulus simply. “He used to be her friend at Hogwarts too. At least for few years until it all blew up. You see,” he added, “she was in Gryffindor and he was in Slytherin and he was in there with the worst group one could imagine. They were all marked or at the very least claimed they were all marked by beginning of their sixth year but he...” Regulus paused.

“Held on?” offered Sirius sceptically.

“His room-mates joined the Dark Lord during the summer before your sixth year. But he and I were induced into Death Eaters together even though he should have gone with the rest of them a year prior. But he hadn’t,” said Regulus pensively. “I think that he was holding on for so long because he hoped that Evans would come around...”

“And let him apologise for calling her Mudblood in public?” asked Sirius sourly. “Well, it was partly our fault but it came out of his bloody mouth and it wasn’t as if he was all that innocent prior to that day.”

“Just like you?” quipped Regulus.

“I can’t believe that you’re taking his side,” snorted Sirius.

“I’m not taking anyone’s side in this,” snorted Regulus. “All that I’m saying is that he held on even though nothing should be holding him back. He’s also the only person I can imagine at the Dark Lord’s side who could betray the Dark Lord the very moment he started hounding the Potters. No one else would have bothered to bat an eye, even Pettigrew hadn’t.”

“True,” muttered Sirius grimly.

“Who you’re talking about?” asked Harry, feeling completely resigned that he wasn’t going to get a straight answer out of them.

“Severus Snape,” Sirius and Regulus said in almost perfect unison. “I doubt that you ever had a chance to met him,” added Sirius sourly
Harry’s jaw dropped at that, as a fork fell from his hand too.

“By your reaction I take that you had,” said Regulus pointedly.

“Twice a week last year and once a week in a year before last,” Harry finally mumbled out. “He’s a Head of Slytherin and he teaches Potions at Hogwarts,” he added quietly.

“You get along well?” asked Regulus while Sirius simply stared at Harry.

“Like peanut butter and jelly,” muttered Harry.

“That means well,” whispered Sirius weakly.

“If you like peanut butter and jelly together,” snorted Harry. “He hates my guts, I hate his and given a chance we would happily drown each other in a cauldron.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m in dire need of a beta reader. This chapter was proof-read, spell-checked and checked with Grammarly but this is really the best I can do without help.
Chapter 03 - Severus Snape

Chapter Summary

Snape plots. Harry, Sirius and Regulus talk, mostly about Snape but also themselves.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter or anything you can recognise from any books or TV series or movies. I do however take liberties with the plots or mentions provided by JKR or other writers. The only profit I'm getting out of it is improving my English.

Title: Secrets & Keepers – Keep Us

Rating/Warnings: R/M [AU; Manipulative Dumbledore (therefore not Dumbledore friendly); profanity; canon-typical violence; frank discussion of past child abuse (Harry but not only) and of past child abuse of sexual nature (not Harry); not very detailed descriptions of torture (not Harry); Black family feels].

Additional warnings: References to pure-blood bigotry. References to the death of a child. Minor, not very descriptive sex scene. Some black humour. Marauders being Marauders.

Chapter summary: Snape plots. Harry, Sirius and Regulus talk, mostly about Snape but also themselves.

Word count: Around 25 000 words.

Author's note: Someone in a review for the first chapter (as a guest, therefore, I was unable to reply to it) voiced they worry that I might be putting certain characters down just in order to make others look better. Especially that issue was raised in regards of James and Lily. I have long-term plans for Lily, though dead, she managed to out-manipulate master manipulator quite beautifully, pay close attention to mentions of her or her things in this chapter because they'll be important in the future chapters. As for James, for a long time in HP books, James is a pretty one-dimensional character, we don't get to see him as anyone else until OotP and that picture isn't a pretty one. It had to come from somewhere, so I'm exploring that somewhere in this chapter. He still grew up and he died a hero's death but prior to that he was a sheltered teenager and had his judgement coloured by his upbringing. I think Sirius and Regulus together sum it up pretty nicely. Remember that it's an image of teenage James and not the adult he became.

Personal ramble: Also, I'm my own worst enemy. This chapter was supposed to cover the events of an entire day of 8th August for all the characters so I could move on to what will happen on 9th August (and it's a lot). So after I saw how long it is I decided to shuffle around certain parts so I could at least have certain points of view in a single chapter together. Regulus's and Remus's povs were supposed to be in here too until I shuffled them to chapter four, then when I saw how long Regulus's pov was I
decided to shuffle Remus to his own chapter because his pov will be longer. Then when I started writing Remus's part I got to Tonks, who is a pretty important part of both chapters. I'm hoping to close the events of the 8th August by the end of chapter five but I learned to not expect that I'll keep my own word on it. Either way, I'm simultaneously writing two chapters because introspective parts of Regulus's chapter allow me to move between his chapter and Remus's and Tonks's chapter.

*Dedicated to all of my readers who stuck with me for so long. Thank You, I hope that You will find this story enjoyable. I would be the most grateful for constructive criticism.*

This chapter was proof-read, spell-checked and checked with Grammarly.

See the end of the chapter for more *notes*

*Consequences are unpitying. Our deeds carry their terrible consequences, quite apart from any fluctuations that went before—consequences that are hardly ever confined to ourselves. And it is best to fix our minds on that certainty, instead of considering what may be the elements of excuse for us.*

~George Eliot, Adam Bede

**Secrets & Keepers – Keep Us**

**Chapter three: Severus Snape**

*Severus Snape – Hogwarts, 7th August, evening*

The urge to wring Bathsheda's neck sized him, the very moment he realised that amongst the restorative potions for his weakened magical core, restorative potion for his damaged leg, as well as, Pepper-Up she somehow managed to swindle a vial of a sleeping draught.

He reached for his wand to hex her silly and to summon the counter potion, but he didn't find it in his holster. His mind quickly supplied the image of him leaning heavily on her shoulders through their entire walk into the castle. He was so focused on the diminishing distance between themselves and Hogwarts that even a child would be able to lift his wand from him.

Meanwhile, Bathsheda was locking his wand away in the drawer in his desk.

"It'll unlock the moment your magical core is stable enough to take this ward down," she said simply.

"Wandless?" he sneered. "You want me to take a ward down without a wand? Are you out of your bloody mind woman?" he snarled as he tried to stifle a yawn.

"If anyone here is out of their mind, it's you," she shrugged. "Dumbledore isn't here, yet. And I know you, you won't go on a rescue mission without trying to learn more. Maybe it won't even be necessary because for all that we know, Potter had been found. Either way, it wouldn't do you any
good, if you showed up at a meeting with Headmaster looking like you were run over by Hogwarts Express."

"That's not the point!" he protested vehemently.

"That's exactly the point," she retorted. "I pulled up the ward we used last spring. Dumbledore won't get into the castle without setting off the alarm, which will wake you up. As for the ward, really?" she pointed at the desk as she stared at him. "Did I or did I not teach how to turn a simple locking charm into a ward keyed to a specific person? Or how to take it down without a wand?"

"Bathseda!" he growled. "Potter!" he spat.

"Do you trust my wards?" she asked simply.

"Of course, I do," he mumbled. "I've seen your work but..."

"No buts, do you trust my ward work or not?" she interrupted him.

"Yes," he admitted grudgingly.

"So, you do remember that time I asked you for samples from your very secret stash of things Dumbledore should not know about?" she asked pointedly.

He remembered, albeit not very vividly, seeing how exhausted he felt. But he did remember the argument that followed her request and after some grumbling, he handed her over the tiny vial of Potter's blood and few strands of boy's hair.

"You used them?" he asked tiredly.

"I did, right after our dear Headmaster came back from his impromptu trip to London," she confirmed. "I immersed protective crystals I placed on the cornerstone of the Dursleys' property in his blood. Black jasper, nephrite-jade, black onyx, Tibetan black quartz, you get the idea," she continued. "On that foundation, I placed a ward of my own, it's intent based and tied to Potter only. If he was taken from his relatives against his will, the ward would collapse immediately and that wouldn't go unnoticed..."

"How?" he mumbled.

In an answer, she extended her right arm to him, showing a small bracelet on her wrist. It was made from black stones, aside from green nephrite jade and the stones gleamed in the low light of the dimly lit room.

"I cut the original stones in half," she said. "The chain is made from the strands of his hair immersed in silver and is enchanted to start burning if the ward would collapse. Trust me, I would notice the sensation if it happened."

"But it didn't," he whispered.

"But it didn't," she agreed. "Which tells me that no matter how and why he left his relatives, Potter left them willingly," she added. "The other stones on it I placed around Ms Granger's home and around the Weasleys place. I had to set the perimeter there quite wide for them to not notice it and they, in turn, are enchanted to alert me if Potter crosses the boundaries of these properties."

"Which he hadn't," he sighed. "Same burning sensation?" he asked curiously.
"Do you think I'm a dimwitted Hufflepuff?" she snorted. "Of course not, opposite sensation, with different intensity to alert me which of them he crossed."

"And Dumbledore didn't notice?" he muttered. "How could he not notice someone tampering with the wards?"

"He didn't notice because I wasn't tampering with existing ward work, just adding my own," she shrugged and then she smiled. "And we both know how well I can keep my magical signature away from Headmaster's prying eyes."

He nearly snorted at that because he did know. He knew that from the earliest years she was drawn to wards, possessing a talent of sensing the presence of any existing ward work. It wasn't the rarest of talents, plenty of people to certain degree possessed it but not many trained themselves to use it, frequently or at all. Those who did usually utilised that skill in curse-breaking or they became Aurors.

To a certain degree, Severus also possessed that talent, but the wards he was able to sense were usually of darker origins. He also didn't pay too close attention to those who possessed that talent, seeing that looking for such individuals and pushing them towards the careers that needed them was in Bathsheda's job description. But he did notice an occasional first-year student here and there wandering corridors with their hands pressed against the stone walls, feeling centuries-old magic and wards within. Just last year he kept chasing little Luna Lovegood out of dungeons until he had a stern talk with Flitwick about curbing Miss Lovegood's perchance to get herself lost in thoughts and in the dungeons while Slytherin Monster was on the loose.

Not a curse-breaker herself but a descendant from a family of curse-breakers, from the earliest years Bathsheda had plenty of opportunities to hone her ability into mastery, not only practically but also academically. Her private quarters were filled with bookcases which sagged under the heavy weight of accumulated books. Her interests weren't limited only to ward work, although that collection alone was very impressive. She was also interested in general history, Arithmancy, wand lore and jewellery making and everything that could fall under the definition of that subject.

Quite often Severus found himself leaving her quarters with a book or two hidden in his pocket. Equally often Bathsheda, herself, could be found, only by him, curled up in an armchair by the fire in his tiny living-room and deeply immersed into one of the books from his collection.

Their relationship wasn't what one could call conventional. Neither was their first meeting as adults and Hogwarts professors. It started badly and ended with a disaster neither wished to remember or talk about. But it proved them one thing, sex was a great method to relieve stress and burn up excess energy. Evenly tempered in bed and respective of each other's boundaries there they worked an agreement that lasted eleven years of mutual sexual gratification.

They never officially dated one another, in fact in public during the very early days of their relationship they were openly hostile towards each other. With passing time their mutual hostility transformed into dispassionate civility outside of their private quarters, and inside them into a tentatively budding friendship between two headstrong people of similar sexual drive and overlapping academical interests.

Especially in last two years Severus often found himself venting his spleen to her. Mostly on Potter but also on Dumbledore, other teachers and other students. She paid him back in kind. The sex was great, as was the frequency in which it occurred, to the point that seven weeks without her felt lonesome, and a little straining on his hands, since he didn't really masturbate alone for quite some time.
That's why he went to her. He trusted her, maybe a little too deep than he liked, but he had faith in her abilities and he needed help with this.

"What you're planning to do?" he asked sleepily.

"Check the perimeters," she answered. "Ask around Little Whinging whatever or not a kid matching Potter's description hopped on a bus in whichever direction. Knowing the Aurors they already had done so but it wouldn't hurt to double-check."

"And if you won't find him there?" he asked between yawns.

"Then I'll try something else," she shrugged. "As will you, I bet. But we both know that for that to work you need to be on the top of your game and right now..." she grimaced. "Sleep, Severus, the ward will wake you up when Dumbledore gets here. Pester him for more information. I'll find you later."

"When?" he yawned.

"When I'll get back," she answered simply.

"Are you officially back to Hogwarts?" he asked pointedly.

"I'll know when I'll get back. Sweet dreams, Sev," she replied before she started heading towards the door.

"I don't have sweet dreams," he called after her.

"Sour dreams then. Bye," she called out just before the door closed behind her.

Shortly after he collapsed on his couch and within moments was fast asleep.

He woke up with a start, a little disoriented by finding himself back in his rooms. But the memory how he got there and why he got there hit him with enough force to make him fall from the couch while he was trying to scrambled into sitting position.

Fucking Harry Potter. Why that infernal boy for once in his god-damn life couldn't stay put. On that note, also fucking Albus Dumbledore, the ever-twinkling scumbag who trusted Potter to think rationally and behave. Potter wouldn't know a rational thought even if it bit him in the arse.

That was it, at the earliest conceivable time, provided that the brat would be found alive, Severus was going to put him in a permanent detention from which the boy won't get out until he'll reach adulthood.

He managed to hoist himself into standing position and without glancing at his watch – knowing fully well that it was showing Beijing's time – he hurried to his desk. The drawer opened without much of a problem, so he quickly grabbed his wand and cast 'Tempus'.

Half past six. Most probably PM although one couldn't be sure. Bloody Bathsheda. Once the dust had settle, he will get her back for dosing him with the sleeping draught and he even knew how he would do it. A pleasant night of bondage and orgasm denial would serve her well.

But that will come later. In the meantime, he needed to prepare himself a meeting with Dumbledore and it wouldn't do him any good if he looked dishevelled or less than presentable.

Within ten minutes he was in and out of the shower, dressed in fresh dress robes and on his way to
Headmaster's tower. Mercifully he didn't encounter anyone else on his way. He didn't even need a password to get past the gargoyle guarding the entrance. During the summer Dumbledore always made an exemption for Heads of the Houses to access his office without a password, as long as, he was inside it. Apparently, since Severus started teaching, Minerva, Filius, Pomona and himself had a tendency to turn the gargoyle, guarding the Headmaster's Tower, into a revolving door during the first fortnight of the summer vacation. So, in the end, it was better to give them free access, as long as he was there to supervise them, than to constantly grant them access to it.

He climbed up the stairs, opened the door to the office without knocking and immediately zeroed his glare on Dumbledore.

"Severus," said Dumbledore cheerfully. "Aren't you supposed to be in Beijing right now?" he asked curiously.

"I was," said Severus swiftly as he strode towards the desk.

"And?" asked Dumbledore pointedly when Severus stopped right in front of his desk.

"As you can see, I'm not in Beijing anymore," answered Severus simply as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Now would you care to explain me why I had to find out from The Daily Prophet of all sources that the impudent brat also known as Harry Potter went missing from his relatives yesterday?"

"Oh," sighed Dumbledore. "I was counting on that infamous Chinese lack of interest in matters not concerning Asian countries..."

"Sorry to disappoint you," said Severus calmly. "Apparently Potter's name is enough to take interest in what's happening on the other side of the globe. Speaking of which..." he stared at the man expectantly.

"You really didn't have to leave China, Severus," Dumbledore said calmly. "It's nothing more than a family quarrel that went a little too far..."

"Far enough for Potter to run away from his relatives?" asked Severus pointedly, trying very hard to not sound sour. "While Sirius Black is on the loose and looking for him?" he added calmly. "Please, try again, Albus."

"The Dursleys were visited by Vernon's sister, Marjorie," sighed Dumbledore. "She's not the most pleasant person, with a big mouth and too short fuse," he paused and twinkled at Severus. "Much like you, Severus."

Bugger off, Severus snarled behind his Occlumency shields and said nothing allowing Dumbledore to continue.

"He blew her up," said Dumbledore with a small chuckle. "Admirable inflating charm, Lily would have been delighted," he smiled. "She would obviously scold him for doing so, but really Severus, it couldn't happen to a better person," he twinkled at Severus again.
"As much as it pains me to say it," said Severus softly. "Potter does possess some latent self-preservation instinct when it comes to me. He wouldn't dare to use magic against me because he knows that whatever he will give me I'll pay him back tenfold. Now," he paused as he uncrossed his arms and placed his hands on the desk, "where is he?" he asked calmly.

"We don't know, yet," sighed Dumbledore. "We might have an idea of what might be going through his head..."

"Not much obviously," snorted Severus.

"Last year Harry received a warning from the Ministry for breaking the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry. While at the time it wasn't his fault, rather than that well-meaning Malfoy's elf, the charges stuck since he was the only wizard in residence there," said Dumbledore slowly. "Seeing that inflating Miss Dursley, was not only very public and a major burst of spontaneous magic, he fled their home..."

"Hearing?" asked Severus pointedly.

"Wasn't even considered," sighed Dumbledore. "Cornelius from time to time uses his brain and he reached the conclusion that with Sirius Black on the loose, they can overlook the incident. No hard feelings, he might have been protecting himself...."

"By blowing up his Aunt?" asked Severus calmly.

"I don't know," shrugged Dumbledore. "I'm not going to disabuse him from that notion, so I wholeheartedly agreed. Outside of the Dursleys Harry is the safest here at Hogwarts..."

"Like I said before," said Severus and he smiled grimly.

"... so I'm not going to jeopardise his return here by unnecessary Ministerial hearing," finished Dumbledore. "Granted, convincing the Dursleys to allow him to return there next year will take a lot of time and quite a lot of convincing arguments," he sighed heavily. "But that's my problem and it can wait until after Harry is found."

"About that..." started Severus slowly.

"Cornelius, as well as the Aurors who are working the case, believe that Harry fled to one of the three locations," said Dumbledore briskly. "They're mostly concentrating on Diagon Alley and Gringotts because they believe that Harry is convinced that he's on the run and therefore will need the access to his vault. Once he accesses that, he might run to his friends, hence a pair of Aurors located both at the Burrow and at Ms Granger's place."

"And you aren't worried?" said Severus softly. "Your precious boy saviour is missing..."

"He can take care of himself, and like you once said, he has an inordinate supply of sheer dumb luck," said Dumbledore calmly. "I'm counting on it working in our favour."

"Well, I don't," snorted Severus. "Here's the thing about sheer dumb luck, Albus. It has a tendency to run out. You might content yourself to hoping that everything will work itself out, without your involvement, but I'm not you," he spat the last word.

"I noticed," chuckled Dumbledore. "Actually, you two are very much alike..."

"Don't you ever compare me to that impudent brat, Albus!" hissed Severus.
"I was..." started Dumbledore.

"If you're planning to still be, you will cease making such comments," spat Severus. "Don't forget who am I and what I know. From the top of my head, I can give you five different ways in which I can kill you, while making it look like an accident. A very convincing accident," he stressed out. "Do. Not. Tempt. Me. Albus."

"You were saying?" said Dumbledore calmly, as if Severus didn't just threaten to murder him.

Severus looked sideways at the clock on the mantle before he glared back at Dumbledore.

"It's precisely seven o'clock. The day is 8th August," he said firmly. "I'm giving you, Minister and the Aurors exactly twelve hours to locate Potter without my involvement. If tomorrow, after early breakfast, Potter still remains missing I'll go after him myself," he hissed out before he paused and whispered, "And trust me, Albus, you don't want me to come after him."

With that, he straightened up, turned on his heel and marched out of Dumbledore's office. He made his way back to his quarters and ordered a hearty dinner. Unlike Dumbledore, he wasn't planning to wait until the problem resolved itself, and neither was he planning to wait until morning to start looking. He just needed to gain some more strength to not faint, again.

There were a few things Severus considered as his most prized possessions. Any mementoes of Lily, no matter how tiny or trivial, counted as such. He most unwillingly parted with few photographs of Lily back when Hagrid was putting together a family album for Potter, but in the end, he decided to hand over the least valuable photographs or those of which he possessed another copy. But that was his personal limit. He wasn't going to hand over anything else.

Then there were obviously his academical achievements. Diplomas for every single step of his three masteries. Occasional medal from Potions Guilds from all over the world. Several letters of gratitude from the Society of Arithmancers.

But the most valued things of all were stored away from people's, especially Dumbledore's, prying eyes.

One of them was the gift he received from Bathsheda for his twenty-third birthday. It was a rectangular box made from polished mahogany, about a foot long, eleven inches wide and five inches high. The top of it was craved with a Babbling family coat of arms, two triskelions surrounding a menorah. It was also imbued with the finest protective enchantments he ever saw in his life and was keyed to open to his touch only. Not even Batsheda, the original enchanter, could open it once she keyed his magic into the locks.

But the box while valuable itself physically housed the most valuable items Severus ever owned. A vial of shimmering memories and a small triskelion pendant made from platinum with a tiny onyx in its middle, on a very thin, short silver chain. Condemnation and absolution.

For a very long time, the pendant and the vial were the only things that the box housed, even though it had enough space to house more things. But as the time pass, Severus started to add other things.

A tiny silver pendant with an even tinier image of a saint on which another side was written, St Severus. His grandmother, Agatha Snape, got it from a friend who visited St Severus's Church in Boppard, Germany. It was the last gift he received from her before she passed away shortly after his eighth birthday.
Another necklace, this time not silver, but plain tin locket with no adornments but what was most valuable was inside, tiny pictures of him and Lily wrapped in a tight embrace at eleven and just before he turned sixteen, it was the last gift he received from Mrs Evans but the most valuable of them all.

The third pendant he found himself, during one of the sleepless, miserable nights when the guilt was too heavy to be dampened by Dreamless Sleep potion. It had seen him going through the ruined cottage in Godric's Hallow searching for something anything that even for a moment would bring him some peace of mind. It was made of gold and was hanging on a short, tiny golden chain, oval with a tiny H engraved on it. It was tied to the mobile that was hanging over the cradle that was stored in the attic. Obviously, a Naming Day gift. Technically it belonged to Potter now, but the only way Severus was ever going to hand over that painful reminder of one of his greatest sins to the boy was via his own last will and testament.

Then there was the box. It was made out of mahogany; its lid was covered with small dots arranged without any sense or pattern he could recognise. It was about half the size of Bathsheda's box and in fact fit into it perfectly. It appeared on his kitchen table at Spinner's End at his twenty-first birthday with a painfully short note written by Lily's hand that wished him 'Happy Birthday'.

Its appearance frightened him initially, but it quickly gave way to annoyance when he realised that even though technically it was his gift from Lily he couldn't open it no matter how hard he tried. And he tried very hard. At one point he even handed it over to Bathsheda to see if she could open it but as hard as she tried, she couldn't open it either. She couldn't even manipulate the enchantments Lily placed on it to reveal which conditions should be met to open it. In the end, still unopened, he kept it because no matter what, was inside it, it was important enough for Lily to leave the safety of a safe-house in order to deliver it to him. He could only hope that one day Lily's conditions will be met.

For many years that was all that the box housed until after he spent that harrowing day pouring restorative potion after restorative potion down Potter's throat. Potter's magical core was ruptured, and he nearly drained himself dry while trying hold off Quirrell. He nearly died trice during the first day in the hospital wing and only Madam Pomfrey's expertise and Severus's potions kept him tethered to life. So once Potter recovered enough that Pomfrey was expecting full, albeit not very swift, recovery. During the night, while Pomfrey was dozing off, Severus sneaked into hospital wing and procured a big vial of Potter's blood and quite a lot of Potter's hair. After all, no one knew when it will come useful, and he would be damned if he was going to survive another day like that without taking some preventive measures to keep tabs on Potter.

That vial of Potter's blood came very handy last spring when Minerva realised that Potter and Weasley missed a headcount. With no Dumbledore to try and stop him and Bathsheda who was only encouraging him to do so, he performed a dark ritual that was supposed to help them locate Potter. It didn't work exactly as he planned but at least it proved beyond a shred of a doubt that Potter was still at Hogwarts, somewhere in the dungeons, or even underneath existing dungeons. When it turned out that Potter was in the Chamber of Secrets it didn't really surprise Severus, after all the ritual pointed them in the right direction even though it didn't provide an entrance.

He was going to use it again tonight, but with Dumbledore inside the castle, he needed to be very careful. Luckily for him, he kept exchanging bodily fluids with a master warder to whom Hogwarts wards were like Honeydukes to a sugar-starved kid.

Bathsheda loved Hogwarts wards and quite frequently spent her patrolling nights with one hand pressed to the stone walls. At times Severus even found her cooing over this or that wall of the castle. It amused him greatly until at one point she got really annoyed by his smirk and showed him what she was doing.
It was a very enlightening and humbling experience. Nearly thousand years old wards, with layers upon layers of protective enchantments, the magic of an uncountable number of students and teachers that bleed their own magic into the walls. All of this under his very fingertips, fluctuating, moving around, waiting to be called upon, to be played with, to have a purpose again. It was the greatest power he ever felt, and he served two the most powerful wizards of the century.

And in the middle of that was Bathsheda, who felt the magic's desire to be used, who prodded and poked around it, reminding the magic within the walls that it still had a purpose. She poured her love for wards into them and in return the magic loved her back for remembering about it. Dumbledore might have been the headmaster and as such he was the master of all Hogwarts wards, but he didn't really pay them much, if any attention, when he didn't need them and seeing that the Dark Lord had fallen and most of his Death Eaters were captured, he didn't need them. So mostly ignored by the Headmaster, reserves of magic to the one who hadn't ignore them they went too.

It seemed to Severus that the magic within the walls was a sentient being, and as such, was prone to its own moods and mischiefs. Doors that opened on a specific day, at specific hours, staircases that one day led one way while on the next day they led in a completely different direction. Rooms that appeared only on rainy nights, while others appeared during specific moon phases. They fascinated Bathsheda and she prodded and poked around until she found a combination that would open them. Being a master warder, she was able to manipulate her magic enough to convince the magic guarding the entrances that its conditions had been met even though they really weren't.

She also had a knack for finding hidden passages and even once – with a lot of prodding and a lot of determination on her part – she was able to direct the magic within the walls to create one that conveniently connected her private quarters with his via the hidden doorway in their walk-in closets. It was an impressive thing considering that her quarters were on the sixth floor and his were in the dungeons. It was even more impressive that the passage still existed. But then again it was used quite frequently to keep their mutually beneficial trysts away from prying eyes.

It was also Bathsheda, after a vigorous round of sex – which didn't seem vigorous enough to tire her out since she had the energy to talk – who told him about the existence of a giant flaw in Hogwarts defences.

Hogwarts, as a castle was built in the eleventh century by the founders. Majority of the castle's structures remained unchanged over the following centuries. Granted, some adjustments were made to accumulate such inventions like indoor plumbing and the growing number of students, teachers and occasionally their families. But the initial structure stayed the same way it was built.

Initially, the entirety of the castle was used, from the lowest dungeon to the highest tower. But as the centuries passed initially big population was decimated by magical maladies which spread like wildfire as well as wars of both magical and Muggle origins. Granted there were moments of peace between wars and magical maladies didn't run rampant all over the country all the time. But it seemed like every time wizarding Great Britain managed to recover enough from one disaster, another one was waiting just around the corner.

The number of students lessened slightly with each generation going from several hundred – at certain point nearing even a thousand sometime in the thirteenth century – to about two hundred students per year tops by the time the nineteenth century started (apparently it was supposed to be a good year if they got that many). A lesser number of students required a lesser number of instructors to teach them. Departments that used to staff at least ten, usually fifteen but sometimes even twenty, teachers for the same subject steadily grew smaller and smaller until the number finally settled on one teacher for one subject for the entire seven years of schooling.
The lesser population of Hogwarts required less space. Old classrooms were turned into storage rooms, as long as, there was something to store in them. Living quarters for the teachers, both solitary apartments for single teachers as well as spacious family apartments for those teachers who had families of their own were sealed. Oh, Hogwarts still offered accommodations for those teachers who wished to live on the school grounds, but more often than not, teachers with families of their own picked living in their own properties over living at Hogwarts. Granted every now and then an exemption from that preference will occur.

Initially, the majority of the living quarters for the teachers were located in the dungeons, there were of course exceptions from that rule made to Head of the Houses and Heads of the Department but as the number of teachers steadily diminished with the number of students remaining instructors petitioned current Headmasters or Headmistress as well as Hogwarts Board of Governors to allow them to move to the unused quarters upstairs.

By the time Phineas Nigellus Black became a Headmaster of Hogwarts nearly all the faculty moved upstairs, with the exception of, the current Head of Slytherin, who was contractually obligated to live in one of the dungeons quarters to remain easily acceptable to his or hers Slytherin students.

It was during Black's tenure as a Headmaster when the dungeons had undergone certain changes in structure which allowed Black to completely seal the portion of the dungeons that used to house teachers' quarters, as well as certain unused parts of the dungeons that surrounded it. Just in case, if these dungeons would ever be needed again there was left an entrance that was quite masterfully hidden from curious eyes and locked down with very heavy enchantments.

Once the dungeons were sealed off most wards surrounding them were retracted and directed elsewhere as they were needed, first by Black as the Headmaster and later on, by Dippet and Dumbledore.

Severus had been to these dungeons several times since he started teaching. Granted he found the hidden entrance to it on his own, and he even managed to pull down several enchantments placed on it, but up until he showed the entrance to Bathsheda and let her take her turn with them he was unable to access them. At the time too curious about what laid ahead he paid Bathsheda's puzzled expression no mind before he passed through the entrance and proceeded to discover what the dungeons were hiding.

As it turned out what the dungeons were hiding was a lot of rodents, mostly dead but some of them were alive and quickly running away from them. The dungeons were also a home to quite an impressive number of unused furniture and a very curious collection of books on a plenitude of subjects. They were obviously left behind by their owners and since no one really was planning to come back for them he and Bathsheda shared them amongst themselves.

Further below lied a tangled maze of dungeons that included former classrooms and former storages. Most of the stuff that was left behind went bad ages ago but some like several vials of phoenix tears, entire unicorn horns, dragon's yolks and most impressively several vials of basilisk venom were left perfectly preserved. While he was going through potions ingredients Bathsheda wandered off somewhere and didn't return until he was ready to leave the dungeons.

When she came back, she was so lost in thought that she didn't speak with him through the entire way back upstairs. Even after they reached the entrance the only words, he heard her say through the rest of the day were the incantations for the enchantments she placed on the door and later that day during dinner 'could you pass me the salt'.

Severus, by then, knew how she preferred to be treated, when she was in certain kinds of moods.
He left her in peace, for several days, knowing fully well that when she wanted to share something with him she would share it. And if she didn't want to share what bothered her, she would never breathe a word to anyone.

Several days later he woke up in the middle of the night to having his prick sucked by wide awake Bathsheda dressed only in a flimsy nightgown which she quickly lost before he proceeded to quickly bugger her into the mattress. By then they had enough trysts to know what the other liked when they were in certain moods. A spontaneous oral nearly always meant hard and fast coupling, unless the oral sex itself was the point but for that, they were always nearly completely dressed while tender touches or occasional lingering glances over the table or in the hallways promised a slow evening of lovemaking with a lot of foreplay.

"You know that I respect you, don't you?" she said out of the blue when he was busy trying to catch his breath.

He knew. They had that conversation previously. He told her so and even added, "I even know that you like me for some reason."

"Too right," she snickered. "I like you, Severus and I respect you..."

"If you say you love me..." he started warningly.

Love was off the table. He respected her greatly, both as a person and an academic and to himself even admitted that he privately liked her company, at times, just like he liked their occasional academic and non-academic squabbles because she tended to keep him on his toes. But love was, definitely off the table. He was still very much in love with Lily and even though he found Bathsheda attractive enough to want to have sex with her on a quite regular basis the only thing he could give her was the admittance that he was fond of the time they spent together and that he liked her.

"I don't love you, you humongous prick," she snorted softly. "I don't think that I ever will, and you know why."

"I know," he sighed. "I'm still..." he started.

"I'm still talking," she interrupted him quickly. "We're not talking about that, not now, not ever again," she sighed.

"I think you should," he whispered.

"I talked about it," she said simply. "To Mirzam, to her boyfriend, to a Muggle therapist, they found for me. To my bloody parents, to Aaron and Abby. To several priests from various religions even. All of them with different results. It's in the past now. I moved on."

"Here," he said softly.

"Here," she nodded. "Mirzam would have a lot to say about the state of my marbles but she's not here anymore to judge my decisions," she added bitterly. "And this," her right hand sneaked down to his prick and patted it lightly, "is my decision."

"Doesn't change the fact that she was your sister and best friend," he added as he sneaked his own left hand under the covers and twinned his fingers with hers.

Verascez's death was still a very sore subject for her even though over three years had passed from the day she died.
"If you want to be technical about it, my half-sister that was older than me by nearly five months because my hypocrite of a father couldn't keep it in his pants," she snorted.

"Still your best friend," he supplied.

"Still my best friend and one of the three best people which that good for nothing family produced within last century," she agreed bitterly.

"Four," he told her. "You're leaving yourself of the count."

"Well, I'm not dead yet," she snorted. "Can we change the subject to what I was originally planning to say?" she asked pointedly.

"Of course," he nodded. "You like me and respect me. Beats me why, but like you just said it's your decision," he squeezed her fingers.

"I'm still not having that conversation," she sighed.

"Okay, we aren't," he agreed. "So, what you're planning to talk about?" he asked.

"How much I trust you," she said softly. "I thought a lot about it for the past couple of days and I realised that out of all people here you're the only person I would dare to call a friend. Granted the others are friendly enough, especially Filius but he was my fucking Head of the House and already an adult when I was still a kid. My mind can't still get past that even though I'm no longer his student and quite frankly I don't want him to know what I'm about to tell you."

"So?" he prompted her.

"Remember that time when you were cooing over the vials of phoenix tears?" she asked.

"I wasn't cooing, I was amazed by the fact that they stayed fresh," he protested. "Does it have something to do with that solitary stroll you took when I was examining ingredients?" he asked curiously.

"Everything," she said quietly. "I was following down the wards. I tried to distinguish the casters. There were four of them, I think they were the founders themselves. If not..." she paused. "At least one of them was Rowena Ravenclaw herself. Over the years I learned how to pick her magic from the current of others, it's pretty impressive, she was an amazing witch and very powerful."

"What did you find?" he prompted her.

"The heart," she sighed. "I found the Heart of Hogwarts wards," she whispered. "And those idiots, those imbeciles, those retarded flobberworms," she spat angrily, "they cut out the Heart from Hogwarts wards. Granted," she huffed, "some power manages to seep through the stones but it's weaker than it should be, it's so weak that if the Dark Lord decided to attack Hogwarts at any point in the past the Hogwarts would have fallen within an hour, maybe two, but no more than three."

"You're saying..." he started in shock.

"That the only thing that was standing between this century Dark Lords and complete ruin of Hogwarts was always the amount of power Black, Dippet or Dumbledore could put into the wards?" she asked angrily. "Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying. We were fucked, we are fucked and if someone doesn't fix it, we'll be fucked if any future Dark Lord decides to take over Hogwarts."
He gulped and weakly asked, "Why you're telling me that? Why not Dumbledore?"

"You think that twinkling goat doesn't know?" she snorted. "Of course, he knows, he's a bloody Headmaster, of course, he noticed the state of the wards. He just doesn't do anything about it. I checked."

"You asked him?" whispered Severus.

"Was I sorted into Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw?" she muttered. "Of course, I didn't ask him. I checked library records when Pince wasn't looking," she added with a huff. "Speaking of Pince, seriously?"

"Not my idea," he snorted. "I didn't hire her and if it was up to me, she wouldn't even get through Hogwarts gates. There's nothing I can do about her," he sighed heavily.

"Are you a Potions Master or not?" she asked pointedly.

"Exactly, I'm a Potions Master and if our dear, very healthy, librarian would somehow manage to drop dead without a very good cause I'll be the first person suspected for her murder," he explained sourly. "I've been a prisoner of Azkaban for three weeks and I'm not planning to come back there, ever. Even if I'll have to spend the rest of my life living in the same castle as her," he added with a heavy sigh.

"Well," she started, "the family resemblance is uncanny," he could practically hear her smirking.

"Bugger off," he snorted, but it lacked heat.

"I'm just saying that I'm surprised that our dear Sebastian didn't notice his... what? The first cousin once removed?" she snickered.

"The first cousin twice removed," he corrected her with a huff. "Maximus Prince had three sons: Erastus, Ignatius and Tertius. Erastus only had one son, Lucretius and one daughter, Lucretia. Lucretius also had one son Titus, who is the father of the bane of our existence also known as Sebastian Prince," he explained.

"And Tertius?" she asked curiously.

"Three sons, one daughter," he sighed. "Thelonius, Bonaventure, Augustus and Eileen."

"And then she had you," she nodded.

"She had me, the Half-blood Prince," he snorted. "And here I'm, teaching my second cousin once removed and constantly resisting the desire to drown that twerp in a cauldron."

"Such restraint," she snickered.

"We will talk about that restrain once that berk will graduate," he muttered. "Or reaches O.W.L.s. With his abysmal potions grades I won't have to teach him for additional two years..." he muttered. "Heir of the Ancient and Noble Potion Making House of Prince my arse."

"Unless Dumbledore and the Board will make you do it," she added.

"They won't," he smirked.

"He's the Heir of the Ancient and Noble Potion Making House of Prince," she said pointedly.

"And the lousiest potioner I ever saw, pull my other leg," he snorted. "I got it added to my contract."
The only way for me to take in Advanced Potions student, actually any student with a grade lower than Outstanding is if the entire class fails to get an Outstanding on their O.W.L.s. Even then I won't take anyone with a grade lesser than Exceed Expectations. I won't allow that sixth-year disaster of 81/82 to happen again. If an entire class fails, then the entire class fails, I don't care, if their parents still want them to learn Advanced Potions so badly then they should hire bloody tutors because I'm not going to waste my precious time on imbeciles."

"I hope that he doesn't pick Ancient Runes," she sighed. "Or Arithmancy. Because if he'll make a pass at me again in public, I'll put him in permanent detention for the rest of his career as a Hogwarts student."

"Promises, promises, you'll be only doing that because you like him and want to spend more time with your prospective husband," chuckled Severus. "You can't fight the true love."

"Yeah, for the Babbling family fortune," she snorted. "And it's not love, it's a teenager lusting after an older woman."

"You're only what, eleven years older than him? What're eleven years in the grand scale of things?" he asked with a smirk.

"Fuck you, Severus," she muttered.

"You fuck me, and I might consider dropping that subject," he said dryly.

"I beg to differ," she snorted. "You'll fuck me only if you drop that subject," she added with a huff.

"You do realise that your hand is still on my prick, don't you?" he asked pointedly.

"Do I?" she asked in a voice that dripped with false sweetness. "It's such a tiny sausage that I might have missed it," she added dryly.

He used his free hand to raise the covers and took a good look at his prick. Granted, he wasn't hung like a Hippogriff but his prick was at least average. He once heard Narcissa Malfoy complaining to her sister, Bellatrix, that Lucius wasn't what should be called well-endowed in that department (it explained quite a lot of things about him). He was torn from his thoughts on the length of his prick by Bathsheda's laughter.

"Men," she choked out when she finally stopped laughing. "You're so sensitive about your pricks."

"Well," he muttered. "One has to have some pride in the state of the equipment."

"It's not the state of the equipment that matters but how it's used," she snickered.

"You seemed to be pretty content about how it was used up until now," he pointed out.

"Come here and I'll show you how content I'm with your equipment," she said cheekily.

"You heard about such a thing as refractory period, didn't you?" he asked.

"I did," she snickered. "I also know that Stamina Enhancing Potions do exist and, oh look at that, I'm currently sharing a bed with a Potions Master."

"It bothers you that much?" he asked with a sigh.

"Your occupation? Of course not," she protested lightly.
"Not my occupation," he snorted. "The Heart of Hogwarts wards," he added as he looked at her. "You're forgetting how well I know you. You tend to channel some of your restlessness into horniness."

"That obvious?" she sighed.

"To me," he shrugged. "Remember that I'm on its receiving end."

"And what you're going to do about it?" she asked curiously.

"For now, I'll summon a vial of Stamina Enhancing Potion and proceed to bugger your brains out," he said slyly. "Tomorrow, once we are rested, I'll help you find a solution to our problem."

"Our problem?" she asked pointedly.

"Do I or do I not live here?" he asked as he reached for his wand to summon the potion. "I was a Hogwarts student once, I teach here now. I care about this place, I care for its students, even though quite happily I would drown a substantial number of them in a cauldron. Hogwarts safety matters to me. I won't stand there and do nothing."

"And that's why I respect you," she smiled at him gently. "You're a good person at heart, Severus Snape."

"No, I'm not," he protested. "I'm irascible, I'm bitter, I'm spiteful, I'm vindictive," he counted out.

"Aware of your shortcomings," she said simply.

"I have a tendency to hurt people I care about," he continued. "I have a tendency to hurt people in general," he sighed.

"Not me," she shrugged.

"How can you say that after..." he sputtered.

"Remember that I had you at a wand-point," she said grimly. "I had the tip of my wand pressed against your throat and a Killing Curse on the tip of my tongue. And what did you do?" she asked pointedly. "You didn't beg for your life. You didn't even try to defend yourself."

"I told you that you've been spared," he sighed.

"You told me that I was being lied to," she said firmly. "You were the first person in that bloody castle who told me the truth. You didn't have to, you didn't need to. I made my feelings towards you quite clear during that staff meeting. The very first moment I saw you again, in that room, I hated you with every fibre of my being. I wanted you dead, I wanted to kill you, I was ready to kill you. And what did you do?"

"What I did in the first place to deserve it," he said grimly.

"That wasn't your fault," she sighed. "It was Smith's fault," she spat. "But you?" she breathed out. "You were kind to me when you didn't have to. You could have hidden behind the obvious excuse, but you didn't. For as long as you could you were restraining yourself, for my benefit. You turned the experience that could have destroyed me..." she paused. "Because it would have destroyed me," she sighed. "You turned something potentially horrible into something good. Selflessly."

"Selfishly," he protested. "I didn't promise you or anyone that what I did will never happen again. I
promised myself. I stayed true to that promise even though I was potentially risking my life for keeping it. I couldn't change who I became, it was too late for that. But I could change who I wasn't going to be, and that was not ever being that man again."

"The man who sheltered me," she said softly. "Your motivation doesn't change your actions. When it mattered the most you protected me, you were gentle with me, you were considerate with me, you were patient with me. I had to respect that even when I hated you with every fibre of my being and with passing time, I learned to respect you. I started liking you. I forgave you."

"Please don't..." he protested.

"I forgave you and I'll keep reminding you that you're a good person. I'll keep saying that until one day you'll finally believe it," she said earnestly.

"Well, there goes my erection," he muttered.

"I don't need your erection," she snorted softly. "Well, I do, I'm still restless which means still horny, but I can manage. What I really want however is to be held right now and you're not the most tactile person I know..."

"... and having sex is the only way to get me to hold you," he finished. "You could have told me that you want to cuddle."

"Would you cuddle?" she asked cheekily.

"With dread," he admitted. "As you said, I'm not the most tactile person. I don't really understand the mechanism or the logistics of what to do with your limbs in which positions. Sex is pretty simple."

"It's pretty simple too," she smiled gently. "All you have to do is pick a position."

"Any preferences?" he asked, feeling slightly nervous.

"Since it's your first, we will go with yours," she smiled at him again.

"You know that I do not really have preferences," he sighed.

"Well, on your back or on your side?" she asked.

"Won't I end with my mouth full of your hair if it's on the side?" he asked.

"Let me guess, you spent too much time listening to Malfoy complaining about his sex life?" she chuckled.

"He whines a lot," he shrugged. "And I have to stay on friendly terms with them," he added. "Apparently not all is going well in the Malfoys' bedroom. He's been thinking about trying for another baby, preferably a girl to fulfil the societal expectations of helping other families extend their own lines in the future."

"And Narcissa isn't cooperating?" she asked curiously.

"Well, she fulfilled expectations lied upon her," he shrugged. "I suspect that she's brewing her own contraceptive potions and quite diligently on that."

"Here is the thing about hair," she changed the subject as she sat up, pulling her long, curly, dark hair over her left shoulder, twisting them around themselves before she lied down again and turned
on her left side before, she added, "one can move them pretty easily."

"Thank you for your consideration," he said as he shifted closer.

He fumbled for few minutes with what to do with his left arm, since it was obvious what he should do with his right arm. Finally, he placed it under the pillow and snuggled closer to her, pressing himself against her body, from shoulder to ankles. It was a tight fit, but it seemed to please her. Just like it pleased him, his prick wasn't erect, but he did feel a twinge of arousal from time to time – Stamina Enhancing Potion could help with that but in order to get that he would have to untangle himself from holding her and he was quite content with where he was.

Their position allowed him to run his free hand all over her body, stroke her breasts, pinch her nipples, rake his fingernails over her stomach (an erogenous zone that always made her gasp). In no time he had his right hand between her legs tortuously slowly stroking her into completion.

He believed what she said about the Heart of Hogwarts wards, but he still needed a confirmation from Dumbledore about the state of wards at Hogwarts and he enquired the older man about them. He was quite frankly told that they were still in the best shape. That answer didn't please him, but he swallowed it and placated Dumbledore with an excuse that he was only worried about them because not all of the Dark Lord's supporters were captured after the war. And while he didn't hear anything about a possible attack, it didn't hurt to know that they were prepared in case it ever happened.

After that their actual work on the wards had started. They knew that it was going to be a long and tedious process, one that needed to be kept secret from everyone, especially Dumbledore. Granted Dumbledore could help but the way he easily dismissed Severus's worries about the state of the wards didn't sit well either with Severus or Bathsheda. Alerting anyone else would eventually lead to alerting Dumbledore so, in the end, they decided that it had to be just the two of them doing all the work.

And the amount of it was overwhelming. The founders' wards were trickling through the walls, but none of the outer wards trickled back to the Heart. There was no telling how long the founders' wards would be able to sustain the others and when the reserve of the power would eventually end. They needed to carefully reroute the outer wards back into the Heart to keep sustaining it. It had to be done painstakingly slowly and very carefully to not alert Dumbledore that someone was tampering with the wards. He didn't pay attention to an occasional pull or prod or distinct changes like unlocking a room that was supposed to be locked. But he would realise that something was wrong if suddenly a majority of the power of the wards was shifted and directed elsewhere. And there was no telling what he would do with them if he found them tampering with wards.

The actual process of rerouting the wards one by one through the walls of the sealed wing took ages. It was also exhausting, especially for Bathsheda who was doing all the heavy lifting. Oh, she taught Severus how to do it, what to do to push or prod the magic within into doing what he wanted, like going through a bloody wall but while he learned how to do it and he did it quite well he was nowhere near as good as Bathsheda.

Granted not all wards were supposed to be pulled back directly into the Heart. If they had to do it, they would have to quit their day jobs and do nothing but rerouting the wards and even then it would have taken ages. No, Bathsheda managed to distinguish the strongest wards that needed to be pulled back into the Heart. Severus, on the other hand, managed to find a way to manipulate some other, weaker wards into connecting with the stronger wards. It was a tedious and painful process that required blood magic but finally, on the Halloween night of 1990, all wards in one way or another were connected into the Heart of Hogwarts Wards again.
Once it was done, he and Batsheda found themselves sitting cross-legged on the floor marked with Slytherin's and Ravenclaw's symbols in front of the Heart, with their dominant hands pressed into the Heart while they twinned the fingers of their other hands together.

It was an exhilarating experience. He could sit there forever, watching in his mind, behind closed eyelids the sheer amount of raw power, twisting and turning before him, pulling him within, to play, to move with it, to follow it. So he went with it and without moving he found himself running through the corridors, going through the doors and walls. He followed various miscreants, found himself passing Filch with Mrs Norris, snorted at the sight of Aurora Sinistra lip-locked with Quentin Hoops, their current DADA teacher (and a bloody idiot).

He also found himself following Minerva in her Animagus form, prowling through the corridors in search for either miscreants or mice or both. Upon seeing her he couldn't resist pushing his own magic into the wall making the suit of armour that stood by it, first creek slightly and a moment later fall over startling Minerva enough to transform into her human form.

But he didn't linger there, as amusing as it was, he was already travelling with the magic down to the Slytherin common room taking notice of several quite handsy couples that come morning should receive a very stern lecture about the importance of contraceptive charms and potions.

At some point he found himself back into his quarters, in his empty bedroom, walls vibrating with familiar power, not raw like the wards but familiar, chilly like a breeze.

Batsheda, he realised. She was there with him in his room even though they were sitting together by the Heart, yards away from his bedroom while they could be there, fucking like a pair of horny rabbits. As soon as that thought passed through his mind, he found himself fully corporeal standing in front of equally corporeal and equally bewildered Batsheda.

"Did we just apparate inside Hogwarts?" they asked each other in unison.

"Let's try it again," they said together.

They did, it didn't work. Apparently, it wasn't their own magic but the power of the Heart of Hogwarts wards that allowed them to physically move away from it into Severus's bedroom. Content with that result, slightly disappointing, but realistically expected they moved to what caused them to apparate in the first place. Which was fucking each other silly.

It was such a great and satisfying night that even the next morning he was still smirking. It gained him a few disturbed and worried glances from several of his colleagues. It also made an entire second year class of Slytherin/Gryffindor mix which he had as a first thing that morning stay put in their places and for the first time in, well forever, keep quiet for the entire duration of the double lesson. It never happened again.

Obviously, they tried using the Heart's power to apparate again. They were very careful about it and Severus personally suffered through a very long and painful game of chess with Dumbledore (because it took the old goat ages to move every single bloody piece) while Batsheda was trying apparate from the Heart all over the castle. Dumbledore didn't notice a thing and if he did, he never breathed a word to Severus, and probably anyone else too.

After that, they sealed the wing again and life went on. It was an awesome power but since it worked only one way and only within the castle's walls there was very little use for it. Additionally, the distance they had to cover to get to the Heart was just as big as simply going on foot to where they were needed.
They tried it again last spring when Potter went missing with Weasley and Lockhart but for some reason, the Heart couldn't push either of them through to where Potter was. The blood ritual, for which Severus was prepared just in case something went wrong didn't help either. The ritual was supposed to locate the magic within the blood of the one who was its intended target and show a clear way to them but for some reason, the tracker couldn't get past the dead-end of the furthest dungeon below the Heart.

Later he and Bathsheda decided that Salazar Slytherin had to place his own wards that were disconnected from the others in order to protect the Chamber of Secrets from intruders. They couldn't check it out because it was locked again, and Dumbledore wasn't very forthcoming about revealing its location. Not even a suggestion that half of the total worth of the price they could fetch for selling harvested parts of the basilisk – while the other half would go to Potter as the actual slayer – would be enough for Hogwarts to become independent from the whims of Ministry of Magic for at least several decades convinced the man to reveal the location of the entrance.

It was the first time Severus regretted being condescending with the boy. Potter wasn't Granger, who realised that Slytherin Monster was the actual basilisk, but apparently was smart enough to figure out himself where the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets was located without Granger leading him by the hand. That much Severus managed to get out of Dumbledore.

Even if Dumbledore didn't tell him that, Severus could figure out that much himself. It was a simple process of elimination of who certainly could not find it. Lockhart couldn't do it, the man wouldn't get a clue during clue mating season in a field of horny clues while smeared in clue musk and doing clue mating dance.

Weasley on a good day couldn't find his table manners and on a bad day even enough sense to recognise a bad idea when it bit him in the arse. Like flying his father's car all the way from London to Hogwarts for example. That it was his idea and not Potter's as he initial thought, Severus learned from using Legilimency on both of those idiots. It surprised him, but at the time he was too furious with both of them, to address it and well, Potter, the dunderhead, did get into that car with Weasley.

Potter, on the other hand, recognised that something was happening shortly before they stumbled into Filch's cat and the sign that claimed that the Chamber of Secrets was opened again. Severus tried to use Legilimency again, but he couldn't go as far as he wanted since they were in public and the only thing, he got was that Potter was lying through gritted teeth. If they were alone back then, even for a moment… things might have turned out quite differently.

But that was in the past and in the present Potter was still missing and Severus wasn't going to wait until morning to find him. He knew that with each passing hour chances for Potter's survival was getting slimmer.

There were many things Severus could call Sirius Black like cruel, condescending, rash, hot-headed but stupid wasn't one of them. Black was smart, not book smart like Lupin was or emotionally smart like Lily was (she was overall smart, but she was the most emphatic person Severus ever met). Black was socially smart in the same way Severus was. He knew what to say and to who he should say it, he could charm his way out of the tightest spots and get away with nothing more than a slap on his wrists. He knew with whom he should present what front. That was how he manipulated Potter Senior into becoming friends with him in the first place.

And Potter, the idiot, bought it. The image of the estranged son of one of the oldest and most set in their pure-blood supremacy ways families. Severus knew better. Potter Senior often accused him, Severus, of being consumed by his knowledge of the Dark Arts and the desire to learn more, but he
couldn't see that his supposed best friend knew about the Dark Arts just as much if not more than Severus. He just hid it better.

For many years Severus had suspicions that Black wasn't as uneducated in the matter of the Dark Arts as he presented himself to be. He was hiding it quite masterfully, giving wrong answers when asked about something, deliberately failing an occasional test or not getting full marks for them. But it wasn't until he and Black found themselves in Defence Against the Dark Arts Third Class Mastery program when Severus's suspicions became a certainty. Away from the watchful eye of James Potter in the program Sirius Black thrived, he always got the highest marks, always knew an answer to all the questions he was asked and even showed understanding of what he wasn't asked. Black didn't get his knowledge overnight or even during the summer between their fifth and sixth year. No, that amount of knowledge had to be in Black's head long before he got into the program.

It annoyed the ever-loving fuck out of Severus, that and the fact that the bastard wasn't expelled for trying to kill him. Curiously enough after Potter took Lupin and Pettigrew in the Marauder Divorce all of Black's attacks on Severus had stopped. Five years of torment and the very moment Black was away from Potter nothing, not even a single condescending comment for the entire two months. And even after that the only thing that left Black's mouth was, 'Snape you bloody pillock' when Severus managed to accidentally push him down the stairs (only the last five and truly by accident since he had his head turned around to look at Lily and he didn't calculate that Black who was walking several people ahead of him would suddenly stop walking and just stand there).

Since then until those bastards got back together after Easter nothing. It was as if Severus Snape ceased to exist for Sirius Black and even after that Black was far more restrained than Potter. Oh, he could insult Severus just as much if not more than Potter did but never during that year Black ever tried to assault him physically. Out of fear that if it would happen again, he would be expelled, perhaps?

Black didn't fear Severus, that much was evident from the things that left his mouth on occasions. But he did fear expulsion from Hogwarts and it made taunting him even funnier.

Yes, Black possessed enough charm to lure Potter away from safety and enough of knowledge in the Dark Arts to try and use Potter in a ritual that would either summon or restore the Dark Lord to his former glory. Severus from the top of his head could name a few of them. Luckily for Potter preparations for them required a substantial amount of time and Black as a fugitive couldn't have an easy access to what he needed.

What Severus needed was performing the blood ritual to find Potter again and he could do it quite easily since he had everything prepared after the last time. But he also needed Dumbledore to be otherwise occupied while he was performing it, like gone from Hogwarts occupied, or at the very least sleeping since Severus was planning to draw some of the raw power from the Heart to help him locate Potter.

So, once he was done with his dinner, he gathered his stuff and headed to the Heart of Hogwarts. Once there he placed both of his hands on the Heart and plunged his mind into the wards. He located Dumbledore easily, the old coot was still in his office, supposedly working on something.

And he waited. He waited for a very long time until Dumbledore finally retired to his private quarters below his office and after some shuffling around finally fell asleep.

It was time to act.
"Not a fan of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches then?" asked Regulus curiously.

"That's what you took from the conversation?" snorted Sirius.

"I just prefer them separately," said Harry simply. "What about Snape? That doesn't surprise you?"

"Not in the least," said Regulus simply as reached for his tea and took a sip of it.

"Why?" asked Harry quickly.

"You're forgetting that I knew them both," shrugged Regulus.

"And?" pressed Harry, he didn't forget it.

"And I had a vested interest in what was going through James Potter's head for most of the time," sighed Regulus. "Both as a student from the rivalling house and his younger brother," he added as he motioned with his cup at Sirius.

"Why?" asked Harry.

"Why don't you tell him?" asked Regulus as he looked pointedly at Sirius.

Sirius shook his head, for a moment fiddled with his fork to finally put it down and reached for his tea. He took a long sip from it and placed the cup back on the table before he finally asked, "You remember that James was raised by his grandparents, don't you?"

Harry nodded quickly.

"They raised him the same way they raised his father," continued Sirius. "They catered to his every whim and James for most of the time was easy to please. He didn't require much, he was a Quidditch buff from the earliest age and for quite a while he had no interest in things that weren't Quidditch," he paused for a moment. "As a kid, James was quite single-minded, that made him a great Quidditch player, it also helped with his studies once the Potters decided that it was time to push his interests into more academic ways. He grew out of it eventually, single-mindedness not his studies..."

"But?" asked Harry curiously. "Because I can feel that there's a but in there."

"But in pursuit of his academic interest James quite early stumbled into the Dark Arts? And that didn't sit well with the Potters because they felt that that was what got their son killed?" supplied Regulus curiously.

"It wasn't directly what got their son killed but Charlus did hang around a lot of individuals that were well versed in the Dark Arts," said Sirius sourly. "So, James's academic interest in what was considered as the Dark Arts didn't sit very well with Fleamont and Euphemia. In a way, they lost their first son to the Dark Arts, so there was no way that they would allow another to succumb to it."

"Except teaching young James that such a thing like the Dark Arts existed and explaining what they were, how they worked, how they affected the caster, or how they affected other people Fleamont and Euphemia took probably the worst approach a parent could take," sighed Regulus.

"Which was?" asked Harry curiously.
"Making the subject practically a taboo in the Potter household," muttered Sirius. "They taught young James that all Dark Arts were bad, that knowing the Dark Arts was bad, that people who know the Dark Arts will eventually give into its lure and would do a lot of bad things to innocent people..."

"That's a load of Hippogriff shit of course," Regulus interrupted him. "Knowing how to make a poison will not automatically make you a poisoner just someone who knows how to make a poison. From there you can either go and use it on someone and kill them or make an antidote to it to save someone's life. Same with Parseltongue. Sure, you can order a snake to kill someone but you can also tell the snake to not kill someone. St Patrick, the patron of Ireland was Parselmouth and he's been revered for chasing the snakes from Ireland, especially by Muggles."

"The same works for the Dark Arts," nodded Sirius. "Sure, it's a very gruesome subject, even to some adult wizards. But knowing the Dark Arts, understanding how they work can make you capable of either doing a lot of harm to other people or protecting them from other people who know the Dark Arts and want to use them against them."

"In the end, it's all about how you use what you know," said Regulus simply. "And Potter..." he grimaced.

"The Potters, you're leaving Fleamont and Euphemia out of the count," sighed Sirius. "And they heavily influenced young James and how he regarded people who possessed a certain amount of certain knowledge. Don't take it the wrong way, Harry. He was a good man, good-natured for most of the time, easy-going, funny," he sighed again.

"Also naive and depreciatory towards people who didn't share his views at the world," added Regulus.

"He grew out of it eventually," Sirius pointed out quietly.

"Did he really?" asked Regulus, his voice was dripping with sarcasm. "Or was I suffering from auditory hallucinations when I heard a very annoyed Severus Snape venting his spleen to Rabastan Lestrange about hypocritical bastards who deliberately presented themselves as uneducated in the subject of the Dark Arts in the company of one James Charlus Potter only to turn into practically an expert the very moment said James Charlus Potter wasn't in the same Defence class with him?"

"Did he really?" Sirius drawled out.

"It annoyed the ever-loving fuck out of him," answered Regulus. "You're forgetting that I was in the same Third Class Mastery program, just a year under you and Snape. And trust me, he was quite vocal when it came to judging your hypocrisy in that regard."

"It annoyed him because for the first time ever he really had to put his back into it to stay on the top of that class," snorted Sirius.

"That's not the point, you hypocritical little shit," growled Regulus.

"I know what's your point," said Sirius stiffly. "And don't call me a hypocrite because you're just as guilty of the very same thing, you humongous bell end," he snorted. "Did you suddenly develop an amnesia and forgot how we were raised? By whom we were raised? Who were our occasional childhood companions?" he asked sourly. "Do I have to remind you?"

"No," sighed Regulus and he grimaced before he took a sip of his tea.

"How does it relate?" asked Harry curiously.
"We're the Blacks, Harry," sighed Sirius. "The Black family is," he paused and grimaced, "used to be one of oldest wizarding families. Not the oldest, strictly speaking, I'm not a history buff, that's more up Reg's avenue, but while the family started recording the names of their ancestors some time in Dark Ages..."

"... there was an occasional mention of individuals who called themselves Black way before Christ was born," finished Regulus. "It's hard to gauge whatever or not they were actually related to the first Black, who wrote his own name, into the history of the British Isles but family legends liked to believe so considering that one or two of those individuals had names that fit the family."

"Or the family made their names fit those individuals," suggested Harry and when Regulus looked at him pointedly he added. "What? If it works one way, it can work the other way too, can't it?"

"Point taken," snickered Regulus. "It's hard to tell. The original Blacks and by original I mean the ones who settled down on the British Isles were a family of merchants from the Middle East of possibly Jewish or Arabian ancestry or both considering the names they favoured and how they looked like..."

"All of that is pure speculation," Sirius interjected.

"Oh, shut up, Ash-shira," snorted Regulus.

"Ash what?" asked Harry curiously.

"Ash-shira," said Regulus.

"Malikiyy," muttered Sirius.

"Kreacher what they're talking about?" asked Harry as he turned to look at Kreacher who was sitting at the far end of the table and eating his own omelette.

"Names, Master Harry, Masters are talking about names," the elf answered after he swallowed. "The names of the first Masters Black who called themselves Black and settled on the British Isles. Master Ash-shira and his son Malikiyy. Ash-shira means the leader in Arabic."

"It's a transliteration from Quran I think," said Regulus pensively. "The verse says, and mind you that my knowledge of Arabic doesn't extend much beyond Astronomy: That He is the Lord of Sirius, the Mighty Star."

"And Malikiyy?" asked Harry curiously.

"Royal," said Sirius. "Stands for Regulus and in one way or another had been frequently given in the family."

"Just like Sirius," said Regulus cheekily. "Traditionally the name Sirius was always given to the firstborn son of the heir of the main line of the family. Our Sirius, I think is the thirty-something Sirius that was given that name," he added pensively. "I don't know for sure, I would have to sit down in front of the tapestry and count them all. For certain I know that he's the fourth to be given that name within the span of nineteenth and twentieth centuries."

"Take in consideration that Regulus stands literally for 'little king' and you get a pretty rough idea what it meant to be a Black to the Blacks themselves," said Sirius sourly. "Practically royal. Quite arrogant, don't you think?" he asked as he looked at Harry.

"There's nothing wrong with being aware of your self-worth," said Regulus with a smile.
"Yes, when it's your actual worth as a human being and not a delusion fed to you by similar minded people," said Sirius with a huff. "And the Blacks as the centuries passed lost touch with reality when it came to that," he snorted.

"You've seen some of it, Harry," added Regulus. "Granted not everything but you know how this family is well-off. The complete family name stands for The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. The motto is Toujours Pur and refers to the purity of blood."

Harry nodded, he didn't have full picture, but he could easily imagine the older generations of Blacks being much like Malfoys.

"Imagine growing up with it," said Sirius sourly. "On one hand it makes you a conceited prick and on the other, it makes you very cynical about the motivations of other people when they try to befriend you."

"In short it makes you a very cynical conceited prick," snickered Regulus.

"I literally just said that, Reg," snorted Sirius. "Now imagine me at the age of twelve, from the earliest age aware that the very moment my grandfather shuffles from the mortal coil I'll be made into the Head of the Family."

"Not your father?" asked Harry curiously. "You said..." he started.

"That the inheritance, especially this house, has to be passed down the direct line, to the next male with the name of Black," said Regulus quickly. "The rules that apply to the Head of the Family, however, are a little bit stricter," he added. "First off, the Head of the Family must come from the main line, no distant cousins with a different name, a Head of the Black family must be a Black by birth. Secondly, not only he has to be a Black by birth, but he also must be the firstborn son, the only time that term doesn't have to be applied is when that firstborn son dies before producing an heir of his own."

"Preferably also a son," said Sirius grimly. "Happened our great great great grandfather Sirius Regulus Black, his firstborn son, also Sirius died at the age of eight and when Sirius himself died, his second son Phineas Nigellus was allowed to take the mantle. He later passed it onto his own son, also Sirius, who eventually passed it onto his son."

"Let me guess, also Sirius?" Harry supplied.

"No, Arcturus," Sirius said dryly.

"And your father?" asked Harry.

"Orion, not a firstborn," answered Regulus. "Had an older sister and that's why he didn't qualify for the position of the Head of the Family. He could only qualify for an interim one if Grandpa Arcturus passed away before Sirius reached adulthood. Which didn't happen because Father predeceased Grandfather and as you can see Sirius is very much alive and let's keep it that way."

"Where I was?" sighed Sirius.

"Shuffling your grandfather from the mortal coil," said Harry eagerly making Regulus snort into his tea.

"Well, it didn't happen but at the time it remained in a realm of a possibility," said Sirius sourly. "So let's go back to that twelve years old Sirius Black, extremely aware of the expectations laid upon his young shoulders from the very moment he figured out who he'll become the very moment
"Master Sirius says the sweetest things," mumbled Kreacher.

"Objection, they were his exact words," protested Sirius quickly. "I remember them because I was about six at the time and that was the first time, I heard one of the adults in the family cuss. It left an impression, Kreacher."

"What did you do?" asked Regulus curiously.

"I don't really remember," sighed Sirius. "Told Persephone Greengrass to kindly leave me in peace, I think. It was one of the balls at Grandpa Arcturus's manor in the country. It wasn't the most official thing, it was in the summer and there were plenty of kids running around, quite a lot of them were girls."

"Ah, the manhunt for a prospective husband," said Regulus with a smirk. "Got to love them."

"Well, I didn't," snorted Sirius. "At one point he took me aside and told me very plainly what was expected of me. He told me that he understood that I was young and, at the moment, not very interested in family matters and extending said family. But he was also very firm that I should start to consider them in my teenage years and be very careful about whom I would pick for a prospective wife because he wasn't going to allow another mess like that to take place."

"What mess?" asked Harry curiously.

"Reference to our parents' marriage," sighed Regulus. "It was arranged. Most of the pure-blood marriages are, some, as long as, both of them are pure-bloods happen out of love. That's the way things are," he grimaced. "Arcturus, not giving to his father's pressure to marry young as he did..."

"He means Hogwarts student young," Sirius interjected. "His father was fourteen when he was born. His uncle, Cygnus, was thirteen when his oldest son, Pollux was born and Pollux, in turn, was also thirteen when our mother was born as was his youngest son, Cygnus when Bellatrix was born."

"That's..." Harry mumbled.

"Stupid and irresponsible considering that at that age children are supposed to be children?" asked Regulus pointedly. "Exactly Grandpa Arcturus's point. It didn't sit well with him, neither it sit well that all of them were arranged marriages to equally young children. So, he himself married Grandma Melania out of love and had his daughter Lucretia when he was twenty-three and later our father at the age of twenty-eight. On the other side of the family, the only one who tried to add children to the family at the proper adult age was Pollux when he and his wife had their youngest son Cygnus at the age of twenty-six."

"Aunt Lucretia similar to her parents married as an adult and out of love, they didn't have children of their own but it didn't matter. What mattered was that both Arcturus and Pollux had sons. Not firstborn sons but sons nevertheless. Pollux even had two of them and one of them was a proper responsible young pure-blood and knocked up his young fiancée Druella at the tender age of thirteen since he came to the conclusion that neither his older brother nor his distant cousin who was the heir of the main line will ever procreate."

"Why?" asked Harry curiously.

"Because they shared similar views at their preferred partners," snorted Sirius.
Harry stared at him pointedly, expecting a clarification.

"He's trying to say that they were both homosexuals, Harry," said Regulus simply. "Both our father and our uncle Alphard were gay."

"But your father married your mother and had you two," protested Harry.

"As I said, pure-bloods, I'll get to that," nodded Regulus. "The birth of Cygnus's youngest daughter, Narcissa was quite difficult on Druella, in fact, it was so devastating that fearing that she wasn't going to make it the healers removed her womb. It was the end of the year 1955 and to the family, it became painfully obvious that they won't be getting any male heirs for the youngest generation."

"Hence the turn to the other two viable males who could marry and procreate," said Sirius sourly. "Arcturus and Pollux got together and plotted. Gay or not their sons had a duty to the family which was producing a next male heir. Additionally, Pollux had an unmarried daughter who was on her merry way into old maidenhood."

"So our father received an ultimatum, as did Uncle Alphard. They could be either happily gay and disowned by the family or one or, both of them, could man up, marry and procreate like a proper Black male should," added Regulus grimly. "Seeing that I wasn't born at the time I don't know how that conversation actually went, but in the end, it was decided that Arcturus's son Orion would marry Pollux's daughter Walburga, while Alphard..."

"… will remain happily gay and unattached," finished Sirius. "It didn't sit well with our Father but he was between a rock and a very hard place, so he conceded. He dutifully married our mother in January of 1959 and kept having sex until she wound up pregnant with me. When I turned out to be a quite sickly child they tried again until they got him," he pointed at Regulus. "After that, they decided that two sons were enough and..." he paused.

"… they didn't have sex since," Harry finished.

"You can say that," grimaced Sirius. "Certainly not with each other because if they did, we would have a younger brother or sister running around," he said grimly.

"And we don't," snorted Regulus. "It's just the two of us."

"So let's go back to me at the age of twelve," sighed Sirius. "Extremely aware of the expectations laid upon my shoulders and very cynical about the attention of other people and what they mean."

"Why twelve though?" asked Harry curiously.

"You know that Hogwarts sends admittance letters to all students who turn eleven?" asked Regulus.

Harry nodded.

"For some time, I think three or four centuries since it was founded they went with admitting students by the year they were born but it was highly inconvenient since quite a lot of students were conceived during the winter months. You know winter, there was nothing really to do except eat, sleep and procreate if the fancy struck someone," said Regulus.

"That means that quite a lot of Hogwarts students were born between May and December," said Sirius. "And seeing that quite a substantial number of them were born between early September and December technically they had quite a lot of students who were admitted to Hogwarts at the age of ten."
"Which wasn't very good or very easy on Hogwarts staff since they had to devote last two weeks of the summer holidays to going around and recording the number of students who were about to enter Hogwarts even though they wouldn't turn eleven by the time the school year would start," continued Regulus. "You see the Book of Admittance gives the names of students after they turn eleven..."

"So at some point, it was decided that Hogwarts would simply accept students who already turned eleven before the school year officially would start," added Sirius.

"So the count goes from 1st September to 30th August," nodded Harry in understanding. "And you were born..."


"And you?" asked Harry curiously.

"That's debatable," chuckled Sirius.


"Well, that's the date on his birth certificate," said Sirius dryly.

"Is it wrong?" asked Harry.

"No," snorted Regulus.

"Technically, yes," smirked Sirius. "He was born here, in this house, just like me," he added. "In our parents' bedroom. The healer who was helping with the birth put on the birth certificate the date 1st August because the grandfather's clock in our parents' bedroom showed two minutes after midnight the very moment little Reggie opened his tiny mouth and screamed."

"Allegations," muttered Regulus.

"Oh, shut up," chuckled Sirius. "What the healer didn't know was that particular clock never showed time properly, it was always run three minutes ahead of the correct time and Reggie was technically born on 11:59 PM on 31st July."

"Literally as the seventh month dies," whispered Harry hopefully.

"Also if you want to be technical about it..." started Sirius.

"I don't," snorted Regulus.

"... our parents thrice defied the Dark Lord by never officially joining his Death Eaters," finished Sirius. "Claimed that they were too old for that..."

"You're forgetting that while they never officially joined they did support his cause," muttered Regulus.

"One could also make an argument that your knowledge of the existence of his Horcruxes is the power he knows not," supplied Sirius eagerly.

"Also as long as you survive he eventually cannot," said Harry eagerly. "Neither you can officially live as long as he does. Are you sure that the prophecy, actually refers to me?"
Regulus shook his head, snorted and said in a falsely sweet voice as he rolled up his left sleeve, showing off the shadow of the Dark Mark, "Oh, my sweet naive Gryffindors. You're forgetting the part of being marked as his equal. This isn't a mark of equality, it's a mark of servitude."

"Debatable," pointed out Sirius.

"Not really," snorted Regulus as he rolled down his sleeve. "You're also forgetting the 'approaches' part of the prophecy. As in not there yet. As in, it didn't happen yet. As in, it will happen as the seventh month dies in the future and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal. Not, the Dark Lord did mark him as his equal," he added sourly. "But it's a nice and thought out theory, even if not very accurate, I'll give you that. Ten points to Gryffindor, gentlemen."

"Worth a try," sighed Harry.

"I know," grimaced Regulus. "Are you sure the sorting hat, put you in Gryffindor, Harry? That attempt to shuffle responsibility isn't very Gryffindor."

"Well, it did want to put me in Slytherin," admitted Harry sheepishly. "Called me very difficult. Mentioned plenty of courage. Something about not bad mind and a talent. A thirst to prove myself. Told me that Slytherin could help me achieve great things."

"Most curious," sighed Regulus. "Why didn't you end there?"

"Because he obviously ended in Gryffindor," answered Sirius. "What I find more interesting is that damned hat told me practically the same thing."

"Really?" asked Harry curiously.

"Almost word for bloody word," nodded Sirius.

"Well, I didn't want to be in Slytherin," sighed Harry. "Ran into Malfoy several times before the sorting. I really didn't want to spend the next seven years sharing a dorm with him."

"You might not have too," said Regulus pensively.

"How?" asked Harry curiously.

"Remember that Hogwarts as a castle was built in Middle Ages when the majority of people lived in one-bedroom houses, entire families of them. Hogwarts dormitories were built the same way, granted they separated students by year, but the basic idea was the same, all children from the same year, separated obviously by their sex were supposed to live in the same room. It was supposed to promote friendship or something," answered Regulus.

"All founders, with the exception of Salazar Slytherin, subscribed to that," said Sirius. "Slytherin, on the other hand, believed that after spending quite a substantial amount of time sharing the living space with the other people his students deserved some luxury of privacy."

"Hence separate dormitories, granted the bathroom or bathrooms depending on the number of students per year were communal. But all of the bedrooms are single, tiny as fuck, big enough to fit in a bed, a tiny desk with a chair, a wardrobe and some space for the trunk if someone doesn't store its contents away," added Regulus.

"They don't put it down in advertising brochures," snorted Harry.

"No, they don't," chuckled Regulus.
"That was my only problem with being sorted into Gryffindor," admitted Sirius sheepishly.

"Who snore?" snickered Regulus.

"Pettigrew," snorted Sirius. "Remus sometimes did too, especially around the full moon. But snoring wasn't my problem. It was the other thing."

"What thing?" asked Harry curiously.

"Not what thing, it was wanking," chuckled Regulus. "Polishing the broomstick, taking care of the equipment, tickling the pickle, playing pocket pool, fighting the purple-helmed warrior..."

"All right, that's enough," groaned Sirius.

"...spanking the rooster, tooting your horn, buffing the banana, taming one-eyed snake," continued Regulus unashamedly.

"Reg!" growled Sirius. "Innocent ears," he added pointedly.

"Not so innocent," snorted Harry. "You're forgetting that I shared a dormitory with other four boys and two of them last year discovered that taming the dragon or playing the bagpipe is a great method to relieve the stress, of being pursued by Slytherin Monster. So, I understand how annoying it can be."

"What about you?" asked Regulus dryly.

"What about me?" asked Harry quickly.

"Do you... ouch," started Regulus and he yelped when Sirius waved his wand at him. "Merlin," he coughed up, "Sirius, you bloody prude."

"I'm not a prude," snorted Sirius. "I just believe in preserving children's innocence for as long as possible."

"You do realise that prior to Hogwarts Harry was in Muggle primary school and basic information about reproduction is covered by the school's curriculum?" asked Regulus pointedly. "I only want to spare him and consequently us some embarrassment."

"Of what?" asked Harry curiously.

"Night-time pollutions," said Regulus and he ducked a jet of light heading in his direction. "Sheet soiling," he added and he ducked another.

"I always wondered if it's possible to die from second-hand embarrassment and now I find it disturbingly possible," Sirius muttered sourly.

"At least he's just talking and not walking around naked," added Harry simply.

Sirius stared at him in shock.

"Seamus has, at least had for a while, a penchant for walking around the dormitory naked," he clarified.

"Judging by the way you're avoiding an explanation I presume that the answer to my question is, no," said Regulus. "Don't worry, it will come at the right time."
"Gee, thanks," snorted Harry and he glared at him before he added, "Dad."

Sirius snorted into his cup of tea and Regulus howled with laughter.

"Mum," Harry added sweetly as he looked at Sirius, making him choke on his tea and making Regulus laugh even harder.

He waited until they both stopped coughing and laughing before he added, "Now stop trying to distract me from the actual topic. I believe that we were at you," he pointed at Sirius, "being nearly twelve years old conceited cynical prick."

"Yeah," snickered Regulus.

"Well, for some reason I don't really remember right now..." started Sirius.


"I was dropped off at the platform at ten o'clock. It might have been a combination of having that appointment and our parents desire to see how I would fare on my own," he shrugged. "Anyways, I was sitting in a compartment minding my own business when the door opened, and a black-haired bespectacled kid walked inside. Immediately he started talking a mile a minute, something about chances of Puddlemere United winning the league cup, I'm not sure. In between, he managed to introduce himself as James, asked about my own name. Got an answer that it was Sirius, changed the subject to some amazing Zonko's product..."

"Basically treated you like any other kid?" asked Regulus.

"It was both unnerving and refreshing," sighed Sirius. "Up until that point, any other kid my age or about my age before he or she talked with me knew exactly who I was and who I eventually was going to be. They had their own expectations and their own designs," he shrugged. "James, not so much, to him I was immediately Sirius Black, his year-mate and prospective friend, not Sirius, the son and heir, future Head of the Black family. It was a quite heady feeling, the freedom of basically being myself, unrestrained by social expectations."

"Heady enough to land you in Gryffindor," nodded Regulus.

"And how Snape fits into that?" asked Harry curiously.

"At some point before the train started moving your Mum joined us," said Sirius pensively. "She wasn't in the best of moods. Came in crying, seemed really upset, not upset enough to accept comfort from total strangers so she told us to kindly bugger off and mind our own business. So, we did, I think she intimidated your dad a little and I..." he shrugged. "Well, the lady said no, so I wasn't going to press her into spilling her heart out."

"How noble of you," snorted Regulus.

"You're going to provide a running commentary to what I'm saying, don't you?" asked Sirius sceptically and Regulus nodded eagerly. "Anyway, once the train was moving this other kid came in. Small, scrawny, ugly as a night, already dressed in school robes even though the train barely started moving like ten, fifteen minutes earlier. And it wasn't the best set of robes. I was never interested in fashion, but I could pick up second-hand robes pretty easily. He ignored us completely, we ignored him back and he started talking to your Mum, arguing even, probably about your Aunt Petunia. I'm not sure."

"And?" Harry pressed.
"At some point, the bugger told her that she'd better be in Slytherin," sighed Sirius. "Which ticked your Dad off..."


"Oh, stop whining," snorted Sirius. "We already agreed that while wonderful and caring parents Fleamont and Euphemia were as biased as our own, just in a different direction. Now stop interrupting me."

Regulus mimed shutting and zipping his mouth.

"You see, neither your Dad nor Snape had much of a brain to mouth filter," continued Sirius.

Regulus snorted and coughed up, "Aren't you as guilty of that?"

"Not right back then," Sirius shook his head. "That came later on. You remember Grandpa Arcturus's lessons. The only gracious way to accept an insult is to ignore it; if you can't ignore it, top it; if you can't top it, laugh at it; if you can't laugh at it, it's probably deserved."

"Snape was raised similarly. I think it was his grandfather who taught him that a slander is like a hornet and if you can't kill it dead the first time, you better should not strike at it," added Regulus.

"Don't tell me that you've been sharing stories..." started Sirius.

"... while braiding each other's hair between making friendship bracelets?" supplied Regulus. "We weren't, don't worry," he snorted. "But I did like his sense of humour, it appealed to me."

"Snape has a sense of humour?" asked Harry sceptically. "He wouldn't know a joke even if it bit him in the arse," he paused and quickly added, "especially if it bit him in the arse."

"Wizards call it goblin's sense of humour," said Sirius sourly. "It's rather cruel, often insulting and for most of the time, you can't gauge whatever or not you're simply being insulted or made fun of. It generally amounts to the same thing."

"That's why it appeals to me," said Regulus simply. "It requires a certain degree of intelligence to distinguish it from an actual insult. And Snape," he shrugged. "Well, as it has been once said, you can get a man out of Cokeworth but you can't get Cokeworth out of a man. Sure thing, Slytherin did polish him to behave properly but everybody knew what pushing the right combination of buttons could bring up. Sirius, and also, James to a lesser degree, worked it into some state of the art. I don't know which one of them Snape hated more."

"Both equally," snorted Sirius. "For different reasons of course."

"Why?" asked Harry.

"I don't know about James, I think that it was a combination of being a Slytherin, his interest in the Dark Arts, as well as hanging around prospective Death Eaters and your Mum whom your Dad might have begun to be smitten with," said Regulus pensively. "As for Sirius, well, let him tell you."

"I didn't care, not at first," muttered Sirius. "It didn't bother me what some future Slytherin twerp was saying," he sighed. "What bothered me was the expectations laid upon me as the future Head of the Black family and what I was beginning to realise was the prospective loss of the first friend I ever made by myself," he sighed. "From the way we talked it became painfully clear to me that if I
was sorted into Slytherin like the rest of the family. James would never speak to me again and I...
he paused. "I didn't want that. I made a friend, on my own, as me just a regular student Sirius
Black, not who I was going to be," he grimaced.

"You know that if he was actually planning to be your friend, he shouldn't be bothered by whatever
colours you were going to wear?" Regulus pointed out.

"Did you have many friends from other houses than Slytherin?" snorted Sirius.

"Plenty," shrugged Regulus. "Ravenclaws mostly. Not the best of friends but good enough for me
to come up to them and to start talking with them about stupid things."

"Well, I didn't," muttered Sirius.

"So you got yourself sorted into Gryffindor," nodded Regulus.

"I didn't get myself sorted into Gryffindor," snorted Sirius. "I wasn't planning on getting myself
sorted into Gryffindor. I just thought that I didn't really want to be in Slytherin. Ravenclaw
wouldn't have been so bad and Hufflepuff...."

Regulus snorted and rolled his eyes, "I'll give you Ravenclaw, you were a curious little shit but
Hufflepuff? Seriously?"

"What's wrong with being a Hufflepuff?" asked Harry curiously.

"There's nothing wrong with being in Hufflepuff," sighed Regulus. "But once you take into the
consideration that Slytherin takes the cunning and ambitious, Ravenclaw the studious and eager to
learn, Gryffindor the brave and loyal you're left with what?" he looked at Harry pointedly.

"A house full of people who don't fit into the other houses?" supplied Harry. "Supposedly just and
loyal."

"Exactly," nodded Regulus. "There's nothing really wrong with that but..." he grimaced.
"Hufflepuffs, at least those from my generation were always easily swayed, eager to please, felt the
bravest together... Majority of them weren't very studious or too ambitious. They just were," he
shrugged. "I can imagine Sirius in Ravenclaw without a problem but in Hufflepuff..." he shook his
head.

"So I simply sat there under the hat and waited for the outcome," said Sirius simply. "It was..." he
grimaced.

"Scandalous," finished Regulus and shook his head. "So bad that as soon as our parents learned
about the outcome of the sorting they stormed to Hogwarts and demanded resorting. Dumbledore
told them kindly to bugger off. So, when it was my turn and the hat told me that I could do well in
Ravenclaw I decided to not tempt the fates and got myself landed in Slytherin."

"What about Snape?" supplied Harry. "What led you into hating each other?"

"I can answer that," said Regulus quickly before Sirius could answer.

"Better not," muttered Sirius. "At first I wasn't planning to be bothered by him. He wanted to be in
Slytherin, fine, his choice and I had enough of my plate to pay too much attention to him. But
James," he grimaced, "was really bothered by him and what bothered James bothered me by
proxy."
"Really mature," snorted Regulus.

"So I started watching him and the more I watched him the more he bothered me on his own," sighed Sirius. "It was like watching a distorted image of myself. Snape was socially smart, granted at times when we pushed him just hard enough Slytherin clout came off and the real Snape barred his teeth… But he had this way of knowing what to say and to who he should say it. It was a learned thing and he was learning fast. On top of that he really was fascinated by the Dark Arts and it wasn't just a fascination regarding knowledge alone. He was practising it and that didn't sit very well with me. I knew the Dark Arts and I knew how easy it was to be consumed by it. So, I started to hate him all by myself. When you top it with that tendency to always want to have the last word..."

"Like yourself," muttered Regulus. "James had no or very little brain to mouth filter and on his own, he could set off Snape just fine. But Sirius?" he shook his head. "Their verbal barbs were legendary and quite soon they turned physical. They were both evenly matched and equally agile duellers. At some point, it became hard to keep track of who started what fight."

Sirius nodded slowly.

"The problem is if they both or at least one of them had a normal Head of the House..." started Regulus.

"Hey!" Harry and Sirius protested in unison. "What's wrong with McGonagall?" objected Harry.

"There's nothing wrong with McGonagall," sighed Regulus. "Would you two, Gryffindorks, allow me to finish what I was saying?" he asked pointedly looking from Harry to Sirius.

Harry crossed his arms over his chest and Sirius did the same.

"As I was saying before you decided to interrupt me," continued Regulus. "If either or both of them had a normal Head of the House who would have taken interest in an inter-house conflict that escalated into physical violence and at that point sat all three of those fuckers down and didn't let them leave until they aired their grievances and resolved the conflict..." he shook his head.

"Flitwick and Sprout were good with that, Sprout more than Flitwick," he shook his head again. "But Slughorn and McGonagall allowed the conflict to continue hoping that it will resolve itself on its own. I really don't know what they were thinking. Either way, they're indirectly responsible for what happened."

"And what happened?" asked Harry timidly as he uncrossed his arms, not sure if he really wanted to know what happened.

"Attempted murder," said Sirius grimly.

"Snape tried to kill you?" asked Harry in shock.


"Did you attack him?" whispered Harry.

"Not even that," sighed Sirius heavily. "I sent him after a werewolf," he paused and added with a sigh, "on a full moon night."

"Why?" Harry asked quickly. "What you were thinking?"

Sirius grimaced and uncrossed his arms, reached for his cup, eyeing the contents for a moment
before taking a sip and finally answering grimly, "That's the worst part, I wasn't thinking. At all," he sighed heavily. "All that I remember is that he was really ticking me off that day, more than usual. It left my mouth before I could stop myself. Didn't regret that for a moment though. At least not until he fucked off and finally rational thought returned to me. Even then I wasn't thinking about him. Just what it would mean to our werewolf friend and to me..." he shook his head. "I'm not proud of that."

"That's an understatement," snorted Regulus. "Why didn't you try to stop him?"

"Try and stop him?" snorted Sirius. "After I told him to go there?" he shook his head. "Ever tried to convince him to not do what he wanted to do?"

"I did," nodded Regulus.

"Were you successful?" asked Sirius pointedly.

"I was," Regulus nodded again. "But then again I had a debt of gratitude and I collected some of it on that occasion," he added grimly. "But he didn't die so someone actually stopped him from becoming werewolf's supper," he said pointedly.


"So that was what the life debt was for," mumbled Harry.

"Life debt?" asked Regulus curiously. "What life debt? Sirius?" he looked expectantly at Sirius.

"Life debt?" mumbled Sirius. "Who told you about a life debt?"

"Dumbledore," answered Harry.

"Curious," muttered Regulus.

"Most curious," snorted Sirius and he shook his head. "Why Dumbledore told you about the life debt?" he asked curiously.

"He was explaining why and how Snape tried to save my life when Quirrell tried to kill me that year," answered Harry. "Said that Snape owed my Dad a life debt and that he, Snape, considered it paid by saving my life."

"What an utter lot of Hippogriff shit," snorted Sirius.

"Why?" asked Harry curiously.

"You see, Harry," said Sirius pensively. "Life debts is a subject you don't learn during normal schooling. They're mentioned, of course, I think at some point in a fourth-year curriculum of the Defence Against the Dark Arts, but it's only just a mention about their existence and a reminder to honour them."

"They're fully explained at the Third-Class Mastery level in Defence Against the Dark Arts," added Regulus. "Everything. How they work. What terms must be met for a life debt to be considered a life debt. One of the most important principles of a life debt to be considered a life debt is that the collector of the debt or more precisely a saviour has to save debtor's life at no expense to his or her own life."
"Meaning that at no point during the saving of the debtor's life the collector cannot be in danger himself," continued Sirius. "And that wasn't the case here. James was in as much if not more danger than Snape was," he added grimly and shook his head. "And trust me, Snape knows that, there's no life debt, there wasn't one in the first place."

"Then why Dumbledore lied?" asked Harry curiously.

"Why did he lie about anything else in the first place?" shrugged Regulus.

"Because he could," snorted Sirius. "Because..." he started but seemed to change his mind and closed his mouth with a loud clack.

"A eureka moment?" asked Regulus curiously.


For a moment the room fell completely silent.

"What Dumbledore could have on Snape?" asked Sirius finally.


"He switched sides," muttered Sirius. "If he hadn't, at least if he didn't give Dumbledore an impression of switching the sides Dumbledore wouldn't let him teach. He wouldn't keep a suspected Death Eater at Hogwarts without a very good reason and Snape started teaching at Hogwarts back in the autumn of 1981," he added pensively.

"And you didn't object that?" asked Regulus sceptically.

"I was more worried about James and Lily," sighed Sirius. "I decided that if Dumbledore needed a Potions Master so desperately to hire Snape then he was well equipped to keep an eye on him by himself."

"Lily," whispered Regulus. "What if it's still about her? About honouring her memory?"

"Saving her son," added Sirius pensively and he looked at Regulus pointedly before he asked, calmly, but with a look on his face that showed very plainly how calm he wasn't, "Did you ever bring him here?"

"No," Regulus shook his head and opened his mouth only to close it with a loud clack. "But it's Snape we're talking about," he added nervously before he turned to Harry and asked, "Harry did you at any point during your schooling ever lost a copious amount of blood in Snape's close vicinity?"

Harry shook his head.

"Ever been unconscious for a prolonged period of time?" asked Regulus quickly.

"Yeah, after the stone I was in Hospital Wing unconscious for three days, you know that," answered Harry. "Why are you asking?"

"Because if Snape ever got a chance to get his hands on a vial of your blood we're in a very deep shit," said Sirius grimly.

"But why?" asked Harry quickly.
"Because Snape is well versed in the Dark Arts and there's plenty of dark rituals that can trace someone by magic within their blood," answered Regulus grimly. "And here we are, talking as if..." he shook his head as he pushed back his chair and stood up quickly. "I'll take a look at the wards, before I'll head out, and will add more just in case. You two finish what you need to finish here and kindly remove yourselves to the upper levels."

"You still think that this is the safest place?" asked Sirius sceptically.

"After I'll be done with the wards it will be," answered Regulus. "I just need to fine tune the wards that repel tracking spells," he added. Looked at Harry, "I'll need your blood for it."

"Sure," Harry nodded. "How much do you need?" he asked as he offered his right arm.

But Regulus instead of answering was already conjuring a small vial and a small knife, just sharp enough to pierce the skin on Harry's forearm. Quickly he collected Harry's dripping blood into the vial and as soon as it was full, he healed the cut before he hurried out of the room.

"He always does that?" Harry asked as he looked at the door.

"That's Black family flair for dramatics," sighed Sirius.

"Speaking of which," said Harry as he looked at Sirius. "How that attempted murder thing ended?"

"You have weird priorities," sighed Sirius.

"I'm just not allowing myself to be distracted," snorted Harry. "I know what you did last night. You kept changing topics like Dudley changes TV channels. So?"

"How do you imagine it could have ended?" asked Sirius sourly.

"With an expulsion?" asked Harry.

"It was demanded," grimaced Sirius. "By Slughorn as his Head of the House and by Snape himself before he was dosed with calming draught and removed to the hospital wing."

"And?" pressed Harry.

"I wasn't expelled," sighed Sirius. "My parents were summoned to Hogwarts. It's a standard procedure for expulsion, it needs to be done in the presence of at least one guardian and together they decide whatever or not authorities should be informed about the additional penalty if an additional penalty was considered necessary."

"Was it?" asked Harry.

"It was considered for a while," nodded Sirius and he grimaced. "I blanked out most of that meeting, out of mortification of what awaited me. I only got bits and pieces of it. My father managed to convince Dumbledore, McGonagall and Slughorn that the expulsion wasn't necessary. I was going to be removed from Hogwarts for the rest of the school year. Once I would return to Hogwarts next year I will be placed in a permanent detention. No Hogsmeade visits, no after-school clubs, permanent removal from the Quidditch team. I was supposed to spend the entire month of September in the detention every day after classes, with the severity of future detentions depending on my behaviour. They were eventually moved to day-long detentions on weekends," he sighed and took a sip of his tea.

Harry waited for him to swallow.
"Additionally from my personal vault two thousand galleons would be removed to be paid as a compensation to both Hogwarts and Snape himself, one thousand a piece," sighed Sirius.

"And Snape accepted that?" asked Harry sceptically.

"He didn't have much of a choice," grimaced Sirius. "He was advised to accept it..."

"And his parents?" pressed Harry. "They didn't have anything to say about these terms?"

"They weren't present during the meeting," Sirius shook his head. "I think his mother walked on him and his father before the beginning of our fifth year and his father... You'll have to ask Regulus about it when he gets back since he knew him better," he shook his head again before he added. "I don't know how his home life looked like but what I do know is that he stayed at Hogwarts for nearly every Christmas except the one in our fifth year, every Easter breaks too and at least thrice boarded Hogwarts' Express with a shiner and or a split lip neither your dad nor I gave him."

"But he was a pure-blood if he was in Slytherin, wasn't he?" asked Harry pointedly.

"He wasn't," answered Sirius. "Snape isn't a wizarding surname and I think he had a certain moniker he used, especially amongst other Slytherins. I'm certain that part of it was a half-blood and the other part was..." he paused.

"Prince," said Kreacher suddenly and both Sirius and Harry stared at him. "Master Regulus had a..." he paused as if he was looking for a word, "he said a friend, who was in a tight spot. The summer before his sixth year he kept going to his place. He told Mistress and Master that it was on the Dark Lord's orders, was gone nearly every day from early breakfast until evening, sometimes very late at night. Always took plenty of food from the kitchens when he was leaving. At times he came back smelling like cheap tobacco and even cheaper alcohol. Mistress was very worried."

"And?" pressed Sirius.

"He stopped going there in late August," answered Kreacher slowly. "On the last night when he returned, he sneaked inside very late, in a borrowed shirt and trousers, without his shoes. Looked very pale and seemed very disturbed. He had his right arm in bandages, he told Lola to not worry and to not breath a word to Master or Mistress. Hardly left his rooms after that, drank Dreamless Sleep Potion which he brewed himself for the rest of the summer," he added. "But whenever Mistress asked about his friend's name Master Regulus called him a Half-blood Prince. Mistress used to mutter something about scandals and dirty beggars after that."

"And Father?" asked Sirius. "He didn't have anything to say about it?"

"Master Orion had plenty of things to say about it but whenever he started to open his mouth in Master Regulus's presence Master Regulus rolled up his sleeve and showed Master Orion the mark. Once he told Master Orion that one skilled half-blood in the service of the Dark Lord was worth more than a silent monetary supporter on the fringes," answered Kreacher. "That got him slapped across the face by Master Orion. Got him slapped again to a split lip when Master Regulus replied that Master Orion was no different than a Muggle drunken skunk. He forbade elves to heal it, kept gnawing on it so it kept bleeding for quite a long time."

"Reg!" Sirius called out. "Come back down here!"

There was no answer. Not even the tiniest creak of the wooden floor upstairs

"Master of dramatic exits," sighed Sirius. "What else do you remember about that summer,
"That Master Regulus spent a lot of money that summer," answered Kreacher pensively. "Took with him a lot of books, returned with other books. He was always kind to elves and polite to Mistress, but he kept getting into verbal arguments with Master Orion whenever he was home. He was very moody and restless, kept wandering around the house only to lock himself in this or that bedroom. Spent quite a lot of time in Master Sirius's bedroom, for some time he even slept there. He used to tie back his hair with Gryffindor tie Master Sirius left behind and when Mistress kept changing its colours, he changed them right back. It worried Mistress and angered Master Orion. Master even kept threatening Master Regulus with disowning, Master Regulus told him that he wouldn't dare to disown another son. Kept telling Master that Master should be ashamed that his own flesh and blood lived in destitution, waiting tables like a house-elf, working three jobs to have something to eat. Master Regulus was very angry."

"I can imagine," sighed Sirius heavily. "I saw him around. Refused his money once, twice, thrice, until he stopped asking me to take it. Still managed to sneak it in somehow. I tried to give it back, but he wouldn't accept it. Sent it back down to the very last knut I sent him. I sent it back to him again. We spent entire September of my seventh year exhausting school owls with sending money back and forth. Until at some point he gave up and he gave all of it to Mirzam, told her that it was an emergency stash for safekeeping, appealed to her Ravenclaw sense."

"Did it work?" asked Harry curiously.

"No," Sirius shook his head. "Matter of a family pride, I wasn't anyone's charity case. I accepted inheritance Uncle Alphard left me because it was an inheritance and I couldn't give it back. I was young, healthy, wasn't afraid of hard work. I wasn't starving, I had a roof over my head and more than the clothes on my back."


"What?" yelped Sirius. "Why?"

"Because Kreacher needs to take a look at Master's leg before Kreacher leaves to get groceries," answered Kreacher simply.

"Right," sighed Sirius as he tried to push the chair away from the table and stand up. The chair slid an inch or two across the floor but mid-rise Sirius collapsed back into it with a soft hiss and a pained expression over his face.

"You okay?" asked Harry in alarm.


"Can Master Harry carry the dishes to the sink?" asked Kreacher as he approached them.

"Sure," Harry answered as he stood up after the elf passed by him.

He quickly picked the three plates, cups and cutlery and carried it to the sink. He turned around to pick Kreacher's plate just as Sirius yelped and mumbled something about never getting used to that. When he looked up, he saw that Sirius was practically naked and that his clothes were hanging over the chair.

Wanting to give the older man some little privacy, knowing that to leave the room he would have
to get past him Harry chose to wash the dishes. There weren't too many of them, just plates, cutlery and cups, very little for an omelette but Kreacher unlike Aunt Petunia when she was making them probably actively cleaned dirty bowls and pans.

He turned back around when he heard Sirius take a sharp breath and hiss it out through his teeth, it was followed by a groan and mumbled, "Thank you, Kreacher."

"Master Sirius didn't change," the elf said. "Does Master still has a thick skull?" he asked curiously.

"Probably," answered Sirius slowly. "But I'm not going to try and check out if I do," he added quickly just as Kreacher picked his left arm and shook his head.

"This looks nasty," the elf said slowly. "And this doesn't look like a real thing," he added as he tapped Sirius's arm with his fingers. "That's even nastier," he muttered after a beat.

"Not a real thing," admitted Sirius grimly. "Didn't sit well with wardens that they didn't find it on me while they found the real thing on anyone else. So, they decided to amend that," he added as Harry started to approach them. "It's ink," he said when Harry stopped in front of him, behind Kreacher's back, realising that Sirius, blessedly, was in his underwear.

The next thing he registered was the Dark Mark, unlike Regulus's, which was barely visible the outline was black, slightly faded and there was something wrong about it. The skull looked weirdly rectangular, the snake coming from its mouth seemed to be longer. Over and under it were some symbols Harry couldn't understand and from the inside of Sirius's left elbow down to his wrist was running a long, jagged scar.

"What are they?" asked Harry softly.

"Runes," sighed Sirius. "Traitor," he pointed his right forefinger at the highest grouping of symbols on his forearm. "Murderer," he pointed at the one below it, just a little above the Dark Mark. "Death Eater," he pointed at the lowest tattoo and pulled his hand away.

It was then when Harry spotted other tattoos, this time on his right arms. The lowest one at the wrist was a mix of symbols and numbers.

"And this one?" Harry pointed at it.

"Pertho algiz 390," said Sirius quietly. "Prisoner PX 390, also stands for permanent and very dangerous, three hundred ninety to be classified as such since Azkaban was founded. Azkaban's inventory of prisoners was always a bloody mess," he snorted.

"And that," he asked as he pointed at the higher grouping of symbols done separately that were arranged in a weird three spirals that met in the middle.

"A blessing," explained Sirius. "A friend of mine did this, Muggle way, hurt like..." he paused and after a moment added, "like it was supposed to be," he sighed. "From the bottom, it reads berkana, gebo, jera, mannaz, nauthir. Up your right: kenaz, tiwaz, uruz, eihwaz. From nauthir up your left; algiz, wunjo, sowulo, dagaz."

"What they stand for?" asked Harry curiously.

"For plenty different things," answered Sirius and Harry looked at him sceptically. "Really, some are blessings of prosperity, of self-awareness. Runes were never my strongest subject. Granted I can read them just fine and I can distinguish them but explaining them is a bit like explaining the
"And that one," Harry pointed at the tattoo on the inside of Sirius's right upper arm.

"Funny story this one," chuckled Sirius. "It's the first one I got. Done by a Muggle who was on something, some hallucination inducing drugs and I was so drunk I could barely see straight. But I could see and could still spell it properly and made sure that the tattooer spelt it properly," he raised his right arm higher, so Harry could see it completely. It read: 

*Moony Padfoot Prongs*

"What are they?" asked Harry curiously.

"Nicknames," explained Sirius. "Our werewolf's friend, mine and your Dad's. We were so bloody pickled," he chuckled. "It was after we received the news that we got our dream jobs."

"Pettigrew?" asked Harry.

"Went home to his mother to tell that he wasn't going to be the next Minister of Magic, didn't participate in that drinking binge," Sirius shook his head. "It was just the three of us, jolly drunks, daring each other to do stupid things, like getting Muggle tattoos," he said with a small smile. "I don't regret it. I went first, didn't go grand scale and got it where I could see what was tattooed on my skin."

"And my Dad?" asked Harry curiously.

"Moony got it over his spine," continued Sirius with the same small smile. "Had enough presence of mind to tell me to mind the spelling, which I did, while he was alternatively complaining how great and how lousy friends he has and alternately crying and laughing into your dad's shoulder."

"There's a life lesson in there somewhere," said Harry suspiciously. "Or something else. Otherwise, you would have answered right away."

"Of course there is," said Sirius cheerfully. "Moony was a very tactile drunk so once he was done, he decided that he wanted to celebrate getting through it with a dance. A waltz from what I remember. I managed to stop him from waltzing with the lamp but I got myself caught up in waltzing with quite heavy for someone so lithe and also very slippery werewolf," he chuckled.

"Which means that you weren't minding my dad when he was getting tattooed," nodded Harry.

"Ever tried to fight with a tactile werewolf?" snickered Sirius.

"No, I pretended to be one though," snorted Harry and when Sirius looked at him quizzically he added, "Lockhart."

"Yeah, so for a few minutes I think we waltzed out of the room. I don't know in which direction because I was too busy with keeping Moony upright since he suddenly decided to mess waltzing with a tango and kept trying to topple us over," continued Sirius. "Either way for these few minutes your dad was left alone with the tattooer who was really tripping, by the time we got back he was talking to both a dragon and James. I managed to wrestle Moony into a chair and got him to stay put in there while I went to check up on James. But it was already too late," he shook his head.

"He already got a dragon tattooed on his butt?" asked Harry pointedly.

Sirius barked out with laughter and shook his head, "No, but you were close. Dead on the target at least."
Harry snickered.

"What your poor dad got tattooed over his butt was Moody, Paddy and Bongs. By the time I got there the tattooer was finishing adding some weird looking flower next to it. I think it was supposed to look like a lily but to me, it looked like some weird anthurium," chuckled Sirius.

"And you, being a good friend, told him about the mistake?" asked Harry pointedly.

"And me, being a good friend I collapsed in a fit of giggles that was so hard that poor Moony got into his head that I was having some sort of an epilepsy attack. He, in turn, being a good friend himself, tried to help me but for the life of him he couldn't figure out whatever or not he was supposed to hold me down or try and resuscitate me, so he tried both. And since I don't react well to being held down I managed to give him a shiner while in return he broke my nose."

Harry smiled before he asked curiously, "What about Bongs?"

"Well, in the heat of a fight because Moony was still trying to hold me down we forgot about Bongs for a moment until he tried to break up the fight which in turn got him two black eyes and having his glasses knocked off," answered Sirius with a chuckle. "But at least searching for them broke down that fight and we left the tattoo parlour best of friends again. Good thing that it was close to Diagon Alley and I lived in the area, so we all went to my place to recover."

"And what life lesson I'm supposed to draw from that?" asked Harry innocently. "Don't drink, don't get a tattoo, get better friends or all of the above?"

Sirius barked out with a laugh again.

"Did he tried to fix that?" asked Harry curiously. "My Dad, that tattoo I mean."

"Well, I completely forgot about it for about a day and a half," answered Sirius. "Could have gotten longer but we were all meeting for lunch that day. Moony and I were already waiting when your Mum showed up, without your Dad and before Pettigrew got there. She sat down, took a brief look at the menu and turned from Moony to me and said, 'So Moody and Paddy, what do you think Bongs would like for lunch?'

"And?" pressed Harry.

"Immediately I got a total recall. Moony was confused, your Mum looked amused but really wasn't," explained Sirius. "She told Moony what she found on your Dad's butt which mortified Moony because he wrote off the pain on his back as a simple accident and was sweating through the entire lunch that he got the same thing on his back. Lily convinced him that he had, I tried to convince him that he hadn't. James looked confused because we were trying to have the entire conversation without getting into details of what we did in front of Pettigrew because we managed to come to a quick agreement that he would have felt left out even though it wasn't really his fault and really it was all stupid..." he chuckled and shook his head. "Your Mum eventually fixed that thing, even got your dad to get it done properly in a better place but whenever she was annoyed with him, she called him Bongs."

"And you called her anthurium?" smirked Harry.

"I wouldn't dare," said Sirius dryly. "When I was annoyed with her which didn't happen often, I always called her Lillian."

"That's her full name?" asked Harry curiously.
"No," Sirius shook his head. "Her full name was Lily Ruth Evans, I think she was named after her maternal grandmother, but I don't know for sure. Maybe once I would meet with Proudclaw I will be able to get my hands on their official paperwork. Your grandparents' names should be on their marriage certificate."

"About Proudclaw," said Kreacher. "Does Master Sirius wants any of them gone? The tattoos?"

"Can you do that?" asked Sirius curiously.

Kreacher in an answer probably rolled his eyes.

"Only the ones on my left arm," said Sirius pensively.

"Just them?" asked Kreacher sceptically. "Not the number too?"

Sirius looked pensive for a moment before he shook his head and sighed, "Whatever I like it or not, Azkaban is a huge part of who I am now. I can't change that, I can't pretend that it didn't happen. Because it did happen and it's an important part of my life, just like the rest of them. At least the ones I put there myself or more precisely had them put there. I'd rather have this one sorry reminder of my bad choices than the other three. I'm not what they stand for but I'm a former prisoner of Azkaban."

"Master's wish," nodded Kreacher and he placed his hand over the highest tattoo.

The ink began to slowly fade leaving behind skin marred with scars. Once the first tattoo disappeared Kreacher moved his hand to the other and repeated the process. Then again and again, until the only things left on Sirius's left forearm were scars.

Once he was done Kreacher removed his hand and shook it over the floor, letting the dust from his fingers fall on the ground. Then he bowed to Sirius and turned to bow to Harry.

"Kreacher will go get groceries now," he said before he disappeared with a pop.

"Amazing," whispered Sirius.

"Kreacher?" asked Harry curiously.

"I meant elves' magic, Kreacher is complicated," sighed Sirius. "Mind you, I'm trying to keep an open mind and very hard to be civil, but I still have an image of him from my teenage years before my eyes and it's not a pleasant one," he grimaced. "He was very devoted to our Mother and..." he shook his head and grimaced again.

"What about the others?" asked Harry, changing the subject since it was making Sirius uncomfortable.

"Which ones?" asked Sirius.

"Pick one," answered Harry.

"I pick two," said Sirius. "Since they're both related to one another even though they say different things and were made about a year apart from each other. Were the Dursleys religious?"

"Not very," grimaced Harry. "I mean they send me and Dudley to Sunday school for a while and we attended church for some time too, but I don't even know what kind of a church it was."

"Doesn't matter," said Sirius quickly. "I'm only asking if you're familiar with the Bible enough for
me to not get into details. Ever heard of the part of the creation of man and woman?"

"Something about God making Eve from Adam's rib, right?" asked Harry slowly.

"Right, that part." nodded Sirius. "While God created a life mate for Adam from his rib, I went slightly a different route. Like I said earlier, I was a very sickly child, I caught everything a kid could catch. It got bad enough that our parents were worried that I wouldn't live long enough to reach Hogwarts..."

"So they had Reg in case you would die," nodded Harry.

"He was literally born to replace me if I managed to die at any point of my at the time short life," sighed Sirius. "So that one," he pointed at his lowest right rib where on his right side was a group of symbols, "stands for Regulus. The language it was written is Hebrew, kind of symbolic, a nod to our Middle Eastern ancestry and to match the other two on the other side."

"What they stand for?" asked Harry curiously.

"Well, this one," said Sirius as he placed his left forefinger on the lower tattoo on his left side, just like the other on his lowest rib, "stands for Lily. I had it added to the upper one after your parents got married."

"And the other one?"

"Stands for Bathsheda," explained Sirius and paused for a moment. "It's kind of complicated. She was a friend of mine at school, not the closest one but a good one. There was also the girl I used to be heads over heels in love when I was seventeen. I had it pretty bad and for a long, while I was convinced that my chances to woo her were close to zero, so I settled myself for being a devoted friend and confidant."

"Were you?" asked Harry curiously.

"I like to think so," said Sirius with a soft smile. "I was privy to quite a lot of secrets, one of them was that this girl, Mirzam was her name, Mirzam Verascez, while she was believed, by the majority of our year, to be a Muggle-born, she was, in fact, a bastard daughter of Solomon Babbling, Bathsheda's father. I won't get into that entire Babbling affair because it's complicated. But aside from her half-sister Mirzam, she didn't want anything to do with the Babblings. The two of them were inseparable since they met on Hogwarts express, much like me and your dad, except they were much more mellowed and more studious as a pair of Ravenclaws."

Harry nodded.

"In our seventh year, Bathsheda's situation at home got very complicated. At the beginning of the year she got pregnant, didn't know who the father was and violently rebelled against her family wishes what to do about that situation," continued Sirius. "I think that in the beginning there was both a manhunt for the prospective father to get them married and a lot of pressure for her to have an abortion. But her parents couldn't do much since she was of age and technically an adult even though she was still a student. In an attempt to control her, Bathsy's parents cut her off from family money, her own trust vault included. I think they were hoping that she would be more malleable to their wishes if she didn't have access to it and with the baby on the way she needed money..." he grimaced.

"What did she do?" asked Harry curiously.

"Went to Mirzam and Mirzam went to me. She knew that I owned three small flats at the time, it
wasn't much but together they could get by, but I already leased two of them out at the beginning of that year for another year so in the end, I only had one," explained Sirius. "Tiny as fuck, enough for me but for two adult women with a baby about to be born not really enough. Especially if we would have to live together. I could have gone to your dad but seeing how much into your mum he was at the time I decided against it. I convinced Mirzam to not worry about it and I told her to keep an eye on Bathsy, while I would worry about where they will be living."

Harry nodded again.

"Luckily for me, my own flat had an attic above it, which was legally considered as a part of that property and had an entrance to it from inside of my flat and the corridor upstairs. So, I moved my shit upstairs, told the girls that they could move downstairs. Before the school ended, I managed to make it liveable for myself, enough to pass as a flat when my friends visited. Over the summer I managed to furnish it enough and prepare it for the girls to move upstairs just as the baby was about to arrive. Granted it was an additional flight of stairs up, but it was bigger than my flat and they needed space. Cut it quite close, but while Bathsy was at St Mungo's recovering from the birth, Mirzam and I moved them upstairs."

"Why the tattoo though?" asked Harry curiously. "You said that you put important parts of your life on yourself with the tattoos."

"I did," nodded Sirius. "Bathsy was important to Mirzam and Mirzam was important to me," he sighed. "I had a brother and our relationship was pretty strained back then but..." he paused. "Quite often during my later years at Hogwarts, I found myself thinking that if I ever had a sister, I would have wanted her to be like Bathsy. Headstrong, loyal, fierce, funny and smart. She had three older brothers of her own but when it came down to leaning on them when she needed their support the most only one of them showed some degree of sympathy and support and even then it wasn't much seeing that he had a family on his own and was himself depending on their family's support."

"So you decided to adopt them," said Harry.

"Pretty much," smiled Sirius. "I'm quite sure that they adopted me before I adopted them, but what can I say?" he shrugged. "She was a good friend and a good person who got in trouble. Helping her find her footing in her new life was the least I could do. I would have done it for a stranger, let alone for someone I genuinely cared about," he sighed.

"What became of them?" asked Harry curiously.

"Well, Bathsy had the baby, a girl. She named her Bathsheba, the name she herself was supposed to be named with. Would have gotten it if her own father was a little less drunk when he was filling in her birth certificate," continued Sirius. "Sheba was an angel, not very fussy, easily absorbed, loved being held, wondrous, so full of joy," he smiled fondly. "Bathsy never made us her godparents, not officially at least. Mirzam and I were both Aurors, we worked a dangerous job and lived dangerous lives, so no official paperwork was drawn up but essentially, we were her godparents."

Harry nodded slowly and as he looked at Sirius's chest he asked as he pointed, "So that B there stands for Bathsheba. What about these Hs?"

"Harrison," said Sirius softly.

"And the other?" asked Harry.

"Also Harrison," sighed Sirius.
"Why?" asked Harry curiously. "Is it about the shape? Like that one on your right arm?"

"A bit by no," grimaced Sirius and he sighed heavily. "The shape you're referring to is called a triskelion. It was a part of Babbling family coat of arms. It symbolises a lot of things, mostly change. Past, present and future. Father, mother and child," he paused for a moment before he continued. "You see by the time your mum was pregnant with you Mirzam and I were already a couple. A very private couple but we were taking things at our own peace. We went through a pregnancy scare, not much of a scare it was, and it turned out to be a false alarm at the time but it got us talking about baby names. We talked a lot about it and for similar minded people we couldn't agree on anything, we were both vetoing each other's choices pretty heavily. Granted most of them were stupid, at least mine were," he smiled softly.

"Like what?" smiled Harry.

"Han Solo," smiled Sirius. "Star Wars?"

"Never heard of it," Harry shook his head.

"We will have to remedy that at some point," said Sirius solemnly. "Well, the new movie was playing in theatres and I loved it, as did Mirzam. We managed to settle that our eventual daughter would be named Leia, but we couldn't agree on a boy's name. Finally, after a heated debate we agreed that while Han Solo wasn't going to be a very good name for a boy Harrison Ford Black, named in honour of the actor who played him, had a very nice ring to it," he smiled softly. "Plus, it would eventually piss off my mother like you have no idea."

Harry smiled at that again.

"So that was that," sighed Sirius. "We were waiting for you to be born with the official announcement that we were together. I don't think it would have been much news to your mum. We didn't want to steal their thunder and after all..." he shook his head. "I was planning to propose to Mirzam, got a ring, waited for a perfect occasion..." he shook his head again. "Got it the day before you were born," he sighed. "I came back home from a night duty, found a teddy-bear with a blue ribbon tied around his neck hanging on the doorknob..." his voice broke, "there was a card attached to it," he paused and swallowed audibly, "it read: Hello, My name is Teddy and I belong to Harrison Ford Black," he practically choked on the last word.

Harry approached him slowly and gently placed his right hand on Sirius's left shoulder before he whispered, "You don't have to..."

"I do," whispered Sirius, his eyes were shining with tears. "I'll never lie to you and I won't hide the truth from you," he added before he whipped the tears from his eyes with his right hand and placed it over Harry's and squeezed it tightly. "I lost them both that day. I was away on an Order errand, couldn't get the news until the evening. Bellatrix literally wiped them out of existence. And on the top of that..." he shook his head. "Your dad's message got me in St Mungo's, he was a nervous wreck, the birth was difficult..." he sighed. "There was nothing I could do for Mirzam or Harry but there was something I could for your parents," he whispered.

"And you didn't tell them?" whispered Harry. "Why?"

"Why should I?" mumbled Sirius. "More importantly, when should I?" he shook his head. "When your dad practically poisoned himself with a calming draught because he was allergic to one of the ingredients? Oh, he made it don't worry, but after that, your mum had him discreetly removed from the room, so she wouldn't have to worry about him. But someone had to stay with her and her apprentice healer wasn't inspiring any confidence," he shook his head. "I could power through it, I
could compartmentalise my own pain and focus on what needed to be done which was being there and supporting your mum for as long as she needed it."

"You should have told them," sighed Harry.

"I disagree," muttered Sirius. "I'm glad that I didn't tell them," he sighed. "But your mum, I think she knew or at the very least suspected that something was wrong," he paused. "They left me alone with you to fix some medical issue, not life-threatening but pressing enough for an emergency surgery. That's when I fell apart, I started talking, to you, at you," he squeezed Harry's arm. "It calmed me down," he sighed.

"And Harry?" asked Harry softly.

"First thing that flew out of my mouth when your mum asked me for a name suggestion," sighed Sirius. "Couldn't take it back and didn't really want to," he whispered. "I knew by then that I wasn't going to have children of my own, I didn't want any children on my own, not without Mirzam as their mother. So..." he shrugged. "Don't even think for a moment that you're his replacement. I loved and still love you to bits but the same way nothing and no one can replace your parents nothing and no one will replace my son. Harry might have been nothing more than a bundle of cells, but he was real to me. Just like you are, but his name... it was the only thing I could pass on," he added earnestly

Harry nodded, trying to ignore the prickle of tears as he placed his left hand over the symbols that ran between B and Hs and whispered, "So that's Mirzam, am I right?"

"Yes," Sirius whispered as he placed his left hand over Harry's. "That's everything that I kept close to the heart," he sighed. "Or to the side, or with arms reach," he smiled softly. "Everything that matters."

Harry smiled softly and whispered, "I think that you're the bravest man I ever know."

"I know braver," said Sirius softly. "I was only..." he paused and smiled. "After her mother died your mum once told me that one of the things her mother repeated at times like a mantra was: he who has a why to live, can bear almost anyhow," he paused again and squeezed Harry's hands. "You're my why, Harry. For you, I can, and I will handle anyhow."

At that Harry couldn't stand it anymore and letting go of Sirius's arm he wrapped his own around Sirius's neck and hugged him tightly. Just as soon as he did Sirius's pulled him down and sat him on his knees before he wrapped his arms around Harry. It was such a simple paternal gesture, but at the same time so meaningful that Harry couldn't bear it anymore and hiding his face in the crook of Sirius's collarbone he finally burst in tears, for the first time in a very long time.

Chapter End Notes

Food for thought: How do you think Regulus managed to avoid getting caught by Dumbledore for so many years and what else he might be hiding? Also, another thing. Ain't that curious that while strong magical numbers are 3 and 7, we get 7 pieces of Voldemort's soul but only 2 possible chosen ones who can vanquish him?
Chapter 04 - Mea Maxima Culpa, The Fall of Regulus Black

Chapter Summary

Regulus in the present and in the past.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter or anything you can recognise from any books or TV series or movies. I do however take liberties with the plots or mentions provided by JKR or other writers. The only profit I'm getting out of it is improving my English.

Title: Secrets & Keepers – Keep Us

Rating/Warnings: R/M [AU; Manipulative Dumbledore (therefore not Dumbledore friendly); profanity; canon-typical violence; frank discussion of past child abuse (Harry but not only) and of past child abuse of sexual nature (not Harry); not very detailed descriptions of torture (not Harry); Black family feels.

Additional warnings: Death Eater's being Death Eaters and everything that falls under that umbrella (murder, torture, general mayhem); descriptions of panic attacks; mild blasphemy; religious undertones; references to past child abuse; references to mental illnesses.

Chapter summary: Regulus in the present and in the past.

Word count: Around 22 200 words.

Author's note/personal ramble: This chapter is very introspective while at the same time moving in the present (at a snail pace). There's a blink and you will miss it mention how Regulus managed to evade Dumbledore for so long. He doesn't clarify how it works for him, not in this chapter, he'll explain how it works in the next chapter when he'll discover it himself and he'll theorise how he managed to acquire it. What you need to know is that I covered my bases, I know how it works, how it worked in the past and how it will work for him in the future. And to think that in the beginning, it was nothing more than a passing comment... I'm very proud of that idea and I hope that sceptics will try and wait for the detailed explanation from him. As for religious undertones, well I wanted to explore Regulus' redemption, the changing point of his life and having a chance to do so through faith and atonement (written from point of vision of a pure-blood wizard). Personally, I never saw that before in a HP fiction and it's not as if that part of him will start affecting everyone around him. It's just him, at this point in his life, taking comfort from what once brought him comfort.

And if the chapter feels incomplete? Well, it is incomplete. Originally, it was supposed to be posted in its entirety but as you can see at this point I'm at 22 000 words and the issue of length of the chapters had been raised multiple times by now. Plus I wanted to post this chapter before Christmas so I divided one enormous chapter into smaller parts that can stand on their own. Plus, this chapter ends in an appropriate
and symbolically fitting place

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year

Beta read by Goddess of IT and maeveiluka88

Dedicated to all of my readers who stuck with me for so long. Thank You, I hope that You will find this story enjoyable. I would be the most grateful for constructive criticism.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There is no refuge from memory and remorse in this world.
The spirits of our foolish deeds haunt us, with or without repentance.

~Gilbert Parker.

Secrets & Keepers – Keep Us

Chapter four: Mea Maxima Culpa, The Fall of Regulus Black.

Regulus Black, 12 Grimmauld Place, 7th August, noonish

As soon as the realisation that while the Aurors, Ministry of Magic, and Albus Dumbledore himself wouldn't be able to trace him and Sirius to 12 Grimmauld Place but one very determined Severus Snape could trace Harry there hit him he could feel the first tell-tell signs of an impending panic attack. A chill ran down his spine, his fingers started tingling.

Not now. Not now. Not now went through his head like a mantra. He could have a full blown panic attack later on but for now, he needed to fix the issue. It was rather easy. Why didn't he think of it sooner?

He squelched his frantic thoughts, while at the same time trying to calm his racing heart, in order to ask Harry for his blood. As soon as he had it, he fled from the kitchen into the hall. Nearly tripping over his own feet, as he stumbled to the wall that separated the doors into the dining room and ground floor bathroom. Still holding the vial of Harry's blood in his right hand he placed both his hands on the wall and pushed his magic into it.

The wards hummed and flared under his touch recognising the blood of a Black.

They were strong.

Layers upon layers of old magic, old blood within walls and that was without the stuff his father had added which was nasty and fancy. He didn't stop to ponder, what his father had done, because he was already pouring Harry's blood on his left hand. Dropping the vial to the floor, he started to draw runes on the wall with it.
First, *tīwaz*, for authority.

*Othala*, for home, second.

Third, was *sowulo* for strength.

Fourth, *nauthiz* for need.

Fifth, *algiz*, for protection.

Finally, sixth, *inguz*, for growth.

All six main layers.

Thank fuck that, by family standards, Harry as a grandson of Dorea Black counted as a Black. He might have been only one-quarter Black and Dorea wasn't winning mother of the year awards, but blood was blood and Harry's own blood would be what would keep him safe here. Both from outside intrusion, as well as, the house itself.

When he brought Sirius and Harry here, he checked the state of the wards immediately after making sure that they were alone and that no one save his somewhat recently deceased family members hadn't been through the door. He feared that the Aurors had, but blessedly he hadn't found any signs of intrusion within wards. There were plenty signs of an attempt to get in on the door, but the door held against the intrusion.

Grandpa Arcturus had to seal them at some point after Mother died. While some members of the family outlived Grandpa and Mother none of them was interested in the old town-house in London.

Cygnus and Druella, up until they died lived in one of the Rosier family summer manors in Cornwall. Aunt Lucretia lived with her husband in Devon. Grandaunt Cassiopeia hadn't set a foot on English soil ever since she retired from her position at the Ministry of Magic day after her sixtieth birthday with firm plans to travel the world. The last Regulus himself heard of her was a small postcard from Bulgaria, which she wrote to his mother, claiming that the weather was marvellous; Bulgarian wines delicious; and that young desperate men looking for a company of an old wealthy witch were simply lining up to accompany her everywhere.

The only other surviving member of the Black family were Sirius, currently unconscious and for over eleven years a prisoner of Azkaban. Bellatrix, who was also a prisoner of Azkaban, and hopefully a permanent one that wouldn't be inspired by Sirius's escape.

Andromeda with her progeny Nymphadora, the former hadn't been here since she announced, during the last Sunday family dinner of the summer of 1972, that she had recently eloped with her Muggle-born boyfriend Edward Tonks, a Hufflepuff, and was currently expecting his baby, before she high-tailed out of the house altogether. She has never set a foot inside the house since then. Neither did her daughter.

Narcissa who had married a Malfoy and was currently living in Malfoy Manor. Even if she didn't want to live there she had plenty of other properties to choose from, both from her marriage as well as her Rosier family side.

And finally himself, who was busy with activating the wards that will prevent the portraits from leaving their frames or coming back to their frames inside the house. Later with Sirius and even later with Harry, much later with Harry, Sirius and Kreacher together he never had a chance to take more than cursory look at anything that wasn't the kitchen, his old bedroom, Sirius's old bedroom and his parents’ old bedroom. Judging by the amount of dust and cobwebs the house hadn't been
inhabited by anyone since Mother died.

Well, there was Kreacher but Kreacher was single-minded in his pursuit to fulfil Regulus's last wish to destroy the Horcrux and didn't give a flying fuck about the state of the house. For whom he should care for it anymore anyway. Regulus was supposedly dead, and Sirius locked up in Azkaban; the house could be only passed on their children and seeing that Sirius had none, was in his mid-twenties when mother died and, as a wizard, he could live past one hundred years, no one was going to live there for a very long time.

Sure, Sirius might die in Azkaban at any point but then seeing that there was no male Black heir the house would be passed over to Bellatrix, who was also in Azkaban, and the same conditions that applied to Sirius would be applied to her.

The next in line to inherit the house was Andromeda and her descendants; she might have been officially disowned but that didn't change that she was Black by blood and providing that both Sirius and Bellatrix would predecease her, she stood a chance to inherit the town-house. Provided that latent blood magic within the wards wouldn't choose Narcissa's only son as an heir.

Really, from Kreacher's standpoint, 12 Grimmauld Place was going to be empty for many decades, maybe even over one hundred years, so why bother with cleaning something that no one was going to use for many years to come. He might even die before that happened.

That was going to change soon, hopefully, Kreacher, and Una, once Kreacher would locate her would take care of the house and make it more inhabitable. Boggarts and doxies could be marvellous training exercises for Harry, and if something worse lived here, there was him and Sirius and they will take care of it.

Everything was under control.

Except for his breathing, and his racing heart, and his trembling hands. He needed to get himself under control. It wouldn't do him any good if he passed out in the hall. Not when he had a job to do and precious little time before it would occur to someone to place a guard in the neighbourhood to watch the front door for Sirius.

He tried to take a breath through his nose and he practically snorted dust because it was so thick in the air. He opened his mouth and gasped for breath, but it was a shallow one and it simply wouldn't do.

*Think, idiot, think and calm the fuck down.*

Mirzam's face swam in front of his eyes. Full of compassion and radiant with calmness but still with slight worry in her hazel green eyes.

"Ansuz," he could practically hear her whisper into his ear, voice soft and full of warmth.

Ansuz, he repeated after her in his head as he took in another shallow breath and let it out through his nose.

"Berkana," she continued.

Berkana. Another breath. In and out.

"Kenaz."

"Dagaz."

Dagaz. Once again.

"Ehwaz."

Ehwaz. Repeat.

"Fehu."

Fehu. Slightly deeper this time.

"Gebo."

Gebo. Just as deep as the last one.

"Hagalaz."


"Isa."

Isa. Ice. Standstill. Block. Challenge. Still not deep enough but his heart was slowing down

"Jera."

Jera. Year. Harvest. Peace. Rewards. The warmth of her embrace, the weight of her arms around his shoulders. The smell of her cinnamon shampoo wafting from her long, curly black hair. The comfort he never found in his mother arms.

"Kenaz."

Kenaz. Again. A little deeper. Torch. Revelation. Knowledge. Creativity. Inspiration. He came to her practically on his knees; strike that he came to Sirius but hadn't found him in his flat. He found Mirzam instead and he fell apart in front of her.

"Laguz."

Laguz. A little more deeper, a little while longer. Water. Sea. Lake. Flow. Renewal. Rebirth. He was born again in front of her. She calmed him down, talked him through his panic attack.

"Mannaz."


"Nauthiz."


"Inguz."
Inguz. Deep. Fertility. Growth. Common sense. Running away. *It can't be me, it just can't. I'm not strong enough. I'm not brave enough. I can't. I won't.*

"Othala."


"Pertho."


"Inguz."


"Raido."


The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies.

"Sowulo."

Sowulo. Deep. Sun. Strength. Energy. Health. Success. *I will carry on. I will end it. Harry needs to be aware of why the Dark Lord wanted to kill him. Why the Dark Lord will pursue him but defeating him once and for all won't become Harry's destiny. He won't be sacrificed at the altar of greater good like a lamb. He won't be torn away from us. He is the Boy Who Lived, he will become the Boy Who Will Live but he won't become the Man Who Defeated. That wasn't his destiny, it shouldn't have been his destiny in the first place like it shouldn't have been that poor Longbottom's boy.*

He should have been more active. Sure, he had a pretty good excuse for three years, being first in a coma and then later recovering from one surgery after another. He could even swing in an additional three years spend on getting familiar with the world he didn't know but was his now. Even Christ himself didn't start teaching until He was thirty, until He lived in the world of man and grew to love it and people in it enough to die for them in the end. *Blasphemous*, his Mum would hit him over his head with a kitchen towel if she heard him say it but... That was the truth and the nature of ultimate sacrifice, one had to know what one was giving up and for whom.

*Thy will be done.* With his right hand, he reached for the chain around his neck and pulled it over his shirt, grabbing what hung on it, all of them together. Sirius's and Mirzam's Auror dog tags, which Mirzam, sweet, understanding Mirzam misplaced and reported as lost after she handed them over to him, to have something to hold on to in the hour of doubt.

His own Naming Day medallion, a plain platinum oval with an R etched on its front and his official birthday written on the back. Sirius's Naming Day medallion, same shape, same metal,
same concept but with a different letter and different date. Mirzam's Naming Day medallion, at least the one she should receive if Solomon Babbling was a responsible man, he had it commissioned by a jeweller after he found her grave, same shape, same metal and concept, but hers unlike his and Sirius had two dates on the back, that of her birth and that of her death.

Harry's Naming Day medallion, not the original one, the original one still should have been in Godric's Hallow and because it was a Potter one, it should be done in gold rather than platinum, but he had it commissioned by the same jeweller after other three. Finally, tiny, thin silver cross which belonged to his Mum's grandmother, a gift she has given him when he first accompanied her to church.

The silver medallion of Saint Martin of Tours was hanging on its own chain.

_Thy will be done_. Well, not that way, not at the expense of other people's lives. He ran away from it when he first heard it but when the push came to shove, he went to that cave, alone except for Kreacher, ready to give up his life for people he loved and cared for. For Sirius, for Mirzam, who one day would become his sister, for the children the two of them would have one day. He didn't exactly succeed. _Thy will be done_. But it will be done his way, no one else will end up being caught up in his own destiny. Especially not Harry and not Sirius, they had suffered enough.

He shouldn't linger, shouldn't waste precious time on another existential crisis. He had a job to do and he needed to do it fast. But it wouldn't do him any good if he showed his own face back in Little Whinging, someone could recognise him.

The solution immediately presented itself to him. It had been there by his side, counting runes with him. He hardly used this one, there were others which he used more often but this one he always chose when he needed comfort and he needed it now. Mirzam was long gone but her warmth, her comfort and solace she offered him lived on, in his memory, embedded into his skin, always there under the surface.

He closed his eyes and summoned to the forefront of his memory the image of her face. Long, curly, jet-black hair; thin, slightly slanted at the end eyebrows over almond-shaped hazel green eyes; straight nose with a little turned-up tip; thin lips; heart-shaped face.

She would be coming up to his nose and wizard or not he didn't have time to adjust his clothing, so he kept his height and pushed his magic where it was needed, not too much just to have something there rather than nothing. He didn't have time to go all the way since going all the way was insanely time consuming and required a lot of concentration. He never went all the way anyway if he wasn't in the mood for female sex and he never used that particular form for sex. He had limits, he could use his almost sister in law's face to head out and walk around or to just stare at her reflection in the mirror taking comfort from his reflection as her but having sex as her was off limits, there were other faces for that.

He quickly willed his prick to shorten enough to not be visible through his jeans. Female face and a pair of breasts wouldn't fool anyone who would look lower and see a clear outline of a male prick. He had enough of close calls in the past and had been called a freak enough times to mind his dangling manhood when he was wearing female face.

He glanced down for a moment at his left hand, noting that all of Harry's blood on it seeped into the wards. _Good_, he smiled softly to himself. Got to love magic. He turned around to take a good look into the tiny mirror hanging on the opposite wall. He saw in it Mirzam's hair, eyes and face and he smiled to himself. Not bad for someone who recently had a panic attack.

Suddenly he heard Sirius's voice coming out of the kitchen, calling out, "Reg! Come back down
Fuck, no. Not in this form. Granted two solid meals gave Sirius some strength but seeing Mirzam's face again after burying her and mourning her for years might give him a heart-attack and Regulus, definitely didn't want that.

So, he quietly tiptoed through the hall, summoning his jeans jacket from upstairs wordlessly and reached for the doorknob just as his right hand closed on the material of his jacket, the door opened under his touch with a quiet click and he stepped outside. Equally quietly he closed it behind himself and put his hand on the handle, willing his magic to close all the locks shut. Once he could feel the last of the locks clicking into its place, he finally dared to peel himself from the door and put his jacket on.

He walked down the stairs and stepped onto the pavement, taking a quick but careful look around. Nothing seemed out of place. The small, gated playground in the middle of the place was full of neighbourhood children, children of children he once used to spy on through the window of his childhood bedroom or children of the new occupants of neighbouring houses. There was also a very determined game of tag going on around the gates.

Muggle cars, mostly clean and polished were shining under the rays of noon sunlight. A radio was playing from one of the upper windows of number eight and Freddie Mercury was singing that he wanted to break free. Kind of appropriate. Mrs 9 Grimmauld Place was gossiping with Mrs 5 Grimmauld Place, her bored daughter or granddaughter was looking longingly at the playground but dutifully holding on her mother's or grandmother's hand. Boringly normal, just another day at Grimmauld Place.

Nothing was out of place, everything was as if he just stepped out of the house into sunbathed street fifteen years ago. Except fifteen years ago, he found all of this annoying, irritatingly Muggle and he questioned the lack or loss of marbles of that one of his ancestors who decided that a town-house in the middle of London was exactly what the Black family needed. Now he only found it comforting.

Nothing to see here. No weird looking or very overdressed people wandering around the place. Just your neighbour girl you never have seen before taking a stroll through the place. Relatively calmly he passed through the place and walked to a kiosk, he quickly took a look at the news-stand. Plain old news, nothing important, same old violence, same old scandals, literally not a single sign that would proclaim that a Harry Potter, 13, went missing from his relatives in Surrey. Good.

He rummaged through his pocket and found some coins and rolled up pounds. Enough for a train journey both ways and a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

"Afternoon. Pack of Silk Cuts, menthol and a lighter," he told the salesman.

He paid the man, picked his purchases and wished him a good day. Just as he stepped into painfully short Grimmauld Street he lit a cigarette and took a deep breath. Merlin, he missed that, why did he quit smoking? Oh, that's right because Dad smoked and after his heart-attack the whole family in order to support him quit smoking, cut down drinking and changed their diet.

Now he had plenty of reasons to start smoking again. Did Sirius smoke? He couldn't remember. Mirzam used to keep a pack of cigarettes around but he never has seen her smoke. She must be having a field day in afterlife right now. Not for the first time he wondered what she would say about him wearing her face. She would probably laugh and call him pretty before she would tell him to take care of them. Merlin, how much he missed her. He could use to have her around. She would ground Sirius, calm him down and she would take care of Harry, the same way she took
care of him. Quietly, without fanfare, just by being there. She would be their rock.

What did she once said? It was a Mexican proverb: *the house does not rest on the ground, but upon a woman*. Granted extremely patriarchal and chauvinistic but true as he found out when he moved with Mum and Dad. Dad could physically take care of the house and he could fend for himself but the one who made a house a home was Mum with her calming presence, gentle smile and a stray hand ruffling his hair. She was the one to whom Dad and Regulus flocked like chickens to a mother hen when they were troubled by something.

Fuck. What he would do about his parents? He couldn't simply disappear without a single word. It would break their hearts, Mum's especially. For now, they were in Spain and during the last phone call they mentioned something about heading to Portugal. They would be gone at least for the rest of the month and if the weather and finances permitted maybe even until mid-September. Speaking of September, what should he do about his job?

There was no way that he was going to return to teaching now. Not with a looming hunt for the Dark Lord's Horcruxes and Sirius and Harry at home. Then there was the matter of Harry's status. If he went missing at any other time the Dursleys wouldn't bother to report him as missing. But before he went missing Harry blew up Marge Dursley, it was an admirable inflating charm that would make both of his parents proud. It might have been accidental but for Improper Use of Magic Office there was accidental magic and there was accidental magic. No one would receive a fine or a warning for a shattered glass or plate or for flickering lights or door or windows closing itself shut but an inflating charm? That would require a visit from Accidental Magic Reversal Squad and a warning from Improper Use of Magic Office. Adding to that the fact that it was a second warning… surely shortly after they left Little Whinging an Auror was dispatched to snap Harry's wand in two and when they didn't find him there….

If only he could get his hands on a Daily Prophet, he would know where they stood. Expelled from Hogwarts or not Harry Potter was officially missing in wizarding world, which meant that the Aurors, Ministry of Magic and Dumbledore himself would be looking for him. Quite diligently, maybe even more diligently than they were looking for Sirius. It was only a matter of time before someone would add two and two together and get four. Fudge and Dumbledore might not entertain that idea right away but Severus Snape…

Severus Snape, like Sirius would say, was another bowl of kibble. The man was a Potions genius; if he hadn't gotten himself caught up with the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters he would have gone very far in the field. With some little effort, he could've started his own Potions making company and he would sweep the competition away pretty quickly. Or he could have turned into research and would become the Head of Potions Department at St Mungo's in a matter of maybe five years since receiving his First Class Mastery in Potions. He had clout, charisma and natural talent. It was a pity that it all got wasted on the Dark Lord.

Snape was a Death Eater, just like him and just like him, he had seen the light too late to take back the decision to become a Death Eater. Just like him, Snape had a vested interest in seeing the Dark Lord's fall, at least, as long as Lily Evans lived.

He wouldn't really put it past Snape to convince the Dark Lord that he was spying on Dumbledore, who he had convince that he had changed his allegiance. He could easily convince both maniacs that he was going to spy on the other for their own benefit. It would have been insanely dangerous, and Snape would be walking the very fine line between life and death constantly but if there was someone who could play double agent and remain loyal to his own cause it was Severus Snape.

Then there was also the matter of the cause itself. He wasn't entirely truthful when he told Sirius
and Harry that he didn't get the name of the other listener. He chose to tell the partial truth, that the magical signature of the listeners recorded as the very last thing of the prophecy because it did record as the very last thing of the prophecy. But it didn't change the fact that the initials of the listeners, as well as the speaker, had been seen when the prophecy was being recorded. An S. T. S. had been floating along A. P. W. B. D. and S. P. T. until right before the part about the Dark Lord marking the chosen one as his equal it disappeared and didn't return. Hence the reason why the magic recording the magical signature recorded only Dumbledore's name along with Trelawney's.

Snape didn't attend that meeting on 1st November 1979, for reasons that weren't disclosed at the time or perhaps he had, and Regulus just hadn't see him. He should have, it was one of those grand meetings, when every Death Eater was present, as well as few unmarked supporters that were on their way to officially join the ranks. They were all unmasked. Meetings like these made him feel quite unsettled for a variety of reasons.

He was a good Occlumenist, not an excellent one, he wasn't born with a natural talent like some rare individuals were but he learned, the very hard way, that in order to protect himself and Sirius he needed to be a master of his thoughts and feelings, that he needed to maintain the strongest of facades that everything was fine when it really wasn't.

That particular skill became handy when he realised what a colossal mistake he had made by joining the Dark Lord. It came handier still as the hours trickled into days and then into months and he still lived even though, while still serving the Dark Lord, he no longer served the Dark Lord.

He knew how long it took him to change sides. How long had it taken Snape to realise the enormity of his mistake? To recognise the fact that he painted a bull's eye on the back of the only person he really cared for? It had to have come at some point after Regulus officially died. Or did it come before? It was hard to gauge. Snape was a secretive bastard to begin with. Brilliant, talented, impudent. Oh, he could show some respect when and where respect was due but to someone who truly knew him, who paid him an insane amount of attention it was evident when it was a true respect and when it was a simple placating.

Potions weren't the only area in which Snape was gifted. Fascinated by the Dark Arts he took to curses, hexes and their counters like a duck to water. Through first year and a half he struggled with Transfiguration; he was nowhere near as lousy as Pettigrew had always been, but it didn't come to him as naturally as it came to Sirius or Potter. Snape needed to study hard to receive good grades.

But then halfway through his second year he stumbled into Arithmancy which provided him with a better understanding of the limitations of pretty much everything. Regulus himself had seen it and followed in Snape footsteps, because he had fascinated him from the very beginning.

How come that so much, raw talent and power, could manifest itself in a half-blood, and not even a proper magical half-blood, but an offspring of a witch and a muggle.

It was the fascination with the older boy that led Regulus into challenging Snape that while brilliant at Potions and reasonably well versed in Dark Arts – which earned him in rapid succession a glare, a snort and a very powerful stinging hex into his ribs – he couldn't be good in one of the more subtle and delicate arts of Mencymagic, Legilimency or Occlumency.

After that Regulus, a reasonably practised Occlumenist himself by then– if he wasn't, he would have been flayed for some of the thoughts that went through his head – had been reminded of one of the simplest truths of life. You can't put in front a stubborn and confident arsehole a challenge and tell him that he won't succeed. Really, he should have remembered that after growing up with
Few weeks after that one-sided conversation chess games had begun. At first, Snape accosted him whenever he saw that Regulus had nothing to do, then a little while later he started finding notes in his school-bag with time and place written on it in Snape's tiny and cramped handwriting. In the very beginning, thanks to Grandpa Arcturus's tutoring in chess and playing for ages against Sirius, Regulus was winning. Snape himself was playing pretty unevenly; clearly, he knew the theory but wasn't very well practised, though he had few lucky shots.

Once they removed themselves and their games into one of their private rooms however the conversations had started. At first inconsequential: weather, what the house-elves would prepare for dinner, what are the chances of Slytherin Quidditch team smearing Gryffindor Quidditch team into the pitch.

Easy stuff.

Impersonal stuff.

But conversations required eye contact, it was a behaviour deeply ingrained into young Regulus. When you're talking with someone you should at least try to look at their face if not into their eyes. And Snape's eyes were fascinating, brown like his own but far more darker, so dark that they were nearly black.

So, he looked and that was how he got caught. It didn't occur to him for few months that the bastard was using their games to practice Legilimency on him. Not a Legilimenist himself Regulus couldn't read him but as reasonably practised Occlumenist, he could try and fool Snape into believing that what Snape was seeing was what he was playing. That of course lasted for few matches and few weeks before Snape realised what he was doing. Regulus in the meantime tried to work upon his Legilimency. However once Snape realised what Regulus was doing all bets were off, the games became fast-paced and brutal, each trying to fool the other into believing that they were playing one way while they were really playing the other. They kept playing each other for years, each trying to show the other that he had an upper hand.

Constrained by his upbringing, raised by a supposedly once open homosexual Father until he married his Mother which put him back in the closet, he missed all the signs of budding attraction towards the older boy. Sirius? It was clear to anyone with eyes and a brain that Sirius was as hung up on James Potter as James Potter was on Lily Evans. Snape was just as bad as Potter, if not worse when it came to Evans. It was obvious to practically everyone that all of this Black-Potter-Snape drama steamed from unresolved feelings and sexual tensions that begged to be released.

But then fourth year happened, Regulus' fourth year and their fifth year. Snape opened his bloody mouth after theoretical DADA O.W.L.s exam, Evans took offence, Potter took offence for Evans and Sirius for some reason tried to kill Snape. Regulus suspected why, granted Sirius would never tell it to Harry because he wouldn't want to besmirch Potter's memory, but Regulus was ninety-nine percent sure that the idea to somehow, some way, get rid of Snape, occurred first, not in Sirius's head, but in James Potter's.

It might have been nothing more than a passing thought like, wouldn't our lives be better if someone got rid of Snivellus, but Potter wore his heart on his sleeve and what was in his head ninety-nine percent of the time ended on his tongue, especially when Evans or Snape were involved. All Potter needed was to voice that sentiment to Sirius just once and Sirius, the idiot, would remember and because there was nothing which Sirius would do for James Potter…

Following his escape from 12 Grimmauld Place after his fifth year, Sirius went to the Potters and
stayed there for the entire summer. Then nearly immediately after the school year had started, Potter publicly divorced himself from Sirius and took Lupin and Pettigrew in the divorce. Granted, in retrospect, Lupin had a very good reason to not want anything to do with Sirius but Potter… Potter was the instigator of that divorce. Potter had to have a reason of his own to avoid Sirius like a plague…

Like being made aware that the entire incident happened because of something he said?

Like realising that his best friend's devotion wasn't as platonic as it seemed?

Like discovering that Sirius would literally do anything for Potter to for once in his god-damn life have Potter look at him the same way Sirius looked at him? What Sirius had told him for Potter to fold like a chair under Lupin's suggestion that he didn't want anything to do with Sirius Black?

It was a good thing, for Sirius, that his illusions were shattered in that incident. He fell out of love with Potter, matured, concentrated on his studies, started hanging around sensible people who had a good influence over him. And he had fallen in love once more with someone who was worthy of his love and devotion, granted like with Potter it had taken time for the idiot to, actually say something, and not pine for Mirzam from so close and yet so afar.

In the meantime, Regulus, still unaware of why it was so damn important to him to have the older boy's attention focused on him, worked on Snape. Granted it had taken him nearly an entire year to convince Snape that while hanging around induced Death Eaters was helping him to advance his status in Slytherin, being an actual Death Eater would advance his status even more. What kind of a fool he had been? Not only he signed his name on a dotted line, but he also dragged in another, maybe not so innocent soul, but certainly, one that would have held up longer without his involvement.

Induced and branded Snape was still hung up on Evans and it didn't sit well with his own peers, nor with Bella. So, it was almost immediately suggested to Regulus that he should keep a very close eye on his friend and he had. He pulled the Dark Lord's wish card with his parents and he practically moved into Spinner's End.

The first time he turned up there for a while he thought that he got to a wrong house. He walked around, checked the address he had been given. 113 Spinner's End, Cokeworth. He always felt self-conscious about living in the town-house in the middle of London while majority of his friends (some friends they were) and acquaintances lived in mansions in the country and compared to some of their houses 12 Grimmauld Place seemed tiny and cramped. But Snape's house? It was a tiny one storey house, bracketed from the sides by similar tiny houses. The only difference between Snape's house and the neighbouring houses, at least three on its left and four on its right was that it had an air of being lived in, the windows in there weren't broken, just opened slightly and there was some music coming from inside it.

Snape hadn't expected to see him but after some hesitation, he let him inside. He didn't say a single word when Regulus curiously looked around. From his spot by the door, he could see on narrow stairs leading upstairs, they were littered with bottles filled to a different degree with some liquor that looked much like Firewhiskey except far cheaper. To the left, there was a living room, with a dingy looking fireplace, a couch which seemed to long since seen better days, a rickety table with two chairs. Once he stepped a little to the left through the open door from the living-room he could see small, dingy kitchen, which like the couch, had seen better days.

"I messed up my Potions O.W.L.s and my parents aren't pleased with me," he said the first thing that came to his mind, it was a lie, he did get an Exceed Expectation and his parents were pleased just about right with it but he needed an excuse to spend his time with Snape.
"And what I'm supposed to do about that?" Snape asked sourly. "You had five years of Potions to prepare yourself for it, Black."

"I had," he admitted. "Speaking of preparing, didn't you spend the last six years lending your skills in different areas for a right price? I'm quite sure that in your year you're the only Slytherin that actually passed Potions with a grade higher than Acceptable."

He passed it with a well-earned Outstanding, and he was the only Slytherin in his year that didn't have to bribe Slughorn into letting him into Advanced Potions.

"What you're offering?" asked Snape sceptically.

So, he told him, the wage of a living in tutor, paid at the end of each day. He knew that in that moment he had Snape because Snape's finances had always been limited, his spending frugal. For Merlin's sake, he used to complete homework for his classmates and lower and sometimes higher forms, for a price, not to mention occasional tutoring occasional dunderhead as long as they were paying.

Blessedly he hadn't met Tobias Snape that day, since the old scumbag had been, at the moment, employed and after work he had been out drinking with his mates from work. He hadn't met the older man the next day or the day after. But that meeting eventually came and it wasn't pleasant. The only thing that saved him from being chucked out of the house altogether was Snape's quick comment that his friend was paying for his help with his studies. Tobias, while mindless drunkard, didn't have his brain totally consumed by alcohol, could put two and two together. More money meant more alcohol and more alcohol meant getting sloshed easier or at least on better alcohol.

Regulus also started bringing around food from home, which made Snape scoff at him but after first three tries to turn the food away followed by scoffing that he wasn't anyone's charity case, he relented when Regulus started eating there too. Granted, he had a hearty breakfast in the morning but eating with Snape was the only way for the bastard to accept food. Tobias also accepted free food, didn't matter that it came from the magical house, it was free food and free food meant more money for alcohol.

In the end, it was Snape Senior's messed up thought process that got him in trouble. Because while Regulus was watching Severus, Snape Senior was watching Regulus watching his son, and he was thinking, pretty heavily for someone so brain addled. He somehow got into his head that Regulus's attention wasn't as platonic as it was supposed to be.

Never mind that he was somewhat right, but at the time Regulus was so far in the closet that he was practically prancing in Narnia – an expression he learned much later when he was at university. All that mattered to him was that he could spend a lot of time with the older boy, he could listen to his ideas, theorise with him, after some time and a lot of prodding also laugh with him over stupid things. He wanted to spend his time around Snape, so he continued to ignore Tobias's snipping and had been at his most polite. If anyone ever heard him speak to the man one would think that Tobias Snape was a Dark Lord himself masquerading as a Muggle.

August of that year was unbelievably hot, so hot that one could scramble an egg on the pavement and with Snape Senior's blanket ban on any magic in the house they weren't allowed to use cooling charms and with no air-conditioning in the house they had to substitute one the Muggle way. A wet towel was hung by the window providing some little degree of comforting coolness. Nevertheless, the heat made them lose layers of clothing pretty quickly, to the point of just hanging around in their underwear and under-shirts. They always dressed up when they heard Tobias returning, Regulus's doing, Snape himself couldn't be bothered but by then Snape Senior's comments started getting to Regulus, and he really didn't want to jeopardise his time there.
Maybe if he was less focused on Snape Junior, he would have noticed sooner that Snape Senior was coming back to the house at odd hours, too short to be at work. Maybe if he paid more attention to that scumbag and actually followed him once or twice, he would have realised that Snape Senior once again was unemployed. As it was, he didn't notice until it was too late.

Until one day, at noon, Tobias screamed at Severus from the kitchen that the bread knife was dull and that he should get his arse down there and sharpen it. Too focused on his book, Snape ignored the call; too focused on carefully watching Snape from his vantage point which allowed him unobstructed view of the older boy, Regulus did too and stayed put, just in their underwear, forgetting to dress up.

Being ignored made Snape Senior climb up the stairs, with the bread knife still in his hand and intent to scream at that lazy bastard he called his son in his heart. He was suspiciously quiet for someone so drunk and they didn't hear him until the door to Severus's room opened and Snape Senior stopped in the doorway.

The very moment he saw them on Severus's bed, just in their underwear, innocently reading their books Snape Senior lunged at them, with a knife raised in his right hand, ready to strike. Regulus's Quidditch reflex kicked in immediately, he was jumping from the bed, ready to wrestle the knife from the older man's hand before he even realised what he was doing. Blessedly, he was left-handed while Snape Senior was right-handed. Blessedly, he managed to grab Snape's wrist before the knife had done any more damage to him than simply sliding over his right forearm.

Unfortunately, he was too small, too scrawny and too weak to hold his own against a bigger opponent and he didn't manage to get Snape Senior to drop the knife to the floor. Maybe if he did…

As it was the knife was still in Snape's hand and he even managed to raise it to strike with more fervour. Led by instinct Regulus let him, turning his right side away just enough to not get hit again while dropping down his left arm and when Snape Senior struck again, he was ready. The knife swished through the air and when it found itself on the level of Regulus's waist Regulus grabbed Snape's right hand with his own, twisted it around and pushed it forward with all the strength he had in him.

Snape Senior fell back to the floor with a grunt, and a loud thud, with a bread knife sticking out from his chest like a mast. Regulus froze in shock. He was hoping to incapacitate the man, maybe grizzle him a little, just enough for him to back the fuck off but he wasn't hoping for that. He was planning to defend himself and Severus, not to kill a man, and not just any man, but Snape's father. Tobias was a bastard, drunken skunk and all-around scumbag but for Merlin's sake, he was still Severus's father.

Back then he didn't really understand it, granted at times he felt so bloody angry with his own father that he wouldn't help him if the man was drowning but he wasn't angry enough to shove him under the wheels of the oncoming car, that feeling came to him years later, after…

He didn't know for how long he stood there, with his right arm out, still frozen in the position he shoved Tobias until a gentle hand wrapped itself over his wrist and a gentle, calm voice said, "You're bleeding. Come with me."

It was then when he looked at Snape, in shock, with a whisper that he didn't mean it on the tip of his tongue, but the look in Snape's eyes stopped him from uttering it. Snape's eyes were shining but not with tears, and there was something in them which Regulus didn't understand until much later on. Relief, naked, unbounded relief. He had seen it many years later when helping Child Protective Services he came to the first house from which they were supposed to remove an abused pair of
siblings, four and seven respectively.

Snape patched him up, with a healing spell of his own making, but he didn't have any dittany there to finish it, so he reminded Regulus to use it once he returned home. Then, unbothered by the fact that he just seen his friend kill his own father, he proceed to plan what to do with Tobias' corpse. Reporting the incident to Muggle police was out of the question, same with the Aurors, they were both branded Death Eaters and one good look at their forearms, would land both of them in Azkaban just for being Death Eaters. Granted, Regulus could swing self-defence, but it still was a Death Eater attack on an innocent Muggle.

So, Tobias Snape simply disappeared.

Then and there.

If anyone asked (no one did) he didn't return home from one of his drinking binges. He had done it before after all.

Snape transfigured his corpse into a log before he promptly threw it into the fire. Then he sat in front of the fireplace, till the wee hours of the morning, in sweltering heat, until the log burned down to ash. Regulus stayed by his side until Snape sent him back home and told him that for his own safety he should never come back there.

And he didn't. Perhaps it was shock which made him listen or perhaps was it guilt.

He killed a man.

True it was in self-defence, but it really couldn't have happened to a better man.

But facts didn't change, he killed a man.

Someone's father.

Granted, all around bastard but he still killed him. Still pushed a knife right through his heart… Snape had every right to hate him even if he pretended not to.

Tobias Snape wasn't the only man he killed. He was only the first. But that came later, when there was no hiding behind being underage, when recruiting stopped being enough for the Dark Lord. When Bellatrix stood by his side, goading him, that he was as weak and useless as his brother. When Rabastan wrapped his arm around his shoulders and told her that ickle Reggie could do it.

He could do it. There was enough rage inside him to inflict pain and death on people who didn't do him any harm. He couldn't cast Unforgivables, not at first, but he knew a lot of dark curses to substitute for them and in the middle of a frenzied raid not many paid attention to him, too busy with their own conquests.

But then that small derelict farm in Ireland happened and Bellatrix who was leading the raid forbid their companions from doing anything until Regulus proved once and for all that he wasn't a wimp.

Maybe if Fiona Roberts had been a blue-eyed blonde, he would never leave that farm alive. But she wasn't. She was brown-eyed, black-haired and even at a wand-point, she had enough spite left in her to physically fight against her captors, to goad them and call them worthless cowards.

Coward.

Worthless.
Useless.

Shame of my flesh.

A foul by-product of my blood.

Good for nothing weakling.

Gryffindor masquerading for Slytherin.

You're going to get yourself sorted in Gryffindor too, aren't you wimp? Answer me when I'm talking to you! Fine, if you don't want to talk, I'll make you talk.

Thin, long-fingered hands wrapped around his neck, choking him. The world greying around the edges. The burn in his lungs. The smell of urine. The feel of the wet material on his skin.

Sirius! Save me! Please!

But he wasn't coming because he couldn't hear him. Because he was miles and miles away and he was safe. No one was threatening to kill him.

The look on his father's when finally returned home and found him passed out in the pool of his own piss. No concern, just this dispassionate look on his face and this daunting question, "So what did you tell her?"

A new regiment of potions.

None of them worked.

Waking up to his mother's face over his, with her hands wrapped around his throat. Who are you? What have you done with my son?

Sleeping in closets or empty trunks in the attic. Praying for Sirius to come back home and save him from this madness that their family home became.

Begging Grandma Melania to stay with them after Christmas because there was something wrong with mum. The look on his father's face when Grandpa Arcturus told him that until he won't manage to get his wife under control until then Regulus would be staying with them.

Peace and bliss, being pampered by his grandparents. Flying around the countryside on his broom. Being finally free. Having that freedom yanked away one day when his parents turned up for lunch. His mother all smiles again, so happy to see him, his father telling him that he would be returning home with them.

The canning he received next day when his father left for work and the elves were busy with what elves were usually busy with after breakfast.

"You will never run away again. Because if you do, I'll find you and I'll kill you dead. Do you understand? Nod if you understand. Why aren't you nodding?"

Nodding. Waking at the crack of dawn to make sure that mother took her potions. Wearing long-sleeved and highly collared shirts to cover up bruises. Telling Grandma Melania that everything was fine when it really wasn't. Sirius returning, being told to stay and watch when their mother beat him. Sirius edging her, even after Regulus begged him not too. Following mother around, dosing her with sleeping draughts so she wouldn't wake in the middle of the night and try to kill
Sirius.

Learning how to ward his own bedroom, Sirius's too. Wards against harmful intent and anti-apparation ones. Like a mantra, like a prayer.

Finally leaving for Hogwarts. Getting sorted into Slytherin because he wouldn't dare to end in any other house. Deliberately messing up his potion to land in the hospital wing with third-degree burns just to stay at Hogwarts during Christmas break. Swimming in the Great Lake during the night so he could develop pneumonia just to not come back home for Easter break.

Convincing his father during the summer to send mother to a very private clinic in Italy that specialised in mind healing where they could fine tune her potions. The blessed school year of peace without needing to return home for either of the breaks.

More wards. More potions. More choking. Shielding Sirius from everything he could shield him. Being furious with him for edging mother, for causing him more pain. Not knowing back then that while Regulus was trying to shield him from their mother Sirius was shielding him from their father.

Avada Kedavra.

Fiona Roberts fell dead on the floor.

It got easier after that. All he had to do was see his mother's face. He was good enough Occlumenist to swing that. More faces. Adults. Children. Men and women. It didn't matter because he found the key to survive. That's what always mattered.

His survival.

Until one day in June of his seventh year when ashen-faced Mirzam Verascez came to Hogwarts and pulled him out of Transfiguration class. She told him that she and Sirius were ambushed by the Death Eaters, ten against two. They managed to take down five of them, but the others overpowered Sirius while she was trying to shield their victims from their curses. How they disappeared laughing when Sirius fell down. How Sirius might not make it until next morning.

He was there that night. Keeping vigil, along with the others. Hidden under Verascez's Auror issued invisibility cloak. He had every right to be there because it was his fucking brother, but he just couldn't stand the idea of being seen by those people whom his brother called family.

Witnessing Sirius's delirious confession of his feelings towards Mirzam while the rest of them headed to the teashop to have a coffee and a pastry. Mirzam admitting to feverish Sirius that she returned his feelings, before soothing him enough for Sirius to fall asleep again.

Revealing himself to Mirzam after Sirius had fallen asleep, giving her the cloak back. Telling her to take good care of that idiot. Running away so he wouldn't be seen by the others. Sneaking into Hogwarts, not sleeping for two days straight. Reading letters from Mirzam that updated him on Sirius's progress. He was expected to make a full recovery.

Next raid. Another farm in rural Ireland, near a small village he never got the name of. This time a family of six, young parents of three and a mother of one of them. Avery, Rabastan, Rodolphus, Bellatrix and Lucius. Each of them hounding their own victim. Bellatrix, Lucius and Rodolphus the adults. Rabastan, Avery and him the children. Shrieks of the older girls when those bastards raped them mingled with cries for help and begging for mercy from their parents and grandmother.

And the cot in a tiny bedroom just big enough to fit it and a changing table. The boy inside the cot.
Couldn't be more than a year old. Curly blonde hair and blue eyes. Quiet, curious, so innocent. Just watching the man who came to kill him.

Regulus knew that none of them would leave that farm alive. They will be tortured until they won't have the strength to scream anymore and maybe if one of his companions would be feeling merciful enough, they will finally find themselves on the receiving end of a Killing Curse. If Bellatrix won't bring the whole place down, that's it.

It should have been simple. His job was the easiest job of all. But he couldn't find it in himself to cause the baby any harm even though he needed to kill him. He had to kill him, or Bellatrix would kill him.

He looked around the room searching for something that could help him kill the baby in any other way than by magic when his gaze had fallen on the wall above the cot on which smeared in a multitude of colours was MARTIN, R and N were written in reverse, M was slightly loopy and T and I were almost the same letter and there were colourful handprints around it.

That's when it hit him. He was about to murder a baby in its very own cot. He couldn't even do it by magic which meant that he will have to use his own hands to wrap one around baby Martin's neck while he would place the other over his mouth.

Thin, long-fingered hands wrapped around his neck, choking him. The world greying around the edges. The burn in his lungs. The smell of urine. The feel of the wet material on his skin.

Sirius! Save me! Please!

But Sirius wasn't there. He was still recovering from the attack, during which he had saved another family like that. There was no one in there but him and his bloody comrades and their victims. Even if he somehow managed to get the word out and call for Aurors it would be too late for the rest of the family to be saved.

But Martin? Martin, he could save. He just needed… A pillow on the windowsill, just as big as the baby and while he was nowhere near as good as Sirius at Transfiguration, he was quite skilled at transfiguring stuff into dead things. Stupid teenage pranks that kept going around Halloween that made the girls, and some boys, scream in shock and disgust upon finding one.

How hard could it be to transfigure a pillow into a dead baby? Animals were easy but human transfiguration required human particles infused into transfigured objects. Would spit do or would he need blood? How he was supposed to draw blood from a baby without attracting attention?

As it turned out spit would do, and pillow Martin was just as creepy, alright creepier, than a dead rat. Sirius would have been proud if he saw it, for about two seconds before he would arrest him and drag his arse to Azkaban.

Getting away from that farm was a bloody horror. He couldn't use the stairs because he would have run into the others, so he had to climb out through the window. With a baby in his arms, blessedly placed under silencing charm for the duration of the neck-breaking trek. As he was hurrying away from the farm, he conjured a basket and just enough blankets to wrap the baby inside them under heavy duty warming charms.

He couldn't risk getting away completely. For a moment he entertained that thought but he knew Bellatrix, he could swing getting lost for few minutes but if she or any other of his companions found him running away with a baby both of their fates would have been forfeited.
So, he only got as far as he could to maintain a safe distance just in case Bellatrix decided to burn the farm down to the very ground. He placed the baby inside the basket and put around it the strongest wards he could before he hurried back to the farm where he pretended that he lost himself in the outer buildings after he killed the baby.

He was dead right about the need to hurry away and having a good distance between the farm and the baby because Bellatrix did burn the place down once she and the rest were finished with the rest of the family.

Congratulating themselves on a job well done, each of them disappeared in their own direction. Suspecting that he might be followed Regulus apparated back to Hogsmeade and pretended to make his way back to the castle but as soon as he made sure that he wasn't followed by anyone he disapparated and apparated back to the field where he left little Martin.

He almost cried in relief when he found the boy sleeping soundly in the basket. Unaware that his family was dead, uncaring about the blaze that was consuming the house in which he lived.

Then Regulus cried for real, out of sheer bloody terror. What the fuck he had done? Okay, he saved a baby. A completely Muggle baby he couldn't bring home even if he wanted and he didn't want to. The house was barely safe for him and he was a bloody adult. He couldn't take him back to Hogwarts either. Maybe he should have left him with the rest of the family. That would have been easy and in fact, he could still swing it. He just needed to turn around and get within just enough range to levitate the baby back into….

NO! He didn't save the kid, at the expense of his own skin, just to kill him. That wouldn't do. But what to do? Sirius would know, Sirius could advise him… He just needed a bloody good excuse for how he happened to acquire a Muggle baby, on Friday, during a school year, while he should be at Hogwarts and freaking out about his N.E.W.T.s results.

Oh, well, he made his bed and he should sleep in it. No lies, just the truth and whatever Sirius would do with him after it would be nothing he didn't deserve. So, he disapparated and apparated into Sirius's building. As quietly as he could he hurried upstairs and knocked on Sirius's door, uncaring about the hour or the consequences of his actions.

But he didn't find Sirius inside it. The one who opened the door for him was a bleary-eyed Mirzam. She took one good look at him and his sleeping cargo before she dragged him inside, took the basket away from him, placed it on the table and proceed to cast diagnostic spells on the sleeping baby. Only once she was pleased with the state of the baby, she turned to him, pointed at the chair and said firmly, "Sit and explain yourself."

And he did. He sang everything like a bloody canary. From the very beginning. From induction into Death Eaters – he showed her his left arm – through Snape-sitting and killing Tobias Snape, through the names of people he recruited for the Dark Lord, each raid he participated in. He spoke of killing his mother, no, of imagining he was while he killed Fiona Roberts, her unfortunate resemblance to the witch who raised him doing her no favours. By the time he got into describing the last raid, he was a sobbing, snivelling mess that long since abandoned his chair and was on his knees before the witch in front of him, holding on her dressing-gown to keep himself relatively upright.

Once he was done, he waited for his sentence, with his head hung low, unable to look into her eyes. How could he? He just told her how many people he killed, the atrocities he had done for the Dark Lord and in the Dark Lord's name.

He waited for what felt like hours, still not daring to raise his head. How could he?
Until finally she said quietly, "Repeat after me."

He nodded into her dressing-gown.

"Confiteor Deo omnipotenti."

"Confiteor Deo omnipotenti," he repeated.

"Et vobis fraterni."

"Et vobis fratres."

"Quia peccavi nimis."

"Quia peccavi nimis."

"Cogitatione, verbo."

"Cogitatione, verbo."

"Opere et omissione."

"Opere et omissione."

"Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa."

"Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa."

"Ideo precor beatam Mariam semper Virginem."

"Ideo precor beatam Mariam semper Virginem."

"Omnes Angelos et Sanctos."

"Omnes Angelos et Sanctos."

"Et vos, fratres."

"Et vos, fratres."

"Orare pro me ad Dominum Deum nostrum."

"Orare pro me ad Dominum Deum nostrum."

"Again," she said softly. "Until you can say it on your own without my help. Until you can feel it."

So, he did, stumbling for words, forgetting parts and twisting them around, repeating after her when he got them wrong until the words etched into his brain and he could keep going on his own. Until his voice was nothing but a whisper. With each repetition, he grew calmer, more at peace with himself. Whatever would come, would come and he would bear it.

"Confiteor Deo omnipotenti et vobis, fratres, quia peccavi nimis cogitatione, verbo, opere, et omissione: mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. Ideo precor beatam Mariam semper Virginem, omnes Angelos et Sanctos, et vos, fratres, orare pro me ad Dominum Deum nostrum," he said for the last time, his voice barely a whisper.

He tried again but couldn't get his voice to work properly. So, he sighed and finally sat down on
his hunches.

"Feeling better?" she asked gently.

He cleared his throat before he managed to whisper, "I wouldn't call it better, calmer maybe, more peaceful."

"Good," she sighed making him finally look at her face.

To his shock, he found no disdain or disgust in there. Just this weird, serene soft look. It baffled him.

"You're forgiven," she said softly.

"But..." he tried to protest.

"Forgiven," she interrupted him gently. "You're forgiven, Regulus."

"How can you even say that?" he mumbled. "You know what I did!"

"I do," she sighed. "Believe me, I do."

"But..." he started.

"No buts," she shook her head. "Am I supposed to apply the same measure to the man who realised the wrongness of things he had done and was supposed to do and didn't do them as I would to a man who knows that what he does is wrong and still does them?"

"You're bloody weird," he muttered.

"Five years in Catholic school. It gets under your skin even if you don't want to," she shrugged. "Especially if you don't want to," she grimaced. "I didn't want to, so I learned the hard way. That confession always made me feel at peace and unlike sister Constance, for most of the time I had a clean conscience."


"Witch, Muggle-raised half-blood, nice to met you," she said.

"Half-blood?" he asked curiously. "But aren't you..." he started and stopped himself.

"Heard of Solomon Babbling and that he can't keep his prick in his pants?" she asked pointedly. "I'm one of these things that happen when a man can't keep it in his pants. Funnier still, I'm older than his actual daughter."

"And she used to be your best friend," he finished.

"Still is," she nodded. "And believe me the irony of him renouncing her too is not lost on me," she grimaced. "But enough about me. What about you?"

"What you mean by that?" he asked suspiciously. "What about me? Aren't you supposed to be a bloody Auror or something? I've seen your badge, you showed it to me a few days ago."

"So?" she shrugged.

"Death Eater," he wriggled his left arm before he pointed his left hand at her and said, "Auror."
"Me Tarzan, you Jane," she muttered.

"What?" he mumbled.

"Nothing," she smiled. "It's just Sirius," she sighed before she narrowed her eyes as she looked at him, "But if you say something about a banana, I will smack you."

"Okay." he sighed. "No to these yellow fruity thingies, I get it," he added and shrugged, "But still?"

"Are you really that eager to go to Azkaban?" she asked pointedly. "I can get you there without a problem. You have a one-way ticket on you. But do you really want to go there?"

"I have a choice?" he asked sceptically.

"Of course, you do," she said simply. "You had a choice back at the farm. You had a choice of running away with the baby. You had a choice when you came in here. You could have gone straight to the Ministry and could have gotten whichever Auror is on duty. But you came here."

"Because I wanted to come clean to Sirius," he admitted with a sigh. "It wouldn't make it any different in the end but..." he paused. "I wanted to have him hear it from me rather than from official interrogation transcripts."

"He's still in St Mungo's," she sighed. "The healers are worried about his heart."

"Didn't you take care of that already?" he asked pointedly.

"I did," she smiled fondly. "But I mean it literally. The damage to his heart was quite extensive and while restorative potions are working, they aren't working as well as they should. So, he's one very bored and very unhappy camper on a very strict bed rest."

"He has to be thoroughly miserable," he sighed.

"You can go and cheer him up," she shrugged.

"Reckon at which point I should mention that I'm going to Azkaban?" he asked pointedly.

"None of it since you're not going," she said simply.

"Didn't you swear to protect and serve?" he muttered.

"I did," she nodded.

"So?" he threw his hands in the air. "Serve and protect. You have a Death Eater confessing to his sins in front of you. I can even provide you with a location of the farm."

"And what good it would do?" she asked simply.

"There will be one Death Eater less on the streets," he pointed out.

"And in about a week or two there will be about ten or more back on it, pull the other leg," she snorted.

"You're missing a point," he protested as he tried to get up.

"No, Regulus, it's you who are missing a point," she shook her head before she offered him her
hand and helped him onto his feet. "Your arrest is not going to change anything. Literally, nothing will change. You'll spend the rest of your life in prison. It'll destroy your family..."

"Some family it is," he snorted.

"Some of that family still cares for you deeply," she said pointedly. "You don't even have an idea how much," she sighed. "You might not have spoken to each other in years but for Merlin's sake, you're his younger brother. Him running away from home didn't change that. He's been worrying himself sick that you would join Death Eaters, granted it didn't occur to him that you might have already joined but he's been ridiculously optimistic about the Dark Lord's recruiting practices."

"And you weren't?" he asked.

"Aidan Hopkins was in our year," she grimaced. "That's how he was planning to pick up pure-blood girls. By bloody showing off his Dark Mark. He made a tactical mistake by picking up Bathsheda literally the very moment he stepped onto the train. She reported him to Auror Office before the train even properly left England," she shrugged.

"So, he wasn't killed by Death Eaters," he murmured.

"No, he was picked up by the Aurors from the train and his mates had their memories modified. Bathsheda got away by promising that she won't mention it to anyone," she explained.

"Except you," he smirked.

"I don't count as anyone," she shrugged. "I'm her sister," she added. "There were very little things we didn't share. She always looked out for me just like I always looked out for her. Just like you and Sirius."

"He doesn't know," he whispered. "He couldn't have known," he mumbled.

"He didn't," she admitted. "Otherwise he would never leave you behind. You know that. If he ever had an inkling of suspicions that things in that house were as bad for you as they were for him, he would never leave you behind."

"He couldn't know," he sighed. "I couldn't let him know how bad it was. There was nothing he could do to stop it. How could he stop it? He was just a kid like me."

"The same way he broke the circle in the first place," she answered. "Granted the system here is rigged against the victims but it still works, Reg. If I could fool it for years without really knowing how it works what makes you think that he wouldn't? He would look out for you, he will look out for you. Always."

"Always?" he whispered. "Even with this?" he asked as he rolled up his sleeve.

"Always," she said softly as she placed her right hand over the mark. "You're his brother and you'll always remain his brother. There's nothing he wouldn't do for you, just like there's nothing you wouldn't do for him."

"This," he mumbled as he placed his right hand over hers, "is a sign of lifelong servitude. There's no way out, no quitting, no I'm done with it. I made a horrible mistake and I'll pay for it dearly. I can't change that."

"But you can, don't you understand it?" she said softly. "What you've done tonight speaks more of you than the mark you carry on your arm. You could have killed this little boy. Or you might have
simply put a silencing charm on him and do nothing in hope that Bellatrix would bring the whole place down around him. But you didn't. You saved him. You carried him away to safety….

"I left his family to die..." he whispered.

"Yes," she whispered. "But could you honestly take down Avery, Lestranges and Malfoy single-handedly?"

"Avery maybe," he sighed. "For all of his posturing, he isn't the sharpest knife in the drawer," he grimaced. "If I caught them at the right moment, I could take down Rabastan and Rodolphus but Bella and Lucius..." he shook his head.

"You did the best you could do with what you had," she sighed. "You saved an innocent life tonight. Take some comfort in that."

"I killed more than that," he grumbled.

"Yes," she nodded.

"And?" he asked expectantly. "You don't even want to arrest me. Why? I know faces, names, places. What's stopping you from taking advantage of that?"

"The fact that their victims are mostly dead," she said simply. "I won't deny that your testimony would have brought down quite a lot of interesting people. But here's the thing. We aren't talking about a smuggling ring or a simple criminal activity. We are talking about a full-on war. Everything wizarding society stands for against one megalomaniac with an army of supporters. And how that ended in the past?"

"Not very well," he sighed.

"Exactly," she nodded. "Ministry knows that, they need a regular police force as much as they need soldiers. Sadly, the wizarding world isn't as organised as Muggle world where you get a clear distinction between one and the other. That's why the training had been cut down from three years to six months of solid theory and then apprenticing under trained Aurors until trainees are capable of handling themselves mostly on their own. Because they need police as much as they need an army. And that army wasn't big to begin with. Still isn't. We learn stuff too late to make a difference."

"You need an insider, someone who knows about attacks beforehand," he pointed out. "A spy."

"Exactly," she smiled at him.

Then it hit him with the force of a well-hit bludger, straight into solar plexus. How fast she figured that one out? Not right away, that was certain, but perhaps when he was praying in front of her… She had plenty of time to figure out what to do with what he presented her.

"I'll be lucky if I survive a week," he snorted.

"If you're going to be stupid about it, you won't even last a weekend," she said simply. "So, for your sake, just as much as Sirius's, don't be stupid about it. In fact, if you don't feel like it, the very moment you walk out of this place you can forget that this conversation even happened."

"I can do that?" he asked sceptically.

"Can you?" she asked pointedly. "Think about it. Think about what you did tonight. Think hard if
you can handle it."

"And if I can't?" he sighed.

"Then no hard feelings," she shrugged. "If we ever met again, I promise to give you a chance to get yourself caught so you can confess what you just told me on record. But if you can, you know where to find me."

"What will become of Martin?" he changed the subject.

"I know a good place," she sighed. "They will take care of him and he's a baby so there's a chance that he will get adopted quickly by people who don't have children of their own."

"Thank you," he whispered. "I promise to think about it."

"Okay," she smiled at him and suddenly she hugged him tightly. "Take care of yourself, Reggie," she whispered.

So, he did. He took care of himself. He allowed himself to take comfort in saving an innocent child from a premature death. Luckily, he didn't have to participate in any raids for the next two weeks. The Dark Lord didn't want those who had a chance to infiltrate the Ministry to get caught before applying for their jobs. Especially those who stood a chance to get into Department of Mysteries. Rookwood was already in but due to his outgoing and friendly personality, he was elected by the Head of the Department to collaborate with the French Ministry of Magic on a very secret project. The Dark Lord, while not very pleased with losing his spy in Department of Mysteries decided that losing him for six months, from June to November, was worth gaining more contacts abroad. So, to France Rookwood headed.

Blessedly.

As a freshly induced Death Eater Regulus had no hard feelings towards Rookwood. He even liked the man, Augustus was intelligent and resourceful, very charming to a certain extent. Blessedly by then, Regulus learned from his mistake with Snape that while some people might be interested in what he had to say on an academic level their interest in his knowledge didn't mean that they were interested in him beyond having an intellectual conversation with him.

Rookwood was an asset for the Dark Lord, so he didn't participate in many raids, much like Snape, who was quickly pulled from what Bella called fun into research. In fact, Regulus was sure that those two collaborated on certain projects for the Dark Lord. And if Regulus had something to say about it, he had none at the moment, he was very interested in joining them. He just needed to prove his worth elsewhere rather than during the raids. Preferably without Rookwood hanging over his shoulder.

He didn't intend to wind up in Hall of Prophecy, he was aiming to end up in Brain Room seeing that he was far more interested in Mencymagic than Prophecies and he would have gotten in there if it wasn't for the fact that one of the Unspeakables working in Hall of Prophecy had gone into an early labour, other two caught some very mysterious disease and finally the fourth one decided to quit his job altogether. That made the Hall of Prophecy severely understaffed and the Head of the Department of the Mysteries, Edmund Pickle, decided that Regulus, while still training to be a full-on Unspeakable, could start working in Hall of Prophecy, like a full-time Unspeakable.

It didn't sit well with Regulus, but he gritted his teeth and accepted the assignment. Unlike the work in other rooms work in Hall of Prophecy was rather easy. All he had to do was read old books, old diaries and old papers while keeping an eye and ear on the alarm, which might or might
not sound, one never knew.

It was a tediously boring job. He loved research, but he loved research that led to some sort of an effect and what he was doing was playing a guessing game with help of history books. He loved history on its own; in fact, he was one of those sacred few who achieved an Outstanding in History of Magic on both O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s because he was interested in the history of wizarding world beyond of the dribble which Binns taught in his classes. But these two together while what he really wanted, no *needed*, to do was just a few rooms away? It was pure torture.

In the end that was what got him into trouble. Sheer boredom with his research and internal struggle with his life choices. While he didn't outright say no to Mirzam's offer he didn't say yes either. Luckily the Dark Lord, believing that he needed some time to adjust and gain enough footing and connections in the Department of Mysteries left him in peace for the first two weeks of his new job.

If only he chose to question his life choices at his desk rather than while walking around the room to shake off slight sleepiness at three o'clock in the morning. He sat ten N.E.W.T.s for Merlin's sake and got Outstanding in most of them. He had Third Class Masteries in Defence Against the Dark Arts and Arithmancy and instead of doing something meaningful he was stuck in Hall of Prophecy as a glorified night guard. On top of that, he was a Death Eater questioning his place at the side of a megalomaniac.

Maybe he could convince the Dark Lord that the Department of Mysteries wasn't for him. Rookwood thrived in there, but Regulus just could see himself ageing as a glorified night guard. But if not Department of Mysteries then what else he could do? He flunked Herbology and he was a Death Eater, so he couldn't get into Aurors. He could go and work for Gringotts as a Curse-breaker, Goblins didn't care much about the Dark Lord, as long as he wasn't doing anything to them, and it would be good to have a spy inside the bank.

If only he didn't bang his head against that blood shelf. But he had, hard enough, for nearly all of the prophecies gathered on the shelf to rattle slightly from the force, except one that simply rolled down the shelf and hit the floor before he had a chance to catch it out of pure Quidditch reflex even though somewhere deep inside he knew that he shouldn't touch it.

Before his eyes swam an image of a pearly-white figure with long and curly hair falling around her face.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies," the figure had spoken.

He stared at the shattered glass on the floor then at the shelf at the label that read:

31st October 1960

C. S. T.

*Dark Lord and?*

The next thought that passed through his head was that he was lucky to be alone, so no one saw him destroying the department's property. With a flick of his wand he reassembled the glass orb but even though whole again it didn't look right. For a few minutes he toyed with it enough to
foggy its insides and coat it with dust before he put it back on the shelf. Once there he poured into
the orb the nastiest curses and hexes he knew. Just to fool anyone who would be stupid enough to
catch it.

Once done with it, he returned to his desk, found *The Small Book of Known Seers*, ironically
named because it was quite thick and written in a bloody tiny cursive and gone for letter T. He
skimmed through short biographies of all seers whose last name started with a letter T looking for
a T, C. S. He found quite a lot of T, C's, about thirty of them and six times he even found a T, C. S.
but after checking the dates he discarded their identities seeing that they were either long dead or
not yet born or at the very least incapable of saying anything at the time. Like Charlotte Serenity
Thaw, his Ravenclaw classmate, who was born on 1st October 1960 and at the time prophecy was
made was far more interested in soiling her diapers than in becoming a renown seer. Even once she
became aware of her gift it seemed that her inner eye had a great perchance for predicting the
weather and her prophecies always concerned local natural disasters. It was an interesting bit of
information but hardly useful, other than knowing for certain that Lottie Thaw was the weather-
forecaster one should listen too.

He struck gold with the seventh name.

**Trelawney, Cassandra Sybill, (1st January 1861 – 1st January 1961).**

*Aided many Ministry of Magic offices as well as Gringotts and a number of law firms. Specialised
in uncovering the unknown, helped explain a number of suspicious disappearances, helped in
settling inheritance disputes. Ironically estranged with her own son Perseus, grandson Killian and
great-grandson Patrick for leading Trelawney's Travelling Carnival (the worst established
carnival that ever existed) upon her death she passed her fortune to numerous charities.*

Under the biography was a list of prophecies she made listing the numbers of rows and shelves.
He skimmed down to the number that interested him. Row seventy-seven, shelf twenty-first,
seventh orb. He glanced back at the shelf, the numbers matched so it had to be Trelawney.

Except, why that bloody thing dislodged itself from the shelf and decided to fall down on the floor
in front of him while the other prophecies did not?

He spent the rest of his shift researching that. He knew that only Keeper of the Prophecies or
someone to whom the prophecy referred could remove it from the shelf without dire consequences.
But he didn't remove it and he wasn't the Keeper of the Prophecies, technically he wasn't even a
fully trained Unspeakable. Only someone who heard the original prophecy being made could be a
Keeper of one and he wasn't even born when it was made.

Then his shift had ended, and he returned home, locked himself up in his room, for the first time in
a long time not bothering to take care about what his mother and father were doing. They could kill
each other for all he cared for.

He managed to get few hours of uneasy sleep before he returned to work for another night-shift and
he spent it at going through the department's employment records from the year of 1960 intent to
find the probable name of the actual Keeper of that bloody prophecy. He found his initial suspects
at around four o'clock in the morning and once he did, so he consulted employment records once
again only to discover that both of his suspects were dead, for at least few years. One lost a battle
with Dragon Pox while the other committed a suicide via walking through the Veil of Death.

Once he exhausted that avenue he threw himself further into the research to find the answer to that
burning question. Why that bloody thing had fallen from the shelf right in front of him? The
simplest and most obvious answer was that he met the requirement which Cassandra set upon that
poor unfortunate soul that was supposed to bring down the Dark Lord but that thought seemed ridiculous the very moment it passed through his head.

But it passed through his head and like a stone thrown into calm water left a ripple in his mind. He tried to ignore it at first, by burrying himself further in the books but words on the page didn't make the echo of what he heard and what he knew go away.

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It couldn't have been him. Granted, his parents haven't been marked Death Eaters, but they did sympathise with the cause and did nothing to stop him from joining, in fact, they encouraged it.

His father was a politician, he was both a member of the Wizengamot and Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, a position which he gained after spending ten years in International Magical Office of Law. He would have made a good Death Eater; not only he was well-versed in Dark Arts and was ruthless and cruel enough to use them when a fancy struck him, but he was also a seemingly very amenable and well-connected gentleman, who might have been regarded as a tad conservative fellow. He also knew very well how to use his public image. That public image was everything to him and it infuriated Bella who believed that the family's lack of open support in the Dark Lord was a treachery. Oh, he supported him from the sidelines, mostly financially and by sending his way far more open individuals that were actually inclined to join the Dark Lord but he never took the mark himself.

And the Dark Lord let him. Apparently, the Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation and prior to that a member of International Magical Office of Law left unmarked but still supporting the Dark Lord's cause was worth more to the Dark Lord politically than a marked Death Eater. He even once confirmed, in a private conversation with Uncle Cygnus, away from Bellatrix, that he defied the Dark Lord's invitation not just once but three times before he and Sirius were even born. How he managed to walk away from each of these conversations with the Dark Lord alive was a mystery.

The same happened with his mother. The invitation had been issued at least once before she left Hogwarts and had to be repeated again at some point before she married father. And when it came to inviting her to join him, the Dark Lord suffered from the worst case of a bad timing known to a man. Once it happened when Phineas Nigellus, was visiting her and regarding her with his tales as the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

Obviously, after realising that there was no one there and that Headmaster Phineas Nigellus Black had been long dead and that Walburga Black was in fact talking to an empty armchair, the Dark Lord took his answer and took his leave. At least that was what she claimed happened. When he heard it for the first time Regulus didn't believe it but the older he grew the more he realised that mother's hallucinations always made sense to her even if they didn't make sense to anyone, after realising that there was no one there and that Headmaster Phineas Nigellus Black had been long dead and that Walburga Black was in fact talking to an empty armchair, the Dark Lord took his answer and took his leave. At least that was what she claimed happened. When he heard it for the first time Regulus didn't believe it but the older he grew the more he realised that mother's hallucinations always made sense to her even if they didn't make sense to anyone else.

Curiously enough the Dark Lord came back again, a few years later after she and his father got
married and were already expecting Sirius's arrival sometime in the fall. By that point, she was, finally, diagnosed with a Permanent Confusion Disorder, a rare mental infirmity and not a very well documented one, therefore untreatable.

Only many years later, when he described her symptoms to a Muggle psychiatrist, after removing anything magical from the story, he learned that she might have been suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. It explained why her potions regime for years had been touch and go, some worked splendidly for a while before they stopped working, some didn't work at all.

On the top of that, when she was pregnant first with Sirius and then later with Regulus, she couldn't take anything other than calming draughts and not very often on that. So, when the Dark Lord returned, he found her quite heavily pregnant and at her most lunatic, talking to both Phineas Nigellus and his wife Ursula, both long dead by that time and partly arguing with father that she was caring a dog, not a child.

She hadn't directly said no, but father had. He explained the condition to the Dark Lord and the tentative prognosis the healers presented him with. Granted the only thing that actually prevented her from joining at that very moment was her pregnancy, but father implied that rather than a sound follower she would always be a liability. So, the Dark Lord walked away with another no for an answer and he didn't return for her.

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Although his birth certificate claimed that he was born on 1st August 1961, at 12:02 AM he knew that it was only official record. Lola was present during the delivery, hovering at the sidelines, ready to take care of the baby from the very first moments after his birth. Unlike the healer she knew the little quirks of the house, like the fact that the clock in his parents' bedroom, in which he was born, was running three minutes ahead of the normal time.

So even though his birthday had always been publicly celebrated by the family on 1st August, Lola always had a small gift for him placed in his bedroom on 31st July.

Once Sirius was old enough to question her about it, she told him why she did it and from next year on for as long as Sirius still lived with the family his gift for Regulus was always given to him on the day of his actual birthday.

It was hard to tell whatever or not his parents knew or bothered to care about the actual date since the party was always on 1st August, but Sirius and Lola always did. They always remembered that he was born literally as the seventh month died.

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And the Dark Lord would mark him as his equal. What a load of bollocks. He might have been induced while believing that his supporters were equal to the Dark Lord himself, but he was quickly disabused from that notion. The Dark Lord had no equals, there was only him and what he wanted, if someone disagreed, well, it was nice knowing you.
Arrangements were made pretty quickly, to disabuse said idiot from that notion and he was either handed a task that would eventually see him tying the rope around his neck or he would be simply killed for disobedience.

So what if his parents defied the Dark Lord thrice already before he even was born?

So what if he was born in the very last minute of July?

So what if he was marked by the Dark Lord, supposedly as his equal in beliefs?

What about this power that the Dark Lord knows not?

He was a fairly talented wizard, but he was hardly more powerful than his peers, certainly far more meticulous than most of them. Even though he was recognised as an adult he had yet to reach his magical maturity but even if he had he would be a no match for the Dark Lord himself.

What sort of power it was?

Conscience?

Remorse?

Some basic human decency?

Access to the same knowledge as the Dark Lord?

Some power it was. Granted he figured out pretty easily the Dark Lord's subtle hints about the Horcruxes and just not them. He didn't spend the entire summer of 1977 sitting on Snape just to improve his Potions, while pinning from afar, that was a side effect. He was there to keep an eye on Snape and while he had an eye on Snape, he also had another at what Snape was researching on the Dark Lord's orders.

Vile stuff, truly vile stuff.

_The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies._

It couldn't be him.

It just couldn't.

He wasn't even eighteen years old, there was no telling when he will reach his magical maturity but the average age for majority of wizards was between twenty-five and thirty. Granted in some, extreme, cases it could happen as soon as a witch or wizard had gone through their puberty or it could have happened at eighty. Just as in some rare cases, it simply didn't happen at all for various reasons.

So, if he was lucky he had about seven years before his magic would go through maturity and he had to survive up until that point. With Bella constantly questioning the depth of his loyalty to the Dark Lord, with the Dark Lord himself....

It couldn't be him.
That god-damned prophecy had to refer to someone else!

Surely, he wasn't the only wizard born on 31st July 1961. There had to someone else.

He didn't remember hours that followed his discovery. On a subconscious level, he knew that they had to pass, seeing that he was still there when Urquhart came to relieve him at six. He didn't remember leaving the Ministry, although he was certain that he didn't apparate.

What he did know however was the door in front of which he found himself standing. Sirius's flat. Sirius would know what to do. Sirius would…

The door opened without him knocking on it and he found himself staring at Mirzam. He only managed to register that this time she was wide awake and properly dressed before she pulled him by the hand inside. The door barely closed and locked itself behind his back when the dam broke.

He didn't know how he got from the door to the couch. He barely registered sitting down on it and holding on Mirzam's hand so tightly that even though she tried to move away from the couch, probably to get a calming draught, she had no other choice than to sit down by his side, wrapping her free arm around his shoulders and murmuring runes.

He had no clear recollection of minutes that followed. Subconsciously he knew that she went through the whole runic alphabet. She most certainly started it as an alphabet, so it stood to reason that she finished it as an alphabet. He didn't feel any magic working, so it wasn't a spell.

His breathing was all over the place. His heart tried to beat its way out of his chest. He couldn't feel his fingers and alternatively, he felt chilled and too hot. He tried to fight it, tried to even out his breathing but only when he tried to match his breathing with Mirzam's he managed to get his breathing under enough control that he didn't feel like he was going to pass out from lack of oxygen.

He didn't know how much time had passed before he finally calmed down. It could be minutes, or it could be hours.

What he did know was that the arm over his shoulders didn't move and that the hand he was clutching on wasn't yanked away from his grasp. He could feel the warmth emanating from her body just like he could smell the scent of her cinnamon shampoo and underneath it the more diluted scent of an apple soap.

"You smell like an apple pie," was the first thing that managed to get out of his mouth.

"Gee, thanks," she muttered.

"Did I say that I hate apple pie?" he said weakly.

"Point," she agreed. "So, what happened?"

He didn't know how to answer that.

I discovered that I'm even more screwed than I already was?

Perhaps.

But could he really place the weight of that on her, on Sirius? They both had enough on their plates already.
Either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.

He looked at Mirzam, and things flew through his head.

I don't want to die.

I don't want to die.

I don't want to die.

I want to live and die of old age.

I want to stand by Sirius's side at your wedding.

I want to be there when your children are born, every single one of them, no matter how many you will end up having.

I want to be a godfather of one, no matter if it will be a boy or girl.

I want to cherish them and show them love we never found in our parents.

I want to get married one day, I probably won't have children of my own but yours would be enough.

Mirzam's face blurred before his eyes.

He never told her about the prophecy. Part of him wished to tell her, wished to share the burden with someone who cared for him, and Mirzam did care for him, for a reason he couldn't understand. Even back at Hogwarts when he was still unmarked but already a Death Eater in beliefs and behaviour, she never treated him with disdain. Probably because of Sirius.

It wasn't a matter of lack of trust. He trusted her with Sirius, with keeping him safe. He trusted her when she told him that she would find a way for him to contact the Aurors, if he would ever have a chance to forewarn the office about the attack. And she did find it. She taught him how to use it. She supplied ideas how to make it work even though he believed himself to be a lost cause.

In the meantime, there were other raids. Mostly on Muggles, Muggle-borns and their families. On farms, in town-houses, apartments. He implied to the Dark Lord and his merry bunch of fuckwits who revealed in it that they were his preferred targets. Luckily for himself, not every time he was accompanied by Bella or Lucius or someone who possessed half a brain to realise that something was wrong, and whenever he had a chance to do so he Martined a kid or more out of the house.

And when he couldn't do it, he kept a record of who did what and to whom. He didn't keep himself out of the records. He owed it to those people, to all people he killed in Dark Lord's name in the past and all people he will have to kill in the future.

I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do, through my fault.

Through my fault. Through my most grievous fault; therefore I ask blessed Mary ever-Virgin, all the Angels and Saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God.

The Confiteor became his mantra. It was the first thing he thought of when waking up and the last when he was falling asleep. And when he didn't think about it, he thought of Sirius, back in the field and fighting, the two brothers seemingly on the opposite sides. Of Mirzam, who saved his
soul from himself, who a time or two risked her own position in the Aurors, by letting him get away from the chase because she had faith in him.

That's why, even though he couldn't bring himself to ever tell her or Sirius about the prophecy, when he got an inkling of suspicions what his father was up to, he went straight to her rather than to someone more experienced or more politically connected or even Sirius. He entertained the idea of sharing his suspicions with Sirius, but he quickly discarded the idea. Not when it was nothing but suspicions and not when their father was involved.

So, to Mirzam he went and he shared with her his doubts and suspicions. She listened to him and promised to take care of it, with or without his help. And he wanted to help her, if what he suspected was true, he wanted to help her bring the bastard down with the passion of ten thousand burning suns.

But then Bellatrix got in the way, he tried to be careful, but Bella was smart and suspicious, very suspicious. So, she implied that he would prove himself once and for all if he took care of Sirius. September blended into October and subtle hints became full on call outs, private at first but they quickly turned more and more public. He pretended to ignore her and when that wasn't enough he called her a coward and a hypocrite. Told her that maybe she was fine with killing her own blood but out of pure respect for Sirius for raising him he wasn't going to make it happen, unless it was a direct order and not from her, but the Dark Lord himself.

At the time the Dark Lord was slightly occupied with issues on the continent and handling them, so he was safe for a while but by then he knew that his time was running out faster than he anticipated.

Strangely he found it okay.

He was still terrified of dying without having a chance to live, without a chance to see Mother's fury upon discovering that her older, good for nothing son made a known Muggle-born, though technically a half-blood for those who knew the truth of her parentage, a Mrs Black. He would never see his nephews and nieces, he will never have a chance to hold them. Never have a chance to tell them how much he loved their parents.

Because he did love them. Sirius always, even in the darkest most terrifying hours of his childhood but even during those hours, he knew that Sirius used to love him just as much. He was his older brother, his hero, his rock, his strength.

And Mirzam?

She sneaked in somehow, when his defences were down. Maybe it started that day when she pulled him out of the classroom to tell him that Sirius was on death's door. Maybe it started earlier, back during their sixth year when she stood by Sirius when Sirius had no one. Or maybe it started when he knelt in front of her and rather than punishment and execution, he found solace and forgiveness. It didn't matter when or how anyway. All that matter was that it did, and it wasn't this all-consuming obsessive love both Potter and Snape showed, in regards to Evans. No, it was the other kind of love, the same he felt for Sirius.

He told her as much. He couldn't tell Sirius because Sirius tangled himself with something in the Order at the time and couldn't be located easily and quite frankly Regulus didn't know how much time he was going to have before his name would be signed on a dotted line.

And Mirzam somehow knew because when he told her that he wished that in another life she would be his sister she asked him if he was planning to do something stupid.
"Probably," he answered with a smile. "Just do me a small favour, when you and Sirius have kids one day could you name your second son after me and make sure that he won't copy my mistakes."

"You're being strangely specific," she muttered. "You didn't have to hide at Madame Tea's again, did you? Because she says the strangest things, even for a fraud seer."

"No," he smiled. "It's just my wishful thinking. What did she tell you?" he asked curiously.

"Stuff that doesn't deserve repeating," she snorted. "But okay," she sighed. "I'll give you Regulus Arcturus Black the Second if you promise me one thing."

"Okay," he nodded. "But I'm not taking you with me. I won't have Sirius grieving for both of us if something goes wrong."

"I know that," she sighed. "As much as I'm not okay with that and convinced that you're better with someone watching your back..." she shrugged. "I guess, what I'm trying to say is: try to survive."

"That I can promise," he sighed. "I'll try."

They fell silent for a moment, just standing there on the street, silence stretching between them.

"The individual has always had to struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by the tribe. If you try it, you will be lonely often, and sometimes frightened. But no price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself," she said suddenly.

"Who said that?" he asked curiously.

"Nietzsche," she answered. "Remember that underneath all your mistakes, all your guilt and all your grief you are a good man, Reg. Please don't die if you have another choice."

"You are fond of me," he said cheekily, feeling strangely happy about it.

"You and Sirius are like a very persistent mould, you grow on people without realising how did this happen," she snorted. "Take care of yourself."

"You too," he smiled. "And of Sirius. And father."

"I'll take care of both," she said quickly. "Just one more thing."

He nodded slowly.

She pulled something from the pocket of her jacket and stepped closer to him as she held it up. It was a tiny silver medallion on a thin silver chain.

"No matter what happens, never remove it until I'm there to remove it from your neck myself," she said solemnly. "It's Saint Martin of Tours," she said as she unclasped the chain. "So, you will always remember whom did you save and, who in return saved you."

He bowed his head allowing her to place the chain around his neck.

"I can't convince you to take someone with you, can I?" she sighed as she stepped away.

"I'll take someone with me if I must," he answered. "Probably not in a good way."

"I suspected as much," she said quietly.
"Stay safe," he said softly. "Take care of Sirius," he added before he gave her a quick hug. "And bring that bastard down for me if you can."

"I can, and I will," she said vehemently. "Good luck."

It was the last time he saw her. A day later at a night duty, for the first time since he started working in Hall of Prophecies, in Department of Mysteries, his tentative plans how to handle the Dark Lord's Horcrux without having him notice that someone was tampering with it was interrupted by the alarm. It was an alarm like a no other. Not loud and obnoxious like some alarms but persistent and urging, probably keyed into the wards.

He wasn't sure what he expected but he knew that he most certainly didn't expect a figure draped in shawls with her eyes magnified by enormous glasses repeating word after word his own death sentence.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies," the figure said.

He didn't notice the initials back then. He was too stunned to pay attention to it. Too mortified that someone dared to repeat Cassandra's words and place the weight of the Dark Lord's defeat on someone else's shoulders. And not just anyone but a baby that hadn't been born yet. Just like him nineteen years earlier.

He didn't sleep through the rest of the day. He tried to nap, but after an hour of tossing and turning in his bed, he gave up trying and focused on making preparations for his disappearance. Money wasn't an issue, as the right son, he had unlimited access to all Black family vaults, not just his trust vault of which the contents he liquidated and turned into Muggle currency after his second meeting with Mirzam. He instructed her to set up a trust fund for little Martin to make sure that no matter who would adopt him if someone would adopt him, he would have some money at the start of his adult life. Quite frankly he would rather give him his family back but that was beyond his reach.

The rest of the money he steadily removed through the summer. Not a lot of it but enough to get by if he needed to go Muggle at some point. With Mirzam's help, he organised a small bolthole at the outskirts of London. The place was tiny as fuck, but it was big enough for him. He removed the memory of it from Mirzam's mind with great reluctance, but he recognised that she was right in her assessment that he had to do it to ensure his protection.

The rest of the money, along with a spare wand and an additional set of spare clothing which he didn't stash in his bolthole he stashed in a hiding spot at Uncle Alphard's farm. Sirius's and Mirzam's Auror dogtags, as well as his and Sirius naming day medallions, were supposed to end there too. He was reluctant to part with them but for Sirius's and Mirzam's safety he needed to leave them behind.

The summons to the meeting on 1st November caught him of guard, but not for long and the reasons for it mortified him even more. The Dark Lord knew about the prophecy that foretold his defeat. He spent a better part of that meeting, ignoring murder or torture of several idiots, pondering on how the Dark Lord could find about it. The only good thing was that as far as he could ascertain, the Dark Lord didn't know the whole contents of prophecy. He only knew that it concerned a child born at the end of July to parents who thrice defied him.

Then giddy Bellatrix issued her desire to have Sirius's head delivered on a silver goblin-made plater
by Sirius's twentieth birthday, with a desire to ensure that he won't live to that day and pointed at Regulus as the candidate for the errant, one that could prove his loyalty to the Dark Lord, and his cause by doing so.

He knew better than denying the Dark Lord and Bella on the spot even though part of him was tempted to do so. Luckily for him, that part was safely hidden behind his Occlumency shields, so he walked out of that meeting still breathing, with Dark Lord most probably unsuspecting that he wasn't planning to carry out the order.

Between the meeting and going into the cave, he managed to examine his memory of the recording of the prophecy, as well as the identities, of each individual involved. A. P. W. B. D. was pretty easy to figure out, as was S. P. T. strangely because Sybill Patricia Trelawney, Cassandra's great-great-granddaughter at the tender age of five foretold her grandfather's pretty gruesome demise. It was the S. T. S. that proved to be a problem, it could be Severus Tobias Snape, but it could be someone else. Who said that Sebastian Stebbins's middle name wasn't Thomas or Terrence? Or that there wasn't another S. T. S. in the Dark Lord's circle. The possibilities were endless.

But Snape wasn't at the meeting and Snape attended every meeting in the past.

So, he tracked down Wendell Turnip, Hogsmeade's biggest drunkard, who made his second home in Hog's Head. Using some investigation techniques which he learned from observing Mirzam he got out of him that on Halloween night Albus Dumbledore came to Hog's Head to interview a lass named Trelawney for vacating position of Divination Professor, and that he was followed into the room by some grim looking lad, ugly as night who used to supply local apothecary with more complicated potions before the lad was marched down and unceremoniously thrown out of the pub, by Aberforth Dumbledore himself. Pouring some more Firewhiskey into Turnip's glass got him a more detailed description of the lad, and unless Severus Snape had a long lost, separated at birth, raised in different countries twin brother running around, then it had to be him and no one else.

Leaving Hog's Head, he discovered to his great dismay that he was being followed, by Nott Senior and some chap named Frederick, very blond, very bland Hufflepuff that graduated from Hogwarts two years ahead of him. Frederick alone he could shake off pretty easily, but Nott Senior? Granted Nott wasn't one of the smartest Death Eaters, but he wasn't a complete idiot like Crabbe and Goyle. If he tried to shake them off, Nott would know that Regulus was up to something not good, and he wouldn't hesitate to inform the Dark Lord about it.

So, he gritted his teeth and led the pair of them around Hogsmeade for a few hours. He stopped at every single shop, bought quite a good selection of trinkets, claimed quite loudly that it was never too early to stack up on Christmas presents, actually purchased some Christmas presents and ordered to have them appropriately sent to all the recipients in due time.

It annoyed him that with his entourage, he couldn't send something to Sirius and Mirzam, to not endanger them but he took comfort in the fact that Mirzam, would deliver Sirius's actual birthday present from him on his birthday, a set of finest goblin-made knives differing in lengths and uses with pretty neat goblin enchantments. When he first saw them, he was so captivated by them and their enchantments that without considering their astronomical price he immediately bought three sets of them. One he considered as a birthday present for himself from himself. The second set he immediately decided was going to be Sirius's birthday or Christmas present and the third set he gave to Mirzam on her birthday.

Once done with Hogsmeade and Christmas shopping he came back to London and loitered around
Diagon Alley and their neighbour alleys. He had a pint in the Leaky Cauldron, he went to a theatre and saw a play, even led Nott and Frederick into a bar which catered to social needs of homosexual witches and wizards and while he was having another pint there he watched with increasing amusement how his entourage tried to kindly dissuade the folk interested in them, and they had to be kind enough to not attract too much attention to themselves.

Finally, when he was sure that they were properly annoyed with him he left the area, hitched a train ride to Beaconsfield where one of the many summer houses of the Black family was located. That particular one, had fallen out of use because it was too small even for a small family with house-elves entourage, but it occasionally served as a place for various romantic trysts for various individuals through the entirety of the twentieth century. But it was reclusive enough to commit a murder in there. His very own murder or one on Nott and Frederick or preferably both.

It ended the only way it could have ended, with Frederick wounded and under Auror variation of Polyjuice, which he borrowed from Mirzam, just in case he would ever need it. It was an amazing work, strong enough to last three hours rather than one and undetectable to standard scanning spells. One of the side effects of the potion was that if someone died under its effects their body wouldn’t revert to the original form of the drinker like with normal Polyjuice but rather will continue to work until someone with inside knowledge of the potion would use the counter-spell to revert the corpse into its original form. It was used quite extensively by Hit Wizards and some senior Aurors, and was graciously given to Mirzam to help her pin down Orion Black.

So, for all intents and purposes, Frederick died as Regulus Black and no one was any wiser. Nott and Regulus as Frederick returned to the Dark Lord's side and gave a report that Regulus Black defected, failed his task and was killed while he was trying to kill them.

Once free of Nott, Regulus came back to 12 Grimmauld Place, blessedly empty since his father was busy with his own criminal activity, while his mother was visiting her parents in their country house. That only left the elves and he extracted from all three of them a promise to never reveal his return into the house unless the one questioning them about it was Sirius, and just Sirius.

He spent the rest of the day, mindful that at any given moment either his mother or his father might barge inside the house, at writing letters. To the Dark Lord, he wrote at least seven different versions of the letter, before he settled on a final remotely polite, very terse and painfully short 'fuck you Dark Lord, I got your Horcrux and intent to destroy it'.

To Sirius he wrote:

My Dearest Brother,

The contents of this letter are enchanted so only you can see it and when you will receive this letter odds are that you will already know that I died and how I died. I'm sorry. If you're learning the news of my demise from this very letter, I'm sorry too. I'm also sorry, that it has to be a letter, and that I didn't get a chance to talk with you face to face. I'm also sorry that I wasn't the best of brothers and that I failed to see the reason, and quite literally the light until it was too late.

But I want you to know that regardless of our differences over the years I never stopped loving you.

How could I?

You were my hero.

My best friend growing up, my rock and the light in the darkness.
You always shielded me, always protected me, always knew how to get out from the tightest spots.

From this one, I can't get out. I hazard a guess that you know who I am, what I did and probably to whom. I regret it, every single one of them. I wish that I could take it all back. All of it, not just the stuff I've done but also stuff I said, especially to you.

I wish that I could tell you more, but I don't have enough time left to do so and I'm worried that even this channel of communication isn't safe enough. And if there's something I simply cannot risk is your safety. You're in enough danger already, and I simply cannot bring myself to put you in even bigger danger.

There's however one thing I want you to know. The Dark Lord is an abomination of the worst kind. Always had been, and always will be, unless someone tries to stop him. Hopefully one day someone will. Hopefully soon.

Now I'm heading to my death, with a lighter heart because someone whose opinion I greatly value told me once that no price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself. And for the first time in a very long time, I'm finally my own master.

With all my love, farewell, Sirius.

Always your brother,

Regulus Arcturus Black

He left specific instructions with Kreacher to deliver this letter after Kreacher returned from his errand with him, because he didn't want to risk taking it into the cave with him.

Then he headed to the cave. Ordered Kreacher to switch the lockets once the basin was empty, and to come back home without him, to never reveal Mother and Father his true fate and to destroy the locket.

And he willingly drank the potion, on his own, without Kreacher's assistance. He knew what it was. He knew its name and its effects. It was one of Ekrizdis' creations, a potion which he used in the creation of Dementors, when he was experimenting on poor unfortunate souls he managed to capture and trap on his island.

Ekrizdis' recipe, its variations, as well as several samples of it was seized by one of the first investigators of Azkaban, Regulus Black, a many great-great-great-great something granduncle of his.

In theory, at least that was the family legend, the idiot in question planned to research it, to somehow backward engineer the creation of Dementor to find a way to destroy them. But what he didn't know at the time was that his supposed partner, Edmund Avery managed to duplicate Ekrizdis' research journals, for his own purposes. The only thing which both agreed on was that no one was supposed to know what they found inside Azkaban.

Several years had passed before Avery realised his mistake of allowing his partner to leave Azkaban alive when the tentative rumours of Regulus's research had reached him. Finding his own plans, whatever they were, endangered by his research Avery decided to remove Regulus and his research. Unfortunately for himself, he had done so several years too late and while Regulus Black lost his life, and the world lost his research on Dementors in the process the Black family didn't lose the original copy of Ekrizdis' recipes, which Regulus placed in Gringotts as soon as he managed to copy the recipes. Regulus's surviving older brother, Alphard, called the potion Liquid
Dementor and strictly forbade removal of the recipe from Gringotts as well as sharing the knowledge of its existence with anyone who wasn't a member of the Black family.

But as the time passed, and while the original recipe hadn't been removed from Gringotts it didn't stop several idiots from copying it, and adding those copies into family libraries under very heavy enchantments. However, two copies of it were stolen at some point, carried away literally two weeks apart, one after the other by runaway brides eager to buy their way into the families they were eloping into. One of them married another Avery, while the other married a Rowle. After that furious Head of the Black family, Sirius Arcturus Black, ordered return of all copies to the main library of the Black family, in order to place better and stronger enchantments on them. He then issued a warning that anyone who would be found in possession of not an additionally enchanted copy, will be subjected to a complete magical disowning from the family. This included being stripped from name, possessions and magic and was usually deadly to any unfortunate individual.

In theory it was a very good idea. Even though destroying the copies and restricting the use of original only to the Head of the House, only at Gringotts and under very strong enchantments that prevented the recipe from being ever again copied, would have been a better one, because enchantments placed on the copies were simply ridiculous.

Under new enchantments, the copies couldn't be traded in any shape and form for anything. Couldn't be passed, as an inheritance to anyone else but a male heir, and if there was no male heir the copy was enchanted to disintegrate. The text of both copies and the original was enchanted to appear gibberish to all females of any age and any Black males under the age of fifteen.

After few decades, and few attempts to counter the enchantments, Sirius's great-grandson, Phineas, grew thoroughly annoyed by several idiotic relatives when he became the Head of the House and decided that enough was enough. He finally destroyed all but one copy of the recipe, and left the one surviving copy with the main line of Black family after strengthening existing enchantments, and adding some of his own creations, on the top of it.

It annoyed the ever-loving fuck out of Bella, that she couldn't even touch the booklet with the recipe, without being severely hexed by the various enchantments. When she finally managed to crack it open, in spite of suffering through various effects of the protective enchantments she couldn't even read it. Even more, she couldn't even understand a single word of the recipe when Regulus read it to her when she finally figured out that he could read it just fine.

It was bloody ironic, that the potion which in a way took his namesake's life, in the end, could also be his own undoing.

In retrospect, he should have been a little bit more intelligent, since he knew from Kreacher's tale what the potion did. What it made him do. He should have a plan for that, after all, by that time he was well acquainted with the concept of bottled water. He could have brought several bottles of it with him to the cave.

But for all intents and purposes, he wanted the world to believe that he was dead. To have more time to locate other Horcruxes, because he knew instinctively that the locket wasn't the only one. And for that, he needed Kreacher, and the rest of the world to believe that Regulus Arcturus Black died on 2nd November 1979.

He nearly had. He lost his wand pretty quickly, before he saw Kreacher disappear with the Horcrux and he was dragged under, deeper and deeper. He felt the pressure of water on his lungs, the beginning of a splitting headache while he tried to fight his body to not let any water in. The silence around him was deafening, and probably due to the effects of the potion he was hallucinating.
Sirius's face swam before his eyes, he could hear the Sorting Hate yelling 'Gryffindor' and Mirzam's whisper 'try to survive'. Absent-mindedly he reached for the medallion thinking of Sirius, who was about to discover who his brother was. A brother who was fighting against the Dark Lord and he didn't know that, just like he didn't know that as long as the Dark Lord's Horcruxes remained in the world, nothing could beat him. Nothing and no one could stop him.

He couldn't leave him alone. Granted, Sirius had Mirzam and his entourage in Potter, Lupin and Pettigrew but no one of them knew the truth. No one of them could stop the Dark Lord, not without him.

When his back hit the bottom of the lake, he could no longer stop himself from opening his mouth and letting the water in. So, he gathered all of his magic, and wished with all of his might to just not be there in that cave and just…

It was his last conscious memory for a very long time.

Chapter End Notes

Food for thought: How do you think Regulus managed to acquire his ability? What about the medallion? The prophecy itself?

Confiteor in Latin and English translation:

"Confiteor Deo omnipotenti et vobis, fratres, quia peccavi nimis cogitatione, verbo, opere, et omissione: mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. Ideo precor beatam Mariam semper Virginem, omnes Angelos et Sanctos, et vos, fratres, orare pro me ad Dominum Deum nostrum."

"I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault; therefore I ask blessed Mary ever-Virgin, all the Angels and Saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God."
Chapter 05 - Mea Maxima Culpa, The Rise of Regulus Black

Chapter Summary

Chapter summary: Regulus in the present and in the past part 2.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter or anything you can recognise from any books or TV series or movies. I do however take liberties with the plots or mentions provided by JKR or other writers. The only profit I'm getting out of it is improving my English.

Title: Secrets & Keepers – Keep Us

Rating/Warnings: R/M [AU; Manipulative Dumbledore (therefore not Dumbledore friendly); profanity; canon-typical violence; frank discussion of past child abuse (Harry but not only) and of past child abuse of sexual nature (not Harry); not very detailed descriptions of torture (not Harry); Black family feels.

Additional warnings: mild blasphemy; religious undertones; references to past child abuse; references to mental illnesses; mild exploration of one’s gender identity (very mild).

Word count: Around 17 700 words.

Author's note/personal ramble: This chapter is still very introspective while at the same time moving in the present (at a snail pace). Contains a very detailed explanation how Regulus became an Metamorphmagus. It’s also the end of introspection on Regulus’s part. Next time we will see him he'll have his head in the present and he’ll have to use it because his life wouldn’t be simple if everything went according to the plan.

Dedicated to all of my readers who stuck with me for so long. Thank You, I hope that You will find this story enjoyable. I would be the most grateful for constructive criticism.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Courage is as often the outcome of despair as of hope; in the one case we have nothing to lose, in the other everything to gain.

~Diane de Poitiers

Secrets & Keepers – Keep Us

Chapter five: Mea Maxima Culpa, The Rise of Regulus Black
The next thing he could remember was a kaleidoscope of scenes from his hospital room. The lights in the room changed, as did sounds and people around him. He tried his best to fight his way back into consciousness but he found himself slipping under again and again and again.

The next conscious memory that lasted more than a second or two he had was that of his Mum, at the time Nurse Martha, sitting by his bedside and reading a paper at loud to him. There was something about owls and shooting stars.

Stars.

Canis Major.

Sirius.

Mirzam.

Try to survive.

It appeared that he had.

His left hand flew to his medallion, at least in his mind it flew because the movement itself was very sluggish and it took all of his strength. His entire body was aching and there were tubes and wires everywhere but at the moment nothing was more important than finding his medallion. That movement and the sound altered his Mum, who in turn altered the rest of the medical staff.

He blanked out what followed next. According to his Mum like a majority of the patients that woke up to find themselves intubated he panicked. They gave him something to calm him down which knocked him out again, for a while. Supposedly for a little about an hour but he didn't care because next time he woke up there was no tube down his throat, just a mask on his face and whatever was in there, oxygen as it turned out, was making him slightly loopy.

He wasn't sure how many tries he made to find the medallion and how many it took his Mum to realise that rather than having trouble breathing he was trying to find something that was supposed to be hanging around his neck. But she figured it out in and next time he woke up he found her standing by his bed, with her hand wrapped over his, guiding his hand to the medallion and the chain that was once again around his neck.

He felt much calmer after he found it there.

The doctors eventually came back, to assess his condition and decide whatever or not he was brain damaged. It appeared that he wasn't and he let them poke and prod him because he felt too weak, too loopy and too much in pain to pull a runner. Never mind that at the time he didn't know the extent of his injuries and he didn't know that he wouldn't be able to leave his bed, much alone the hospital itself.

His Mum provided him with the list of his injuries and most importantly a date.

It was 3rd November 1981.

Two years had passed. It also seemed that he tried to wake up as early as 31st July 1981 and several times since then but only his last try several days ago was successful. He was found by the ambulance crew on Spring Street in London, exactly two years ago, lying in the middle of the street. Unfortunately, the driver didn't see him fast enough and managed to run over him,
successfully breaking both of his legs. Once they got to him and tried to assess the damage the ambulance crew discovered that he wasn't breathing and appeared to be drowned. They revived him on site, brought him to St Mary's Hospital's emergency room where the doctors assessed and dealt with remaining damage.

His lungs were punctured by broken ribs, there was no bone in his left leg which he didn't have broken, he had a cracked skull and was bleeding into his brain, he had ruptured spleen, dislocated left shoulder and his left forearm was badly burnt. The list went on, just as did the list of surgeries he had since he was brought into the hospital.

Luckily his spleen was repaired rather than removed, haemorrhage into his brain had been dealt with and his dislocated shoulder was put back together. They removed the initial necrosis on his left forearm and replaced the skin there with a skin transplant from his buttock (really funny but somehow it worked). He underwent multiple surgeries for his broken legs since then because the sheer amount of mending which his bones had to go through was too much and some of the breaks healed badly and had to be surgically broken again.

He was nothing but a shell of a young man who left for that bloody cave. But that wasn't the worst. Physical pain he could stand, just as he could stand the barbaric treatment the muggle doctors put him through in order to put him back together. They didn't have magic so they had to work with what they had. He was grateful for their efforts, after all, they managed to successfully put him back together and keep him alive in the meantime but that didn't mean that he wasn't eager to get the fuck out of there as soon as humanly possible which meant consciously pushing his magic into healing his body. He tried his damned best to do so, to mend himself faster but it took him several days to realise that something was wrong and that he wasn't mending at all.

Subconsciously he suspected what happened even though for a while he refused to even think about it. He was fine, his body was broken, he was weak as a newborn kitten and he could barely hold a cup with water in his hands. The Dark Lord's anti-apparation wards around the cave were pretty bloody strong, strong enough to keep even the Dark Lord himself from apparating straight into the cave and he, Regulus Arcturus Black managed to successfully beat them. Weak and broken he was still alive to tell the tale if someone wanted to listen to it, and he was nowhere near as powerful as the Dark Lord, seeing that he hadn't gone yet through his magical maturity. But he still bloody succeeded which meant that he had to use quite a lot of his magic to do so. It had to come back eventually, especially now that he was conscious.

Except, it hadn't. Days turned into weeks and weeks into a month. November turned into December and he still couldn't as much as levitate an empty cup from his night-stand into his hand. Granted wordlessly and wandlessly, but it was an easy spell and a small object and he never had a problem with it, not even when he was a kid.

It was then when that terrifying thought first entered his mind. What if he couldn't levitate that bloody cup, even for a single bloody millimetre because he no longer had his magic? He discarded that thought nearly as fast as it went through his head. But like with the prophecy that thought created a ripple and somehow it lodged itself in the back of his mind.

What if your magic will never come back?

What if you're nothing more than a useless, broken squib?

What if….

So, he tried harder, worked harder on getting himself into shape. His hearing was as good as always, unlike his eyesight which seemed to be worse than he remembered it being before he
managed to convince Grandpa Arcturus to convince Father into letting him undergo the complicated experimental procedure of correcting his myopia because he was a seeker and glasses on Quidditch field were nothing but a disadvantage. Probably the combination of charms and potions that kept his eyesight from deteriorating gave up the very moment he ruptured his magical core while apparating through the Dark Lord's wards. But since he woke up, he didn't breathe a single word to anyone but he attempted to indicate that he occasionally understood some things his doctors and nurses were talking about.

So, he ate everything that was put in front of him. Obediently he took every medication that was put in front of him too without a fuss. He did all his exercises that helped strengthen his body, either with a physical therapist or with his Mum when she came to check up on him after she finished working.

He just didn't bloody talk. What he should talk about? He knew enough from Mirzam that if he as much as breathed out the word 'magic' in front of his Muggle doctors he would be shipped to the psychiatric unit from where he wouldn't be able to get out easily or maybe even at all. No, it was better to stay silent. Even though it was bloody inconvenient at times. Especially since he got strong enough and well enough for his doctors to start considering releasing him as soon as they were able to identify him so they could release him into the care of his family or a long-term care facility of some sort where he could recuperate fully.

The questions about his identity started as soon as he woke up but he continued to ignore them. He didn't have a Muggle ID on him when he was brought into the hospital and even though the police tried to locate them through their own means through past two years, they still couldn't find him. All they knew was that he was a John Doe, in his late teens or early twenties, that the clothes he wore that night while torn and bloodied were of good quality and had to cost quite a lot of money and that no one reported a missing person that matched his description around the time of his accident.

Technically, he had a Muggle passport and a driving licence in his bolthole, produced by Mirzam with a stern warning that he was supposed to use them only as a last resort without waving it like a bloody flag.

Regulus Arcturus Black didn't exist in Muggle world but Archibald Reginald White had and he was even covered by NHS (what it was he had no idea at the time but Mirzam stashed all Muggle legal literature he could need in his bolthole).

He could even direct the Muggle police there and for few days he was tempted to do so if it meant getting out of the hospital faster. But two years had passed and prior to the cave Regulus Arcturus Black for all intents and purposes died, seemingly murdered on the Dark Lord's orders. Even if the tree, because it tracked both blood and magic, at the time of his supposed death showed him as still alive the stunt he pulled with apparating through anti-apparation wards had to convince the tree that he was dead. The funeral had to be held, Frederick should have been buried in his place and the entire family had to believe that he was truly dead.

There was the only ray of hope in all this bloody mess.

Mirzam.

Mirzam, who gave him the medallion of St Martin of Tours. Mirzam, who told him to never remove it until she would remove it herself. Mirzam, who was an Auror and could find out from an autopsy report whatever or not unfortunately departed Regulus Black at the moment of his supposed death carried the medallion she gave him. If she believed that he would never remove it himself she would be the only person in the entire world who wouldn't believe in his death. He
desperately wished for it with all his might.

But two years had passed. Even if she had to hide searching for him from the world, including Sirius, two years was a lot of time to find someone on the British Isles. And through the entire time he was unconscious he had no visitors, that much was certain because that's what his Mum told him and by then he learned to trust her word.

So, Archie White stayed dormant and locked up in a bolthole and Regulus Black had to find a new identity for himself.

The first name came to him immediately. After all, it had been hanging on his neck since he woke up.

"So you will always remember whom did you save and who in return saved you," Mirzam said back then.

But what about the last name? Middle name? Birthdate? Place of birth? Parents' names?

It took him few days of pondering on it but eventually, he constructed in his mind his alter ego. The first of many, but one he used for years and one in which he believed with all his might that he was.


He admitted that to one doctor finally, speaking it all out in a raspy voice and he was fully convinced that he managed to get away with that lie. How wrong he was he realised when Martha Green introduced him to her husband, Mark Green, a Scotland Yard inspector.

And Dad? Dad was Dad, he prodded, he pushed, he pointed out the obvious and pretty much did all the talking while Mum hovered on the side-lines watching him intently. And even though he knew that he was fucked, sideways and with no lube, in the face of authority he repeated the names and the date until Dad gave up and pulled Mum out of the room.

Mum didn't return to work the next day or the day after that. In fact, she didn't return for nearly a week. He tried to ask other nurses about her because he found himself missing her and her chatter, her patience and her explanations and he wanted to know whatever or not he spooked her into working in a different unit.

She returned eventually. On Christmas Eve of all days, with a wheelchair and a bag of clean clothes that wasn't hospital gown or equally lousy hospital pyjamas. Dad followed her, few steps behind her with an unreadable look on his face.

"We're taking you home son," she said briskly with a smile.

Son.

He didn't remember his parents ever directing that word at him. To others yes, mostly while introducing him around but never at him. Never with kindness. Never with this weird look of pride and hope.

So, they took him into their home. Into a tiny guest bedroom. They put him in clothes which their own son was never going to wear anymore. For now, they said, a few days so he could get used to wearing proper clothes again before they will get him a new wardrobe.
They fed him, with an overcooked turkey and undercooked vegetables (Dad joked that he could use the carrot to hammer a nail into a wall and Mum only good-naturedly smiled at him). The tea they had was cheap, the mug in which he drunk it was chipped, the saucers and plates were mismatched. The Christmas tree was tiny and thin, the ornaments on it were sparse and handmade. But that didn't matter to him because the gift they gave him was worth everything.

After dinner during which he didn't say much, other than few pleasantries, out of fear that he would speak something that will weird them out they sat him down in an armchair by the fireplace and they did all the talking.

They told him that they didn't believe that Martin Reginald Green was his true name or that 3rd November 1959 was his actual birthdate. 3rd November could have been the day of his actual birth but they weren't convinced that he was born in 1959, at the most he could have been born in 1961, although they were leaning towards the year of 1963.

They told him that it was obvious that the circumstances in which he was found were suspicious and that they understood that whatever lead to it had to be a very traumatic experience for him. They told him that they believed that he was running away from people who did this to him which was why he at first didn't give his true name at all and when he found himself comfortable enough to speak, he gave one that was a blatant lie.

Then they gave him his present.

His identity. A passport and a driving license in the name of Martin Reginald Green, born 3rd November 1959 to Martha Esther Green, apparently Dad's younger sister who ran away from home at seventeen after she wound up pregnant. She dropped the baby on a probable father about which the less could be said the better before she harried off to Canada. Dad always searched for her and the baby but he couldn't find it up until now.

There were rules. Obviously, there were rules and bloody obvious rules even for a displaced wizard like him.

If you spot someone who is looking for you, someone from your past, don't run away, alert Dad so Dad and the Yard will handle it.

He wasn't expecting that someone would find him hiding in the Muggle world but even if someone did find him, he wasn't going to put them in danger by just running away. His crutches weren't a wand but he was still convinced that if he put his mind and his back to it then he could beat a stray Death Eater to death with them. He was also pretty handy with a knife, on Mirzam's insistence to practice throwing knives at a target.

If you don't understand something just say it. No one is going to judge you.

That one was pretty handy. He didn't understand a lot of things. Exposure to Mirzam and through her brief exposure to Muggle world, as well as Muggle Studies at Hogwarts had helped some but his knowledge was uneven, spotty at best and downright ignorant at worst. He knew how phones worked and when asked if he could make a call, he could make one. He knew how to turn the lights on and off. He never saw a washing machine before and he watched how it washed clothes until the novelty of dirty clothes turning clean without no magic whatsoever worn off (which took a longer while). He didn't know how to drive a car, the TV to a certain extent terrified him at first, as did the cooker. Granted once Mum and Dad turned on the gas, he could cook though he had to use a cookbook. He never set a foot in cinema. He confused different keys.

Then came his education. Mum and Dad pulled some strings and had him sit mock GCSE and A-
levels. His English was uneven, his grammar was spot on, most spelling quite good but all his answers about literature were intuitive. His History was average, as long as certain events in Muggle world and the wizarding world to a certain extent affected one another he was quite good but outside of it, it was a guessing game. Same with Chemistry and Biology, he passed both but he was lucky with the questions. Physics was a failure, granted not a complete one and mathematical side of it saved his face from a complete failure. He did quite well in French and Geography. But the one thing he passed without a problem was Mathematics. The unevenness of his education baffled his parents but they did their best to help him so he could pass the real exams before the summer.

Then there were surgeries, his left leg had to be surgically broken again in two places during the first one and then in another three during next one.

His mental state varied. Initial depression with his state which he developed in the hospital gave into the novelty of being Martin Green and having to learn the world in which at the moment was living. He wasn't always successful but every tiny success counted. His upper body strength was improving day by day. Work around the house improved his dexterity. He was insanely proud from every single meal he managed to prepare on his own, especially when he managed to serve it to his parents when they returned home from work. His first laundry wasn't a huge success but at least the clothes he washed were clean and he didn't manage to set washing machine on fire even though he managed to wash his red shirt together with Dad's white one which turned the latter pink. But Dad didn't mind.

Then there were worse days. Days on which it was hard to get out of the bed and hobble down the stairs into the kitchen to eat breakfast. They came later after he had a physical proof how little did, he know about the world that was now his own.

On days like that he lied in his bed with his left hand clasped over the medallion and the mantra going through his head.

Confiteor Deo omnipotenti et vobis, fratres, quia peccavi nimis cogitatione, verbo, opere, et omissione: mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. Ideo precor beatam Mariam semper Virginem, omnes Angelos et Sanctos, et vos, fratres, orare pro me ad Dominum Deum nostrum.

During one of those days, Mum accidentally heard him when she was passing by his room. It was before Easter and on the next Sunday she bundled him into the car and drove them to the nearest church.

He attended the mass but didn't understand much of what was going on. He tried his best to follow what the congregation did but the only thing he didn't find himself struggling with was Confiteor. He managed to recognise the reading, Mirzam read it to him once.

After the mass Mum gave him a tiny cross that once belonged to her grandmother and got him a prayer book. He read it from cover to cover, learned a prayer or two by heart. He attended with Mum, and occasionally Dad, every mass after that. He never participated in communion. Not once not ever. At first, because he didn't understand much and then once he did out of respect for the ritual. That respect was deeply ingrained into him by his grandparents. There were plenty of rituals in the wizarding world and plenty of them had constraints on its participants, always that of willingness and sometimes additional restrictions. The same respect kept him from getting christened and truly becoming a member of the congregation. He reasoned out that the purpose of becoming one was to become a full participant of the mass, communion included. Communion itself required out of its participant to be in the state of grace, free of sins. And his sins? He could see no priest ever absolving him of what he had done.
It was also a matter of belief. He spoke the words and for most of the time tried to desperately believe in them, in the higher power in the world. But he still hadn't forgotten that not so long ago he believed in the Dark Lord's greatness and power and that he was essentially his apostle. He drew in other likely minded individuals, he killed on the Dark Lord's orders...

Did falling from one end of the spectrum into the other in such a short amount of time made him weak? Did he truly need someone of a higher power behind his back? Did he always yearn protection of the higher power?

Deep inside he knew that he had. At first, it was Sirius and then once Sirius couldn't protect him anymore, he tried his grandparents, then later Slytherin and later on the Dark Lord.

He missed Sirius. He also missed Mirzam, at the time probably a little more than he missed Sirius. He missed her because she knew him, knew everything he had done and things he had failed to do. He missed talking to her and the freedom of voicing his jumbled thoughts to her. She could help him make sense of it, help him decide what to do next. Mum and Dad were great and they accepted him but he just missed someone who truly knew him.

That yearning, in the end, led him back into the wizarding world by the end of April 1982. Part of him chided him that it wasn't safe, neither for himself nor for Sirius nor Mirzam. But a better part of him reasoned out that nearly two years and a half had passed since his supposed death and he no longer looked like he looked back then.

For some reason, after he was released from the hospital for the first time in forever, he managed to grow a beard. His shoulder-length hair was shaved at the hospital and he kept them that way since he got out. He also grew up a few inches and the stress he put his body under thinned him out. He was nothing but a shadow of Regulus Black and Regulus Black in the wizarding world was dead for long enough for people to forget his face.

So, he headed into the Leaky Cauldron and holed himself in the farthest boots with a mug of tea and a bowl of stew for which he paid in Muggle money. The staff of the Leaky Cauldron generally preferred wizarding currency to Muggle but once, years ago, he saw Tom accepting Muggle money from a stray Muggle-born or a squib.

When asked for his name he gave the name of Archie White, a squib, and claimed that he was supposed to meet his brother here who was supposed to supply him with wizarding money. After that Tom left him mostly in peace and free to listen to various conversations going around.

The atmosphere in the pub was weird. Many people came in and headed to Diagon Alley, sometimes they stopped by and talked with Tom or various patrons. Most were cheerful and weirdly relaxed. He couldn't understand why.

Did the Dark Lord relocate and took his entire entourage with him? Did he just give up and retired? Saw the light and surrounded?

He sat at the pub for three days straight, from late morning until late night and not even once he managed to catch a glimpse of Sirius or Mirzam. Finally, on the fourth day, he worked up enough bravery to head into Diagon Alley, following Holly Turner, a Muggle-born Hufflepuff from two years above him who eventually married Charles Abbot short after her graduation. Holly had a happy toddler at her hip and a bright smile on her face. She waved his apologies for inconveniencing her and told him that it was no problem.

Once in Diagon Alley his first instinct was to head to Sirius's and Mirzam's flat but another which found the cheerful atmosphere in the Leaky Cauldron weird kept him from doing so. No, he
shouldn't go there without finding out what the fuck happened when he was out of commission.

So instead of the place he wanted to go to he headed to the Great Wizarding Library, which was hardly great but still a wizarding library and headed to Periodicals Department. With relief, he discovered that the front desk was still manned by the same witch who manned it for years. She was old, half deaf and always lost in a romance novel.

This time was no different. He managed to sneak in even on crutches and he holed himself in the farthest corner from the door with a mountain of old editions of the Daily Prophet.

He started methodically from 3rd November 1979. His death didn't make it into neither morning nor evening edition. But the death notification made it into 4th November edition. It was painfully short. Nothing but a mention that the Black family was announcing the unfortunate passing of Regulus Arcturus Black with a time and location of the funeral. No cause of death, no murder investigation. But then again Grandpa Arcturus would want to keep it out of the press. So even if there was an investigation it wasn't a public one.

The next interesting thing was another death notification. This time about Orion Sirius Black, who suffered a massive heart attack at the tender age of fifty during his evening stroll through London town on 13th November 1979. There was no mention of the investigation and again Grandpa Arcturus would want to keep it from the press.

Then for the rest of the year, there was a mention or two about arrest which Sirius or Mirzam had made but no mentions about an eventual wedding he hoped for. In January 1980 there was an announcement about Narcissa's pregnancy followed a few weeks later by similar announcements made by the Longbottom and the Potter families.

In between an occasional mention about the rest of the family, there were reports about attacks but he paid them little attention. He really wanted to find out what became of Sirius and Mirzam. They made few more arrests in the following months and they still didn't get married like he expected them to do.

He almost missed the death notification for Mirzam Verascez, put side by side with an announcement of the birth of Longbottom heir, a boy named Neville Frances. He would have missed it completely if it wasn't for a photograph of her. The notification claimed that she was killed in a Death Eater attack on Diagon Alley on 30th July 1980 and that she died protecting a group of first-year Muggle-born students. It also listed time and place of the funeral, one of the Muggle cemeteries in London.

He managed to hold back the tears and a choked sob but just barely by hurrying through the next paper which held the birth announcement of one Harrison James Potter. But what nearly did him in was the edition from 9th August which announced that yesterday was the Naming Day of the boy and that little Harry Potter's godfather was no one other than Sirius Black.

Poor Sirius. He must have been devastated. How tactless it was for Potter to ask Sirius out of all people and to hold the Naming Day… But then again it was Sirius. Sirius, who never let on when he was hurting. Sirius, who smiled at him mere moments after a sound beating, he received from Mother, it was a smile that never reached his eyes but it was a smile nevertheless. If the birth of the boy absorbed his parents' attention enough to not pay it to what was going around for several days and Sirius didn't want to show it then no one of Sirius's friend would have been any wiser, maybe with the exception of Mirzam's sister, Bathsheda.

He managed to page through few more papers but rather than concentrating on the text he found
himself drifting to memories of Mirzam. To her kind smile, to that exaggerated eye roll when he said something stupid, to that determined look on her face during a stakeout, to the warmth of her hand on his shoulder. She was the closest thing he had to a sister and now she was gone. How Sirius could stand it? Living without her, in a world she no longer was.

It was that thought of Sirius, of what became of him after Mirzam's death that at the same time kept pushing him forward to run to him and to tell him everything just as it kept him rooted in the chair and paging through the old editions of the Daily Prophet. Mirzam died in July 1980 and it was April 1982. Nearly two years had passed since then and a lot could have happened in the meantime and to come to Sirius, he needed to know what he was standing on.

After Mirzam's death, Sirius name appeared in the Prophet with greater frequency, always in relation to arrests he made or Death Eaters he managed to kill. After his own death the war went on and it became more brutal as the time passed. People died left and right, people he knew, people he went to school with. His family remained unaffected. Sirius suffered a fair share of injuries and a few narrow escapes from death's clutches.

He even found one photograph of him and if it wasn't signed that it was him Regulus wouldn't even recognise him. He lost weight and his eyes lost the brightness he could see in earlier photos, he didn't smile, his lips were set in a thin line that disturbingly reminded Regulus of father and he had this 'bring it on' look on his face that Grandpa Arcturus perfected when dealing with his adversaries.

The further he went through the pile of the newspapers the more determined he became to reach the bottom of it. He stopped paging through the entire paper and only looked at first three pages. If a mention about Sirius didn't make it there, he could always come back there but he just needed to know what happened to Sirius in the meantime. If Sirius was...

He reached October of 1981 in the early evening, about an hour before the library was supposed to get closed. He powered through it quickly, paying attention to articles only when the word Auror was mentioned and once the name that followed it wasn't Sirius's he kept looking.

The special edition of the Daily Prophet on the 1st November 1981 caught him by surprise as did the headlines that claimed that the Dark Lord had met his match in little Harry Potter, who somehow managed to vanquish him. The edition contained obituaries of James and Lily Potter, whom the Dark Lord managed to murder before he was stopped by their kid. It also contained several interviews with the Potters former classmates, none of which were Sirius, Lupin or Pettigrew.

Well, that explained the atmosphere in Diagon Alley if it explained anything. It didn't explain however how little Harry Potter, about eighteen months old at the time managed to do it. The Potters individually were bright and talented wizards and their son would be one when he will grow up but what Harry Potter could do at eighteen months? Throw a pacifier at the Dark Lord? Scream him to death? Shit on him? Granted there was accidental magic and that god-damned prophecy and it could have manifested back then. But what it could be? What sort of power could destroy the Dark Lord's body because about his soul Regulus wasn't sure?

Poor kid and poor Sirius. It was immediately obvious to Regulus that Sirius would wind up with the guardianship of the kid whom the Daily Prophet dubbed as the Boy Who Lived. He was Harry's godfather after all. It couldn't have been easy on him, finding yourself with a little kid that required constant attention and probably didn't understand what happened while dealing with his own grief, funeral arrangements and just life in the aftermath of the Dark Lord's downfall.

He almost didn't reach for the next special edition of the Daily Prophet and when he did, he
immediately wished that he hadn't because surely the staff at the Daily Prophet got it wrong.

They claimed that Sirius in a fit of rage murdered twelve innocent Muggles and Peter Pettigrew, who in a maverick move that was so unlike him went after Sirius. What was even worse, Dumbledore of all people confirmed that Sirius was the Potters' Secret Keeper and that the Dark Lord wouldn't be able to find the Potters' location if their Secret Keeper wouldn't give it up. The rest of the paper was pure drivel. One of the journalists called Sirius the Dark Lord's right-hand man. Some other classmates of Sirius's chimed in about Sirius's cruel streak in pranks. Another journalist brought up Regulus's own unfortunate demise. Some other reminded that Sirius was a Black and that the Blacks always believed in pure-blood supremacy. Someone else pointed out that even though he was publicly ostracised by the family Sirius was never formally disowned and that he could have been the Heir to the Head of the Black family. Another person chimed in something about the Black family sudden migration to France following the Dark Lord's demise. Then there was a mention about Sirius's arrest and transfer to Azkaban.

He didn't know how he managed to come back home in one piece. He only knew that he did and as soon as he walked through the door of his bedroom he collapsed on his bed because the weight of what he learned today was too much.

First Mirzam and then Sirius. Mirzam's death was tragic and devastating but at least it made sense. She was killed by the Death Eaters, end of story. But Sirius? Sirius, who despised pure-blood supremacy. Sirius, who ran away from all of it. Sirius, who joined the Aurors and then the Order of the Phoenix. Sirius who loved James with all his might, though the passion of first love blended into the fierceness of brotherly love.

Sirius would have never betrayed James Potter. Hex him to the hell and back if Potter would have done something to deserve it? Yes. Call him an idiot if he was being one? Sure. Go for weeks, months even without speaking to him if he believed that Potter did something to deserve such treatment? Yes, that one too. But hand James and his family over to the Dark Lord? And for what? Why? What the fuck went wrong and with whom?

It couldn't have been Imperius. Grandpa Arcturus was way kinder than father ever was but even he believed that he couldn't have the future of Black family that his grandsons and Pollux's granddaughters were susceptible to any kind of compulsion spells, Imperius Curse included. Those lessons were sometimes painful and often humiliating but by the age of twelve, thirteen at the most Bellatrix, Andromeda, Narcissa, Sirius and Regulus could successfully throw off Imperius within seconds after it was cast on them. Remaining compulsion spells were worse to some, Bella could never resist the lure of a compulsion charm placed on a dark artefact, Narcissa had problems when a compulsion charm was placed on her money bag but Andromeda, Sirius and Regulus fared well in that regard.

What could lead Sirius to the Dark Lord? What could make him abandon his principles, his oath of an Auror, his friendship?

And what about the Potters kid? Charlus and Dorea both predeceased Fleamont and Euphemia who in turn predeceased James and Lily. If any other members of the Potter family existed then they had to live in the United States of America where one branch of the family migrated centuries ago and they were so far removed from the main line of the family that it didn't really matter and they probably didn't care. He wasn't even certain if any of them were still alive.

No, the only magical and somewhat the closest family little Harry Potter had was the Black family. But would the wizarding world just hand over their boy saviour to the family that mostly allied themselves with the Dark Lord and his politics? Would Dumbledore? Would Bagnold? And that
was even without taking into consideration that Sirius was supposed to betray the Potters.

Could Grandpa Arcturus raise against the overwhelming odds and call in every favour he was ever owed, use every dirty little secret he knew about various people to get custody of Harry? Harry was a Potter by birth but he was still Black by blood in some regard. And granted there was Lily's blood status but could Grandpa Arcturus overlook it in favour of raising the kid?

And if not the Blacks then whom else? Lupin, the only surviving Marauder? If Snape's suspicions about him were true and Lupin was a werewolf like Snape believed him to be then no one would hand the kid over to him.

Where else the kid could have gone?

He ran through the list of people he remembered either of the Potters being friendly with and the only ones that stood out a little than the others were the Longbottoms, who had a kid of their own and they were both active Aurors. They continued being so even though they had gone into hiding, he caught a mention about public complain of Augusta that her son abandoned the safety of Longbottom Manor and didn't allow her to visit her grandson in their new place of residence and hardly ever brought the boy around when he managed to visit her.

But could Dumbledore, who knew about the prophecy, just hand over the boy who somehow managed to vanquish the Dark Lord to the family of the other boy who fit the requirements of the prophecy? If Regulus was Dumbledore he wouldn't have, it wasn't safe and if the worst came to worst, he could have lost both boys.

Lily Evans' female friends? Those who weren't dead or estranged for some reasons (like snagging James Potter) were either single and mostly overseas and those who weren't as far as he could tell hated children.

Where Dumbledore could place the kid?

Where Regulus would have placed him if he was Dumbledore and he needed to make sure that the saviour of the wizarding world was safe from any backlash?

The answer, Lily's Muggle sister, Petunia presented itself to him by dawn. But would Lily herself place her child there? From titbits of a conversation he managed to overhear over the years he knew that both sisters were somewhat estranged even though they were forced by their parents to act civil towards each other. The estrangement was so bad that when Petunia got married, she even didn't invite her sister to her own wedding. Evans at the time was agonising over it before she shook herself off and claimed that if that was how the things were supposed to be then fine, she wouldn't invite Petunia to her own wedding either. From other titbits, he managed to gather that the estrangement steamed from Petunia's jealousy about Lily's ability to do magic.

Would Lily place her only child in Petunia's care if she was unable to take care of it? Would Sirius place the care of his own child if he had one with anyone in the Black family other than Andromeda? Regulus knew if the tables were turned around and the hypothetical child in question was his he wouldn't hesitate to name Sirius the kid's solitary guardian. But could the same be said about the Evans sisters?

He needed to find Petunia and needed to make sure whatever or not he was right.

He managed to track Petunia and her husband down. It wasn't bloody easy because for the life of him he couldn't recall the bastard's last name, even though he remembered that his first name was Vernon. In the meantime, he sat his A-levels, somehow managed to pass them well enough to get
into a university and he went through another surgery for his left leg.

Bored out of his bloody mind while in recovery he managed to convince his orthopaedist to tell him more about the procedure and tools that were used. Somehow the name of a company called Grunnings came up in that conversation and the lucrative deal which one of its directors, Vernon Dursley managed to sign with the hospital.

The name stuck and as soon as he was released from the hospital, he headed to one of Dad's colleagues, who believed him to be an amnesiac and he managed to convince her to track Dursley down, off the official records because he wasn't sure who the Dursley was to him but he felt that the name was important to him.

He had Dursleys' photo and the address by lunchtime and he was in Little Whinging before tea. He spent the first day canvassing the little town by a taxi ride, which cost him a small fortune. He told the driver that he was planning to move out of London into suburbs and he was trying to feel out if Little Whinging was a place to live. The driver nodded but didn't appear to care as long as the taximeter was running and he was going to get his money.

The trip was somewhat successful, he didn't see Dursley nor his wife nor his son and nephew but he managed to ascertain that Little Whinging was a wizard free town. At least that day it was. He also managed to locate Privet Drive, the street on which the Dursleys lived and the house under number 4 which belonged to the family.

Another thing which he managed to ascertain during his trip was that if he got out of the taxi in the clothes, he was wearing he would stick out like one very sore thumb. No, Little Whinging wasn't Harlesden in London, where a scruffy looking jeans-clad, t-shirt wearing beanpole with a military haircut on crutches blended quite well with the background and was even one of the few other beanpoles with military haircuts. No, even in the height of the summer Little Whinging was where women wore dresses of quality and men wore suits.

So, when he returned there next day he has dressed more appropriately, he still stuck out but not as badly as the day before. He located a small bakery that served also as a small cafe and parked himself by the front window with a good view at Privet Drive and drank his tea and ate his pastries while pretending to read a book.

Petunia Dursley had to come there at some point, her husband didn't look like a man who would have said no to a pastry or a cake and if she had two little kids at home Petunia had enough on her plate without additional baking, so even if she was a stay at home mother, she had to cheat a little.

He didn't manage to read more than an occasional sentence in his book because his attention was divided between glancing at the window and listening to gossip. And it was a good thing that he didn't ignore it because apparently, one of the Dursleys next door neighbour was a chatterbox who liked to talk about her neighbours.

Petunia obviously made that conversation at some point and he gained a confirmation that Harry Potter was indeed living with his aunt. But the cover story which Petunia had for his arrival… Sweet Merlin, Lily Evans would have rolled in her grave if she heard it. Petunia made the Potters a pair of drunks and drug addicts that died in a car accident caused by Potter's reckless driving under influence. The kid himself she made insanely picky eater and badly behaved. Mrs Next Door Neighbour believed that both boys have behaved badly and that apparently what Harry didn't eat then Dudley, Petunia's son, ate for him.

His patience was finally rewarded after lunch when he stepped outside for a smoke. It wasn't a very healthy habit but nicotine stimulated his brain and in the past few months he had done a lot of
thinking. So, he propped himself against the wall and his crutch next to a trash can and he smoked. He was almost done with his cigarette when he saw them approaching.

The first thing he saw was Petunia, with her son in a stroller, a blonde round thing that was screaming something. He would have ignored her even if it wasn't for the toddler that trailed behind her. Even from a distance, he recognised Potter's unruly mop on the kid and as they got closer, he saw the kid's eyes, in the same shade of green like Evans's. If that little boy wasn't their son then whose son he could have been?

But it wasn't that perfect blend of his parents that got to him. It was the look in Harry's eyes. It was so painfully familiar that it physically hurt. He remembered seeing it in Sirius's eyes before he left for Hogwarts and then again in the mirror when Sirius had left for Hogwarts and he stayed behind.

It screamed somebody help me, somebody save me. It rooted him to the ground and he couldn't move, he could only watch as they passed him by, Petunia screaming for Harry to hurry up without even turning to check if he was following her.

It had to be the trick of the light or him projecting his own experience on the boy. Petunia might have been estranged with Lily but Harry was still just a kid, a boy just two years old, an orphan in need of even a substitute parent and unlike his cousin, he was calm and appeared obedient.

He tried to shake it off but the image stayed with him through the rest of the day, into the night and had him returning to Little Whinging next morning just in time for after breakfast shopping trip.

He found Petunia already inside the cafe, with Dudley on her hip, picking pastries while Harry stood by the stroller outside with a resigned look on his face, as if he knew somehow that no matter what Petunia was buying, he wasn't going to get it.

How many times it had to happen for Harry to just not expect anything which his cousin would have? And apparently, it was an entire bloody cake by the look of it.

It chilled him to the very bone. There it was, his own flesh and blood, granted a somewhat distant relative but still a Black by blood, Sirius's godson and the kid looked so miserable that he barely stopped himself from grabbing the boy and hobbling away with him. But by then he lived in the Muggle world long enough to know that it was a supremely bad idea.

He had to remove the kid from the care of his relatives and while for Harry's sake he had to be fast he also had to be very careful and very smart about how to do it without giving himself away.

The idea struck him as soon as he found himself on his way back to London.

All Black marriages, save from Andromeda's, who eloped, were based on marriage contracts no matter if the marriage itself was arranged for political reason or simply out of love between two individuals. All marriage contracts had an obligatory clause that awarded the Black family primacy over the other family, especially if the marriage was arranged on another family's request. For most of the time primacy only affected the order of introductions and sitting arrangements during official balls and galas but the Blacks always remembered what primacy used to stand for before it became just that.

Primacy gave the head of the family the right to decide the placement of spouses and heirs of the members of the Black family, especially if the member of the Black family predeceased his or her spouse. Ages ago it was mostly used to keep wives from hurrying away into their own family protections with future Black heirs. Used almost obsessively over the ages it alleviated the status of the family and while it turned off certain families from arranging marriages with the Black family
it also drew lesser families, who were hoping to alleviate their own status by siding with the Blacks.

One of the beauties of the primacy clause was that only the current head of the family could remove it from a marriage contract and only at the request of a Black family member, usually a parent of one of the participants. It was rarely requested and even more rarely awarded. And even if it wasn't, after Cedrella Black managed to convince her father to both petition Regulus's great-grandfather Sirius, the Head of the Black family at the time, and arrange a marriage with Septimus Weasley without Sirius's knowledge furious Sirius issued a decree that all Black family marriages from that day on forward regardless of how they came to be had to be marriage contracts with primacy clause and that if someone didn't like it they could still elope and see where it would leave them.

The only thing that could be negotiated individually with the current head of the family was the degree and extent of the Black family involvement. The degree in the involvement into the marriage of male heirs was permanent until the extinction of their line. The marriages of females were allowed leniency and restricted the involvement of decision making over their heirs to usually one generation, mostly to ensure that the kid was married well.

Dorea's marriage to Charlus Potter was an exception. Regardless of the individual fondness of the family members for the lad Grandpa Arcturus, who was already the Head of the Black family had his doubts about him. Granted the match was somewhat neutral and it took an ageing old maid from his hands but the lad was still a bloody Potter and while he wasn't the first Potter to marry into the Black family, he was certainly the sleaziest one. It didn't sit very well with Grandpa Arcturus and while he could see the advantage of that marriage, he also had his doubts. Luckily for Charlus and unluckily for himself by the time Charlus decided to marry into the Black family Fleamont ceded the position of the Head of the Potter family to his son. Because if Fleamont was still the Head of the Potter family at the time the marriage contract wouldn't have been signed at all.

The clause on Dorea's and Charlus's marriage contract awarded the Black family primacy over the Potter family not for just one but two generations and when Fleamont discovered it after his son's unfortunate demise he was furious enough to storm into Grandpa Arcturus manor and punch him into the nose right in the middle of a family dinner.

Grandpa Arcturus, not giving in to the demands to call the Aurors and have Fleamont arrested calmly told the family that he will handle it alone. What he eventually told Fleamont no one was really sure but rather than summoning pregnant Dorea to the bosom of the family he allowed her to stay with the Potters. She eventually gave birth to James and decided to run away leaving the kid behind with his paternal grandparents. Then once again Grandpa Arcturus didn't give into the family demands of removing the boy from the Potters care. Reportedly when asked about his reasons he said something about slight softening of the Black family image and reminded the members that the family still had primacy over James's children. Regulus's father speculated with his mother that Grandpa Arcturus was going to use it when it would hurt Fleamont the most, that was at least what he would have done if he was in his father's place.

It was a wonder that he didn't use primacy over the Potter family when James married Lily and dissolved their marriage like Regulus's father would have done if he was the Head of the Black family. But at least by that point, no one tried to argue with him. But what he was waiting for at the time Regulus had no idea and quite frankly didn't wish to know.

Now it was time to bloody remind him.
He sent the letter to Grandpa Arcturus on the most parchment looking sheet of paper he could find. He also wrote it with his right hand which he trained himself to use but rarely used over the years. His writing was legible enough and his message was painfully short and unsigned. He sent it anonymously through the post office owl from Diagon Alley. It read:

*Friendly reminder that the Black family holds primacy over the Potter family up to and including the second generation of Dorea’s heirs, namely the sole heir to the Potter family, Harrison James Potter, the Boy Who Lived and vanquished a Dark Lord. If now isn’t the time to use it then when it is?*

He gave Grandpa Arcturus few days to mull over the letter and several weeks to act on it. That he didn’t do anything he learned about a month later when he returned to Little Whinging and found Harry still in Petunia’s company.

His letter writing continued through the years he spent at university. His letters grew shorter and harsher and by the time he was in a postgraduate program they shortened to just one sentence: *primacy*.

But by the time he finally graduated from the program, it no longer mattered. He graduated with top marks and got a vacating post of a Mathematics teacher in Little Whinging’s Primary School. The headmistress was overjoyed to have him. So, if Grandpa Arcturus wasn’t going to act and remove Harry from the Dursleys himself then Regulus would do it for him. He knew enough about Muggle world by then to know that Muggles had services and channels that dealt with children like Harry and was going to use the system against the Dursleys.

Over the summer after his graduation, he managed to convince his parents to sell their London town-house in Harlesden and trade it for a house in Little Whinging. While it was farther from work for both of them the cost of living there was cheaper and they could have a proper garden rather than the postal stamp they had in Harlesden. He would have settled on any house but when he discovered that one of the houses on sale on Mistletoe Drive shared a garden wall with 4 Privet Drive, he decided that it had to be that one or none.

Also, by then, Mum and Dad got very used to the occasional bouts of weird behaviour from him and they were fine with each house they watched and just happy that he still wanted to live with them rather than on his own. Which according to his colleagues from the university wasn’t normal neither for a man his age and nor for his parents. He knew that by taking care of him in the beginning they tried to fill the void left by the death of their own son and at the time bereft of the proper family love he let them. They loved him, took care of him, were proud of his accomplishments and in return he loved them back, the same way he loved Sirius, fiercely and jealously. Other men, his age could move away from their parents if they wanted, he was going to stay with them for as long as they wanted, even if some people jokingly predicted that he was going to live with them until their death. He wouldn’t mind.

So, they bought 11 Mistletoe Drive (who numbered it like that and on what grounds he had no idea other than it was a bloody idiot). It was a comfortable house and decently equipped but that didn’t matter as much as the view from his bedroom window, straight into the Dursleys backyard.

He saw Harry daily through the window even before the school year had started and every time, he had to resist the urge to just hop over the garden wall, grab the kid and take him away from the Dursleys. He was so bloody small and scrawny.

The system, he kept reminding himself, he would defeat the Dursleys through the system. All he needed was for them to put one toe out of the line and he and the system would fall on them like the fist of an angry god (another expression that he learned at the university).
Except it didn't.

He didn't have to wait long for the Dursleys to put a toe out of the line. A week into the school year, on Monday, Harry walked into the class with dislocated right thumb (which he claimed to hurt by falling down the stairs). At least he was wearing glasses which the school nurse urged Petunia to get him after Regulus marched Harry into her office in order to have her test his vision, but whatever or not the glasses had a correct prescription that was another story.

More injuries followed, mostly bruises and small scrapes (with standard excuses which victims of abuse used). Regulus stewed in anger and the school nurse started to agree with him that Harry's home life might not be as ideal as he made it look but seeing that all injuries which Regulus reported were relatively minor and typical for a child his age, they really had no grounds to involve Social Services.

But they did get involved towards the end of September although the reasons for it escaped him at the time and it wasn't the only thing that did.

As the October had started, following Harry's hospitalisation for a reason that managed to escape him, just like the reason why he was so fixated on the child he started having horrible nightmares. But that wasn't the worst, the worst was not remembering his life before waking up in the hospital and some deeply rotted instinct had him believe that he should remember it.

He kept waking up at odd hours from nightmares about a lake in a cave and pale hands pulling him under and if it wasn't the lake then it was a demented looking woman choking him to death. Then, towards the end of the October, his nightmares were joined by another. An older man in a library with a stick pointed at him and whispering, 'Imperio'.

He had no idea what it meant, no idea who he was before his hospitalisation. He talked with a local therapist who told him that retrograde amnesia happened to victims of trauma and judging by his medical history it might be a good thing that he couldn't remember it. He didn't even try to argue that yes, maybe retrograde amnesia concerning the traumatic event was a blessing in disguise but he should have remembered his life before it happened.

But it wasn't until shortly before Halloween when he and his Mum were on a walk through the neighbourhood and they happened to pass by 4 Privet Drive where little Harry Potter was watering the bushes when Mum made a derogatory remark about the kid until it truly rankled. It was his Mum, the warmest and kindest human being on the planet who always believed good in people.

Compulsion, something from the back of his mind supplied. Compulsion but to what? What could compel his Mum to act like that?

The nights that followed were full of nightmares. The lake, the woman, the man. Then another man making people scream just by pointing a stick at them. A different man in a hospital bed with a woman by his side. The onslaught of people with sticks doing horrible things to innocent people and then the worst of it, being one of them.

Feeling that he was probably losing his mind he had done the only thing that in so far brought him comfort. He kept praying, from the moment he opened his eyes and through the rest of the day until he was again in his bed. More often than not he found himself grasping the medallion around his neck, sometimes wondering how it had gotten so very warm just from rubbing against his skin and his clothes.

Then on the night from 1st to 2nd November, he woke up to the face of a woman who was putting something around his neck. She had long, curly, jet-black hair; thin, slightly slanted at the ends
eyebrows over almond-shaped hazel green eyes; straight nose with a little turned-up tip; thin lips and a heart-shaped face.

"No matter what happens, never remove it until I'm there to remove it from your neck myself," she said. "It's Saint Martin of Tours. So you will always remember whom did you save and who in return saved you."

Even though peaceful, while comparing it to his other nightmares, the dream disturbed him so badly that he headed to the kitchen for a smoke and a cup of tea and he wondered while he kept circling the kitchen.

Why that medallion seemed so important to her? Why it was so important to him? Why he couldn't remember anything about his life from before his hospitalisation? What the hell was wrong with him?

The sound of breaking glass tore him from his thoughts. It also woke up his parents, who came downstairs to investigate what happened. He shooed them back to the bed after informing them that it was an accident and he that will clean it up. But once they were back upstairs and he was cleaning the broken glass from the ashtray he realised something. The glass ashtray was standing on the edge of the counter and even though he was walking around the room like a caged lion something about it felt jarring.

He could have sworn that when he heard the sound of the breaking glass, he was nowhere near the counter on which the ashtray was lying and even if he somehow managed to topple it over without realising it, it should have smashed right by the counter and not so far away from it.

"I'm losing my mind," he told himself back then.

But at least he wasn't losing it in the classroom which was why he decided to wait until a decent hour to schedule an appointment with a psychiatrist from St Mary, who was far more reliable than the therapist in Little Whinging. Unfortunately, from the perspective of later events he considered it fortunate, the only opening the man had on 2nd November had been during his own work hours and he didn't want to skip work so he arranged a meeting on 3rd November after school.

He went through the rest of the day like he always had. He gave each class he had that day a quiz to give himself something to do while his parents headed out to visit a friend in Dover, he even managed to convince them to spend the night there.

And of course, almost the first thing he did after coming back home and eating dinner was falling asleep on the sofa.

The onslaught of images in his dreams was enormous. A boy with black hair and pale eyes holding onto his hand. The same boy with a man who was pointing a stick at him and saying 'Imperio' which did nothing to him. A black-haired girl, a young woman even, treated the same way as the boy and launching herself on a small statue. The demented woman again. Another man, with pale eyes like the boy. A black-haired, dark-eyed boy with a hooked nose. Another man like the boy, with a knife sticking out of his chest. Some humanoid creature coughing and screaming in his arms. More people with sticks. More people screaming.

Small rocky island by the cliffs. Stars above his head. Canis Major. Sirius, the brightest star and running down from it Beta Canis Major: Mirzam. Pale-eyed boy with black hair and green-eyed girl. The man on the bed and the woman by his side.

No matter what happens, never remove it until I'm there to remove it from your neck myself.

"What you're doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Running away like a coward."

"If that's what you're believing."

Confiteor Deo omnipotenti et vobis, fratres, quia peccavi nimis cogitatione, verbo, opere, et omissióne: mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. Ideo precor beatam Mariam semper Vírginem, omnes Angelos et Sanctos, et vos, fratres, orare pro me ad Dominum Deum nostrum.

Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.

No price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself.

Sirius.

Mirzam.

Azkaban.

Kensal Green Cemetery. Small, simple grave with just a name and dates.

He woke up with a start, immediately rising into a sitting position with his left hand clasped over the medallion of St Martin of Tours that was so warm it was burning his hand. But he didn't mind because finally, finally, he remembered.

"My name is Regulus Arcturus Black. I was born at 12 Grimmauld Place, London on 31st July 1961 to Orion Sirius and Walburga Irma Black. My brother is Sirius Orion Black, born at 12 Grimmauld Place, London on 3rd November 1959, Gryffindor, Auror badge number: 0311591. He is currently locked up in Azkaban prison in a top security cell. Unmarried, remained in a committed relationship with another Auror, Mirzam Miranda Verascez, born on 30th September 1959, passed away on 30th July 1980, Auror badge number: 3009592. Sirius's godson is Harrison James Potter, born to Lily and James Potter on 31st July 1980," he said quickly.

My name is Regulus Arcturus Black.

My name is Regulus Arcturus Black.

My name is Regulus Arcturus Black.

My name is Regulus Arcturus Black.

As is Martin Reginald Green.

Son of a bitch. Someone modified his memories. Quite expertly on that because they managed to successfully remove Regulus Black and his history from his mind. All that was left was Martin
Green and prior to his hospitalisation Martin Green didn't exist.

But how he managed to break through the modification of his memory?

"Because you're a Black," a voice in the back of his mind supplied, it sounded weirdly like Grandpa Arcturus. "And no Black should be susceptible to any kind of spells that mess with his mind. Prepare yourself and fight it. Imperio."

Treasure hunts they played as kids. Elaborate schemes that required from all participants cooperation and mutual exchange of information. Bella always tried to ruin them. So, they learned to play without her. Grandpa Arcturus showing them actual treasure and then removing the memory of one particular thing from the mind of a particular participant before he removed the memories of other, different things from the minds of others. The game was won only if they managed to find all items and to do that, they needed to help each other remember what they individually forgot.

Knowing Occlumency helped, but one had to be really fast to remember which items were considered treasure before they were made forget about one item and there was really no rhyme or reason to who will have a memory of which item removed from their mind.

But to practice Occlumency, truly practice it rather than breathing exercises and meditation part of it, one had to be a wizard, one had to be magical and he wasn't anymore. How his magic free mind managed to protect his identity and bury it under modified memories? How they managed to push through modification?


He sprung out of the couch and ran to the nearest mirror. In the near darkness on the corridor, dispersed slightly by the outdoor lights that were getting in through uncovered by draperies windows he could see his reflection in the mirror.

He hardly changed in the last few years. He was still tall and lanky even though he managed to put on some weight. His eyesight was still shitty enough for him to wear glasses permanently. He kept a permanent five o'clock scruff that was easier to maintain rather than shaving every morning and every evening. He still wore military haircuts albeit he allowed his hair to grow out between each of them.

But his own reflection wasn't as fascinating as the softly glowing medallion that was dangling on his neck that felt like it was burning under his touch.

Of course, it was charmed. Who was kidding? Did he truly believe that Mirzam, an Auror, would have given him a trinket that really didn't do anything other than dangle on his neck?

Okay, he was greatly distracted when she gave it to him and he didn't examine it right away. He should have examined it right away or at the very least asked what else it could do other than serving as a reminder of a life he was leaving behind.

Ever the Ravenclaw, he smiled fondly, assume that people just won't ask questions. Truly ingenious.

But what it could do?

Finding an answer to that took a longer while and a lot of effort. Even though he was a squib, at least at the time he believed that he was still one he could still see magic when it was cast around
him (of that much he was certain thanks to his rare visits to Diagon Alley).

But it wasn't until he was holding the medallion which he finally removed from his neck in his palm and trying to check the enchantments that were placed on it when he realised that his magic came back. If it hadn't, he wouldn't have seen the tiniest trace magic of the enchantments on the medallion and not only he could just see them but he could tell them apart.

The number of spells on it was astounding. There was a masking spell that hid the protective runes etched on it from the sight of pretty much anyone. Another masking spell covered its magical signature and made it appear to anyone as a pretty ordinary medallion. Then there were layers upon layers of enchantments that were supposed to improve one's reflexes, agility, to certain degree speed and physical strength. Those were the ones that still held but the enchantment that was all but destroyed and he could only pick minute traces of it was thought directed and touch activated Portkey, it was accompanied by a mild compulsion spell that, as he theorised, was supposed to compel him to touch the medallion and activate the Portkey if he needed to make an escape. Like he did in the cave, sweet Merlin.

No matter what happens, never remove it until I'm there to remove it from your neck myself.

It wasn't just an ordinary trinket but a testament of the lengths Mirzam was willing to go through in order to protect him. And what he had done to warrant it? Confessed to his sins? Went to her in the hour of a doubt? Trusted her to handle one of the most compromising situations the Black family had been through in decades, all right years, the family was pretty good at getting themselves into pretty compromising situations before that.

If she did that for him, who was literally a nobody to her, what she would do in order to protect Sirius?

Granted she hadn't done it alone. She was quite a capable enchanter but not an as good one as the other enchanter who put their own power into the medallion. Their magic was similar in mannerism and strength but the enchantments that were holding still weren't the ones that she placed so it meant that whoever was the other enchanter they were obviously a more experienced person on the subject.

But who would have done such a thing for Mirzam? Curse-breakers at Gringotts could but the amount of spellwork would make it very costly and with so many spells on it they would most certainly throw in Goblin enchantments but he couldn't feel any Goblin magic, just the usual human magic.

Who would help her? Who had a vested interest in helping Mirzam?

Someone who cared for her in return. Someone who would place a number of pretty strong and pretty fancy enchantments on a trinket at a face value, Mirzam's own half-sister: Bathsheda Babbling.

Merlin, he loved magic, he loved Mirzam and he loved Bathsheda. He was a wizard again. He could do…

… nothing. He was in Little Whinging, living under a different name, pretending to be Muggle and actually being quite good at it after five years. His ability to see the magic that was hidden from the eyes of Muggles and Squibs didn't change the situation in which he was stuck and it was a pretty bad one.

Someone messed with his memories and they have done it very well. They would have even got
away with it if it wasn't for whatever magic than managed to bury his identity behind Occlumency shields. But why would someone do that?

The answer was obvious.

Harry Potter.

He had a vested interest in removing the boy from the care of his relatives and it seemed that he probably came quite close to succeeding if he managed to spook his opponent into using memory modifying charms.

The question was how much his opponent knew about him and who the hell it was?

Well, the answer to the latter question was kind of bloody obvious. Ministry of Magic was too corrupted and quite frankly too filled up with idiots for his opponent to be an Auror because if they were, he would be already chilling up in an Azkaban cell next to Sirius's. No, it had to be someone else, someone smarter, someone much more…

Bingo. Dumbledore, with probable help of his Order of the Flaming Chicken. Of course, Dumbledore wanted to have an eye on the boy who vanquished the Dark Lord. He was also the one who put Harry there in the first place. But what lengths Dumbledore was willing to go to make sure that Harry stayed with Petunia?

As it turned out pretty fucking great and learning the extent of Dumbledore's machinations for the lack of better words was bloody annoying and highly inconvenient.

One of the first things which Regulus had done after ensuring that he and Harry were the only wizards in Little Whinging, with the exception of Arabella Figg, a Squib that served as Harry's occasional babysitter, was ensuring that not even a trace of suspicions filled Dumbledore's mind about improved number of magical citizens of Little Whinging.

It was a costly operation and it brought forth all of the Black family paranoia which up until then Regulus kept deeply hidden. Sharing his days between work and loitering around Diagon Alley he managed to construct an incredibly strong set of wards anchored to crystals that he was going to bury around the edge of his property once he was done with enchanting them. Some of the enchantments he mimicked after the enchantments on his medallion and then added standard Black family wards on the top of it. By mid-December 1986 the wards were up and running beautifully without him having to worry about a visit from Ministry of Magic about using magic in Muggle area. He tested them quite heavily by doing a lot of magic in close vicinity to his parents (but out of their eyeshot). There were no letters, no warnings, no visits. 11 Mistletoe Drive didn't exist on the magical map of wizarding Britain and it was great.

The hard part came later and it was ensuring that he would survive next meeting with whoever managed to modify his memory in the past with his memory intact and not on a merry way to Azkaban. The medallion helped, most certainly it gave him ideas of enchantments he could add into it. Like a pretty elaborate enchantment that was connected to his Occlumency shields together with a pretty damn strong compulsion spell to touch it whenever a memory modifying spell was used on him.

In theory, it was supposed to work well and seeing that he came back to religiously practising his Occlumency following his epiphany that he was a wizard again he managed to bury his true identity pretty deep in his mind behind the strongest Occlumency shields he could muster. But just in case it wasn't working he constructed a fail-safe of a letter which only he could read that he left at home.
He didn't have to wait long to test the theory and his enchantments. By mid-January, Harry came to school with a pretty nasty case of pneumonia while poor, little Dinky Duddydums stayed at home with only a slight cold. The incident didn't warrant a visit from Social Services but it warranted an ambulance ride to the hospital and another hospitalisation.

Luckily for Regulus Harry's class was the last class of the day and he managed to follow the ambulance to the hospital. Also, blessedly by that point, his Mum switched from working in St Mary's Hospital to working at the local hospital and also by then Regulus was frequent enough visitor for medical personnel to not pay him too much attention. Once he borrowed doctor's coat, he could pass for a medicine student and blended with the background even better.

It took Dumbledore roughly four hours following initial hospitalisation to get himself involved. And the way he did? Well, Regulus had plenty of things to say about the subject, none of which bore repeating in the company of sensible people. For starters, Dumbledore brought with himself a pretty impressive number of potions that improved Harry's condition. Once done with that he investigated who made the initial call for the ambulance and that was when it got foggy for a while because apparently Regulus's disguise as a medical student wasn't working and Dumbledore had to have a file on every single of Harry's teachers.

But at least he wasn't any wiser about Regulus's ability to do magic. Which was great.

They played that game well through February and March following Harry's hospitalisations for dislocated shoulder, broken leg, sprained wrist and a sound beating with a belt that got infected and required both hospitalisation and involvement of Social Services. Regulus knew, he was the one who discovered them and the one who made the call and demanded the immediate removal of the kid from his relatives and placing him in a foster family.

It didn't work but he wasn't going to give up. He was never going to give up and one day he will succeed in removing Harry from the Dursleys even if it was going to kill him. In so far it only messed with his head pretty badly but each incident helped him improve the enchantments on his medallion and the window of fogginess and not remembering who he was had gotten significantly shorter after every single incident.

That didn't mean that he didn't find them highly inconvenient to the point that even catching the glimpse of Dumbledore in Little Whinging was giving him a tick and had him thinking: great, it's you again.

One such incident happened on the day when he managed to sprain his right wrist on his way to work. It was nothing but a simple accident but it warranted a trip to the hospital that consumed his entire morning so he wasn't there when a call to Social Services was made by the school nurse.

He arrived late and while he was on his way to the headmistress office, he spotted Dumbledore talking both with her and the school nurse and he quickly turned on his heel before any of them saw him. Once out of immediate vicinity he ducked into the nearest bathroom and then into the furthest stall from the door. The headmistress knew that he probably wasn't going to show to work today, he told her that he felt fine and that he could come to work if he would manage to get out of the hospital at a decent hour but with Dumbledore around it was better to pretend that he wasn't around. At least that saved him from having his memory modified again.

But that didn't mean that Dumbledore won't try and look for him on his own. He figured that he made out of himself enough of a nuisance for the old man to check upon his current whereabouts just in case.

If only he had Polyjuice Potion, he mused once he locked himself in a stall. Preparing it wouldn't
be a problem, it was acquiring its ingredients that was problematic. Boomslang's skin was a controlled substance and the apothecaries had to keep records of the customers who purchased it in great quantities and report those records to the Ministry of Magic every month. The only people that were safe from 'what you're cooking here' visits from the Ministry of Magic were licensed Potions Masters and he wasn't one.

Well, he could swing a Third-Class Mastery in Potions. He might be a little rusty and he didn't come near a cauldron in years but his Potions theory was pretty sound thanks to his teenage desire to impress Severus Snape. Also, the man himself was a great teacher once one got past his charming personality and actually listened to what he was saying. Snape himself reckoned that Regulus's understanding of the subject would have allowed him to apply for Third Class Mastery in Potions and pass it reasonably well back when he was still at Hogwarts (if he would manage to find the time for it, which he hadn't).

Wouldn't it be great to spend Dumbledore's visits as say, Herbert Hopkins, the school janitor, who appeared to be some long-lost soulmate of Argus Filch? Herb hated his job because it never ended, hated kids because they made too much noise, hated the teachers because they were more competent than him and pretty much hated the entire world. Throw into the mix Herb's lankiness, bushy eyebrows over dull blue eyes and short, curly, dirty-blonde hair that always reminded Regulus of pubic hair. Yeah, Dumbledore surely wouldn't pay attention to him, most people didn't.

He gave Dumbledore at least a solid hour of prancing around the school while he was hiding in the bathroom. He even managed to doze off. Granted it wasn't the most comfortable position but it wasn't as if he had something else to do other than sit there and wait for Dumbledore to leave the premises.

Finally, after the last bell rung, he dared to leave the stall and he immediately headed to the sinks to wash his face. He glanced into a mirror out of pure reflex and he almost screamed when he saw his reflection.

Blinking out of the mirror at him was Herb Hopkins in all his glory. Well, not exactly in all his glory, he looked like a cleaned-up version of Herb Hopkins in a pair of jeans, a decent button up shirt and a fitted jacket. He poked his cheek and Herb's reflection in the mirror had done the same thing. He tried few more pokes and grimaces and every single time Herb in the mirror did exactly what he was doing.

He was Herb. Just like he wanted to be for a brief moment. Which was bloody weird.

How did this happen? And how was he going to come back to himself? What sort of magic was capable of turning one person into another person by a simple power of thought?

Magic! Didn't Grandpa Arcturus once tell them a story about one of their ancestors that was a Metamorphomagus?

Not a lot of things was known about him seeing that he was reportedly Sirius Black's bastard son from a brief school tryst with Hannah Nelson, a pure-blood witch from a very minor house that by the nineteenth century was extinct. Reportedly she was also a bastard daughter of an unknown individual. Being a bastard would have disqualified the kid from being officially accepted by the family at the time but coincidentally discovery of his existence happened roughly around the same time when Sirius discovered that his own wife was barren and was unable to produce heirs. So, as the Head of the Black family at the time, Sirius dissolved his marriage, arranged marriage with Hannah and officially recognised his son. The kid didn't live long and neither did his mother who died in childbirth while giving birth to Sirius's daughter, Cassiopeia. The kid outlived his mother but only by few years. Luckily for Sirius and his descendants he lived just long enough to enter
arranged marriage with Mary Bones, some very distant cousin of the main line of the Bones family and he even managed to knock her up before he passed away at the ripe old age of thirteen. Mary herself also died in childbirth few months after her young husband and by using primacy clause in their marriage contract Sirius claimed their twin sons and raised them as if they were his own.

No other Metamorphomagus since then was born in the family until Andromeda gave birth to Ted Tonks child. Depending from who one was listening to the child in question was a girl, a boy, magical or a Squib and no one was really keen to learn the truth due to Andromeda's misalliance of marrying a Muggle-born. In fact, little Nymphadora Sadachbia Tonks was over one year old by the time, during one of the family dinners, Grandma Melania brought up her existence, her sex, her name and her ability to do magic.

Listening later to Grandma Mel's discussion with Cissy about the girl cleared some initial confusion regarding Nymphadora's sex. Apparently born a girl through the first twenty-four hours of her life Nymphadora cycled through being a girl and a boy to finally settle on being a boy. But apparently her desire to be a boy only lasted until Andromeda and Ted decided to circumcise their newborn son and upon feeling the first tingles of circumcising charm Nymphadora changed back into a girl and had been one since.

Sirius found it hilarious, as did Regulus. Another thing which Sirius found hilarious, and at the time Regulus didn't, was that Andromeda with her Muggle-born husband managed to produce one of the most magical kids the Black family had seen in centuries.

But Metamorphmagi were born not made so how that could explain his Herb-ing up? Was he even a Metamorphmagus or did his sheer desperation called upon some very deeply hidden Metamorphmagi magic that decided to grant him a changed face this one time? And what if he was going to stay that way?

He couldn't stay that way. He needed to de-Herb himself. But how? Probably the same way he Herbed himself up in the first place. By the sheer desperate need to have his own face again.

Blessedly it worked, even if it took him an hour of alternatively begging whichever deity was listening, cursing at the mirror and pushing his magic into transforming Herb's face into his own.

It was bloody exhausting and terrifying at the same time but he came back home that day wearing his face again.

He didn't attempt poking that beehive of issues for next several days until his parents headed to spend a weekend at one of their friends' place and he found himself home alone with too much time, too little to do and way too much curiosity for his own good. But he had to be certain whatever or not it was a one-time thing or something new.

He started small, with his hair. He spent an entire afternoon and evening at changing its length and by the end of the day, he felt even confident enough to try and change its colours which worked… well, the less was said about that experiment the better. But the more time he spent at staring at his reflection in the mirror between directing his magic to change the length or colour of his hair the easier it became.

He devoted next day to working on various body-types and skin colours and found the hard way that while superficial changes over his existing body were actually pretty easy but trying to mess with changing his height or the length of his extremities were not only hard but also bloody exhausting.

Once exhausted by the output of magic he had to use to change his height, his nose and length of
his limbs he sat down to ponder how he managed to end up with this weird gift of magic that was Metamorphmagi abilities.

By April 1987 he lived in Muggle world for long enough to get himself acquainted with Muggle science and various branches of it. Physics was no longer dark magic to him (another expression that he learned at university) and he even had a pretty strong grasp on how Muggle aeroplanes could fly but what interested him more than various mechanical issues was medicine.

He stumbled into genetics while he was helping his colleague from university prepare for an exam and found the subject greatly interesting and also to certain degree mortifying. If the years he already spent by that point as Martin Green, as well as exposure to Mirzam, didn't manage to kill the last remains of a pure-blood supremacist in him then the study of genetics would have done it.

It was no wonder why so many pure-blood families had problems with procreating and rising magical children with all of the interbreeding that was going on. It was also a wonder that he and Sirius managed to get off relatively lightly once one took into the consideration that they were both brothers and third cousins. Yuck.

The gene responsible for Metamorphmagi abilities had to be a recessive one which explained why Metamorphmagi were pretty rare. They were so rare that Ministry's records of known Metamorphmagi (reported Metamorphmagi at the very least) held only about a little over one hundred and fifty names in total (he checked out of pure curiosity after he learned about Nymphadora). And yes, one could argue that the number might have been higher once one took into consideration that certain families might have hidden their children Metamorphmagi abilities from the rest of the world. Then there was throwing in a random Muggle-born with such abilities but if these children were left to their own devices and happened to be shunned for that odds were that they didn't live long enough to attend Hogwarts.

Most probably Metamorphmagi came into being in the first place due to a genetic mutation that somehow fussled the genes responsible for their magic with genes responsible for their appearance.

The gene had to be recessive otherwise there would be many Metamorphmagi running around and they weren't. So maybe being Metamorphmagi was a bit like a genetic disease when one sick individual managed to pass the gene responsible for the disease to their children to a certain degree which made them carriers of the gene but unaffected by the condition until the carrier managed to have a child with another carrier and their genes had to mix just the right way to create a Metamorphmagi offspring.

That explained Nymphadora. Andromeda carried a gene responsible for Metamorphmagi abilities because there was a Metamorphagus in the Black family and Ted also had to have the same gene and their daughter lucked out in the genetic pool.

That didn't explain him. Of course, he was a carrier and his parents had to be ones too in the first place but he spent eighteen years of his life wearing the same face and then…

Then came in the cave and while trying to escape it he managed to drain himself dry, probably rupturing his magical core in the process. His body shut down and without the aid of Muggle doctors, he would have most probably died because if he ended in the hands of the Healers odds were pretty big that they wouldn't even try and fix the damage.

But he healed, he recovered physically from his ordeal with no magical aid whatsoever and no magic left in him.

Or did he?
The magic eventually came back. It took seven bloody years, two of which he spent in a coma, but he had his magic again. Except, was it exactly his own magic? To a certain degree it had to be since he was using it and it was his body and he knew who he was. But was it truly the same magic his eighteen years old self drained himself dry from?

It had been seven years, seven long years, two of which his body spent recovering from the ordeal. Without magic.

Maybe he truly drained himself dry or maybe whatever remained from his magic went dormant when he wasn't physically fit to use it. Maybe draining himself nearly dry sent whatever remained of his magic into a shock and caused a complete shutdown of his magical core while it healed and probably mutated to protect itself. That mutation might have set off the carrier gene for Metamorphmagi abilities which manifested themselves when he truly needed them.

It was the only explanation that made sense. He knew for certain that he wasn't born as a Metamorphmagus, he would have noticed, his family would have noticed and Sirius wouldn't be able to hide it from him and neither would Grandma Mel. But he was one now, even if he wasn't a proper, born Metamorphmagus.

Further experiments with his newly discovered abilities proved beyond a shred of a doubt that he wasn't a true, born Metamorphmagus. From what he read on the subject as a teenager Metamorphmagi transformation of any kind was effortless as if the magic in the body of a Metamorphmagus just knew what to do to make a change.

His transformations weren't. Granted superficial changes were easy once he trained himself to use them but changes that affected his body under the skin… Well, understanding human anatomy made it easier but didn't make it any less exhausting or faster.

And his first physical transgender change into a woman? The less was said about that the better. It was a bloody disaster and he had to put up with having a vagina for three days before he managed to figure out how to get his prick back.

The sex was great though because he obviously had to try how sound his transformation was.

Regina Black had to die pretty quickly though because he had no use for her.

Yvonne Carmichael though...

Yvonne was a stroke of sheer bloody genius and he had been cackling at his ingenuity for a solid week before he finally managed to calm down and look at Yvonne's face in the mirror without laughing.

Yvonne was of Petunia's height, slightly shorter than him, equally thin but filled just enough in all the right places but not too much though. He didn't want Vernon's eyes to stray too much in his direction although some deeply ingrained sense of defiance wouldn't have minded destroying the Dursleys marriage. But he wasn't going to do that because he had some standards and also limits and while he had no problems with occasionally sleeping with everything that moved (because sex was great) seducing someone like Vernon Dursley was way below of what he could stomach (and that, after taking into consideration that he was once a Death Eater, was saying something).

So, in turn, he seduced Petunia, with an offer of friendship. Although he came to regret it over the years. If Petunia was a witch of magical heritage she would have fit quite well with his mother. She was too full of herself, extremely judgemental, downright racist and also homophobic. But that mattered very little because it meant occasional unrestricted access to Harry, whom Yvonne
occasionally babysat when Figg couldn't (and Regulus tried his best to make sure that Figg couldn't babysit him too after he came around).

Eventual retirement of Yvonne, once Harry headed to Hogwarts, hit Petunia hard. Yvonne eventually settled in Majorca with some pretty gorgeous African-American former female model that was into too tall, skinny blue-eyed blondes with a bad perm. Petunia was very disappointed.

But before that happened years passed. Between Harry's various hospitalisations and occasional few hours spent at watching TV together and eating junk food as well as hiding from Dumbledore and maintaining a set of pretty iron clad aliases, there were days when he wanted nothing more to bundle the kid in a blanket and run away with him.

He didn't though. He promised himself that he would win Harry with the system and he was going to win Harry with the system even if it was going to kill him or Dumbledore, whichever came first. He failed miserably at each try.

Maybe he should have grabbed Harry when he had a chance and relocate to Chile or Canada or Australia. At least then he would be able to make sure that some years of Harry's childhood were good ones. But that ship had sailed.

He missed the entire Hogwarts's letter delivery drama because he got caught in his own. Shortly after Dudley's birthday, after which Harry didn't return to school, he was called out from the classroom by the secretary and have been told that there was an urgent call waiting for him and that his mother was on the line.

Mum never called when he was at work so it spooked him right away and hearing her distraught voice at the other end of the line did the rest. Dad had a heart attack and the doctors were worried that he wasn't going to make it.

He made it but the fight for his life and his health completely consumed whatever was left of Regulus's free time and strength.

Mum was in pieces and so was Regulus but for her sake, he tried to keep his wits and his melt downs private. When he wasn't at the hospital discussing treatment with Dad's doctors, he was following Mum around and trying to convince her to eat something. Dad eventually recovered and was released home but the state he was in promised that his full recovery will be long and the fight for it would be tedious.

He soldiered on. He did everything around the house which Mum couldn't bring herself to do. He cooked, he cleaned, he helped Dad with physical therapy and once he caught Mum eyeing a bottle of sleeping pills for too long, he drove her to a psychiatrist. He took a semester off just to be at home, he barely slept, he hardly ate, he lost a stone in weight. He divided his time between home and hospital where Mum was placed under observation just in case until she was released home with a bag of antidepressants.

Six months went by before thoughts of Harry entered his mind again. But Harry was at Hogwarts, under Dumbledore's watchful eye and even though he didn't like it he had to admit that Dumbledore was pretty adamant about keeping Harry safe. What could possibly go wrong?

Life went on. Dad got better, not well enough to return to duty and eventually he had to retire but he got better. So did Mum, at least for a while, she was smiling again, laughing again. She returned to work, part-time and it seemed that everything was going to get better with time.

Instead, it got worse. During a routine check-up, Mum's doctor found a lump in her left breast and
everything started again. Except this time, it was Mum who was in the hospital, going through
treatment after treatment. Dad fared slightly better than Mum did during his predicament, at least in
front of Mum but once he was out of Mum's side… He barely ate, barely slept and Regulus even
cought him smoking again… for a brief period of time.

Then there were the treatments itself. They sounded good on paper and Mum's doctors believed
that following a surgery and a round of chemo she would get better but Regulus reached the point
where he wasn't accepting any 'would'. So, he went and purchased everything he could find on how
Healers treated cancer in the wizarding world. He left no stone unturned, no tiniest mention of a
potion or a spell unchecked. He brewed, he schemed, he kept enchanting various trinkets which
Mum wore.

He prevailed. He tore Mum out of death's clutches via potions he fed her under the guise of herbal
teas and charms he kept casting on her when she was sleeping. He won. The check-up in April
proved beyond a shroud of a doubt that there was no cancer left in his Mum's body. The doctors
called it a miracle, he preferred the word magic.

Speaking of which he should use it again.

The way to the station and from there to Little Whinging had passed quickly while he was lost in
thoughts. The train was already slowing and he could hear the movement of the corridor.

Should he hazard heading to Little Whinging as Mirzam or should he not?

Better not. He didn't want to lose the comfort which her form provided but if Little Whinging was
under Auror surveillance it was better to not tempt fates by walking around with a face of a non-
Little Whinging resident.

He turned his face towards the window and closed his eyes allowing the magic to flow through
him. The new form was still a stretch since he still kept his height but it had been a while since she
was seen in the neighbourhood so he could still swing it.

He opened his eyes and found himself staring at the reflection of his Mum's face in the window.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Sirius, Harry and nasty stuff that hides in a closet. A lot of hurt and
plenty of comfort with some angst. Hopefully, it won't take me three months to post it.
Chapter 06: The Ghosts of 12 Grimmauld Place

Chapter Summary

Harry and Sirius examine one of the closets at 12 Grimmauld Place and find some disturbing stuff in there.

Chapter Notes

Additional warnings: profanity, plenty of hurt but also a lot of comfort.

Chapter summary: Harry and Sirius examine one of the closets at 12 Grimmauld Place and find some disturbing stuff in there.

Word count: Around 12 000 words.

Author's note/personal ramble: This chapter was born out of sheer 'Regulus's gets too much screen time' which is both necessary for the progress of the story but at the same time can be pretty boring both for you and for me. Not to mention getting stuck at 'would you move already you bugger' is not fun. I know where he's supposed to go, things he's supposed to do but his part was extremely slow going as a writing process seeing that I have to tick certain boxes before he gets home and by have to, I really mean 'have to' because if I don't do it, if I don't show it some chapters down the line you will end up asking 'how did this happen'. So in an attempt to unstick myself, I left Regulus where he was and came back to Harry and Sirius. As for the Mirzam thing, I do have a detailed explanation for it at the bottom of the chapter if you're interested.

At the same time, this chapter was necessary for various reasons and also for various reasons certain things that happen here had to happen prior to getting this merry bunch together (and you will see it when it happens, it had to happen here because there was no other place for it to happen). As for the rest, the rest is a bonding exercise between Harry and Sirius. Granted it opens some interesting can of worms and I just can't wait to hear what you think about it. I'm not begging, I'm just very curious and slightly gleeful because in spite of quite heavy tones it was a fun chapter to write.

Happy Easter

Beta-read by Wilting Rose 08

Dedicated to all of my readers who stuck with me for so long. Thank You, I hope that you will find this story enjoyable. I would be the most grateful for constructive criticism.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the assessment that something else is more important than fear."

Harry Potter, 12 Grimmauld Place, London, 7th August, early afternoon

Harry looked around the room. It was spacious and must once have been handsome. There was a large bed with a carved wooden headboard; a tall window was partially obscured by long velvet curtains in a colour that might have been grey at some point. The chandelier in the middle of the room had candle stubs still resting in its sockets, solid wax hanging in frost-like drips.

The walls, or, more precisely, what could be seen of the walls between the amount of pictures, posters and banners that covered them, had to be silvery-grey at some point, like the walls in Regulus's room. In fact, the only things not covered with them were the bed, quite spacious desk, decently sized bookcase and a large wooden wardrobe that stood directly in front of the bed on the opposite wall of the room.

"What do you think?" asked Sirius.

"Truthfully?" Harry paused nervously. "It looks like how Dudley would decorate his bedroom if by some freakish accident he turned out to be a wizard and somehow managed to land himself in Gryffindor."

"Yeah," sighed Sirius. "I might have gone a little overboard with redecorating." He grimaced. "In my defence, I was fifteen at the time and suffering from a serious case of overcompensation so..."

"Overcompensation? What's overcompensation?"

"Trying too hard to create a usual or correct state from one that isn't usual," explained Sirius grimly. "At fourteen, fifteen I was very busy pretending I was normal."

"Why? Weren't you?" asked Harry curiously.

"Well, puberty started," sighed Sirius as he leaned against the door. "It was bloody confusing. The guys my age started seriously crushing on girls and noticing the changes to their bodies. It was ridiculous; you couldn't go from one class to another without hearing stray bits of conversations about the cleavage or bottom of this or that girl. I wasn't even free from that in my own dormitory, especially between your dad and Pettigrew. Moony was slightly prudish on the subject but I could see that his eyes occasionally strayed to a certain area of interest."

"And yours didn't?" asked Harry sceptically.

Sirius grimaced and sighed before he finally answered. "I'm what's called asexual, somewhat sex-repulsed and what Mirzam once described as bisexualy romantic who has to truly know someone before I would develop romantic feelings for them. So this..." He waved his hand around the room. "Was me trying to convince myself that I was like other guys, that being interested in girls and their bodies was normal, and that a crush on a boy wasn't normal. And the way wizarding world, especially pure-blood families, view homosexuality wasn't exactly helping."

"How does the wizarding world view homosexuality?" asked Harry.

"Somewhat better than Muggle world does," said Sirius pensively. "It's definitely found less offensive than in Muggle world. There are no homosexual marriages in the wizarding world, but no one really minds if two individuals of the same sex live together and are seen together at public functions..."
"But?" Harry prodded.

"But getting married and procreating are still considered a public duty, especially amongst pure-blood families like ours. Sure, no one is going to frown too much as long as the family has a proper number of descendants, especially male. But like you've seen in our case where there's no male heir and the man is capable of procreating..."

"Then he gets a 'get married and procreate or else' ultimatum," finished Harry.

"Exactly," nodded Sirius. "The marriage forced my father back into the closet and in some weird solidarity with him, Uncle Alphard decided that he wasn't going to flaunt his partners in public or at big family gatherings. And I was the firstborn son, future Head of the Black family, so..."

"You were expected to get married and procreate."

"Luckily for me, not that it mattered at the time or was particularly easy on me back then, the boy in question was painfully straight, so I had to accept that it wasn't ever going to happen." Sirius sighed. "It took a while, but I fell out of love with him and had fallen for Mirzam instead."

"Successfully," said Harry.

"Yeah," sighed Sirius wistfully. "You would have liked her and more importantly she would have liked you. Aside from Bathsheda, she got along with boys better than with girls, had to since she had three younger brothers. She was fiercely protective of them since her mother and step-father were..." He grimaced. "Well, the less said about them the better."

"Where are they now?" Harry asked.

"Dead," Sirius sighed. "Her step-father was caught up in some black market deal with wizards. They were trying to launder money through the Muggle world, I think. The Aurors managed to close in on them, and captured some of them, but not before the rest managed to clean up the loose ends, including Mirzam's family."

"I'm sorry," whispered Harry.

"Don't be." Sirius smiled softly. "It wasn't your fault. None of it. It wasn't Mirzam's fault either and it took me ages to convince her to believe that. She was devastated by her brothers' deaths, especially the oldest one. They were really close. He was a wizard, too."

"Well, I can still feel sorry that it happened. Did you know them well? How did you meet them?"

"I snuck out of the house," said Sirius pensively. "It was the summer before my eighth birthday and for some reason we weren't in Derbyshire. I think it was early July. Reg was sick; he'd caught the flu. It was resistant to potions, so he was stuck in bed and mostly sleeping. Our parents left us under the care of the elves for several days. It wasn't the first time we'd been left, but with Regulus sick... I was suffering from a case of cabin. So one morning when Reg was sleeping and the elves were occupied, I decided to sneak out into Grimmauld Place."

Harry sat down on the bed and waited for him to continue.

"I only wanted to watch the Muggle kids playing in the square," Sirius continued. "Back in the day the square in the middle of the Place had a pretty big playground. Originally, I only planned to watch them from the gate. I was a Black and a wizard and Muggles..." he grimaced and shook his head. "But then I heard someone calling my last name, so I looked around."
"Wasn't Mirzam's last name Verascez?" asked Harry curiously.

'I'll get to that," said Sirius with a quick smile. "One of the kids, a big, bulky one, called out 'Black, you bloody wimp.' So, I had to check it out. I was about to reply that I wasn't a wimp. I was quite tall at that age, you see, at any age really and while never bulky, I wasn't small either. Then I saw a small kid, about Reg's age, certainly no older. Small, scrawny, with black, curly hair and big glasses. He was sitting on the ground in the middle of the playground, holding his scraped knee while trying to hold back tears, and failing miserably. The other kids started to laugh at him, and started to call him a wimp too and then..." He smiled wistfully.

"Mirzam appeared," Harry guessed.

"She came running from the other entrance to the playground with the younger two toddling after her. She immediately zeroed in on the bully, and before I realised what happened, the kid was laying flat on the ground," said Sirius fondly. "You have to understand that she was not quite eight at the time, same as me, but was not nearly as tall. The kid she sent flying to the ground was like twelve or thirteen and quite big. Once she was done with him, she looked around with that dangerous glint in her eyes and asked 'Who's next?' You should have seen them run. It was glorious!" He chuckled. "The playground was immediately deserted. She turned back to the bully and said that next time he should pick on someone his own size or better yet on someone bigger than him. Then she kicked him in the balls. He called her a lunatic and screamed something about telling his parents as he was running away. She called after him that they already knew where they were living and that her father would be waiting for them."

He took a deep breath.

"Then she turned to her brother and knelt before him. Wiped his tears and told him that everything was going to be all right before she placed her hands on his scraped knee," he said softly. "When she took them away the blood was gone and his knee was as good as new. I was amazed." He smiled wistfully. "I realised that she was a witch and I just had to introduce myself."

"How did that go?" asked Harry curiously.

"Could have gotten better," Sirius chuckled. "The first thing that left my mouth was 'You're a witch,' to which she replied 'Yeah, got a problem with that?"' he sighed. "So I had to explain it a bit better and told her that I was a wizard myself. She didn't appear to be convinced so I started listing the signs of accidental magic, and then I saw the realisation dawning on her face and a quick look on her younger brother who was listening to our conversation very intently with an amazed look on his face."

"You told him that he was a wizard, too?"

"Not directly and I had never seen him do magic, but from their reactions, it was evident that he was magical like Mirzam. I'm not sure about the twins, they might have been magical but they were about three at the time and unlike the older two, they definitely had a different father. It was evident just looking at them. They might have been wizards but maybe not. Either way, that was how I managed to introduce myself to Miranda and Reginald Black."

"Black?"

"It was an eye-opening meeting. In the Wizarding world, the name Black is pretty bloody rare, unlike in the Muggle world. Their mother's name was Black and their step-father..." He frowned. "It was some weird and elaborate foreign name. It was very hard to spell, so when he married their mother, he took her name and all of the children had the same name."
"But Mirzam?" pressed Harry.

"Mirzam Verascez was the name she used at Hogwarts," said Sirius grimly. "I didn't recognise her at first, until at some point, early into our first year, she kicked me in the balls. Can't say that I didn't deserve it. I had been waiting to hear Miranda Black, and when Sirius Black came with no Miranda, I assumed something must have happened to keep her from coming to Hogwarts," he sighed again. "It took me a while to get out of her how Miranda Black managed to turn into Mirzam Verascez and it wasn't a pretty story. Verascez was the name of the family that eventually adopted her, an older couple as unfit of being parents as her own mother and stepfather, except they hid it better. Mirzam was the name she gave to Muggle authorities when they found her wandering through the streets of London, no last name. But they searched and eventually, someone made a connection between the girl and the missing Miranda Black from the massacred family. She was placed in protective custody under the name she gave them and the last name they gave her. Someone pulled some strings and instead of ending in an orphanage, she wound up in a foster family with the Verascezs who later adopted her. She ran away from that house during the summer before our fifth year. She spent some time with Bathsy and one of Bathsy's brothers. She was living on her own and working to support herself by the time I ran away from home. I ran into her when I was wandering through Diagon Alley. She set me straight on certain things, helped me make sense of it, helped me find a job. We reconnected at a truly vulnerable time for me and the rest... She was unwavering. I think that's what I loved the most about her. She had a plan for her life and she was steadily working towards making it true. She still despised bullies and boy, did I hear a lot about my behaviour and how bad it was from her," he smiled wistfully.

"You ran away from home?" asked Harry.

"After my fifth year. Went to your dad's place and stayed the summer but it happened after my attempted murder on Snape," he grimaced. "The Potters had nothing against me but James... There were good days but there were also bad days so when the atmosphere there became too heavy, I started getting away for a while. I usually wandered around Godric's Hollow until I started going to Diagon Alley. I ran into Mirzam, who was working at Fortescue's at the time. She convinced me to start working there. She set me straight when I needed it, and did a better job than my parents or my teachers ever did. I will be forever grateful to her for that. Indirectly, she is responsible for the man I eventually became."

"I would have loved to meet her." Harry admitted. "She sounds pretty great."

"She was," admitted Sirius. "And she would really love to meet you. She loved Sheba to bits, same as she loved Bathsy but I think she felt more confident with boys. She really didn't have a clue what sort of things small witches preferred. But boys... She knew all about boys. At some point during your mum's pregnancy she managed to complete a list of possible future birthday, Christmas and we-haven't-seen-you-in-a-while presents. The list was very helpful when you were finally born. I got you a toy broomstick for your first birthday because Mirzam managed to track down the manufacturer and managed to find the limitations of each model."

"You really got me a broomstick for my first birthday?"

"Yeah," nodded Sirius. "It could only rise about two feet above the ground but you were a little daredevil on it." He chuckled. "Lily wrote me that you almost managed to kill their cat and managed to smash a pretty ugly vase that Petunia had sent her. They would both be embarrassing Quidditch mums, your Mum and Mirzam. Always there for every game, always cheering. Lily couldn't fly to save her life. I think she was limited by the fact that she was Muggle-born and was asked to believe that a charmed stick could not only fly and hold a person but also by the thought that the combination of charms and spells which hold the broom together might fail at the worst
possible time."

Harry smiled at that thought "Can it happen?"

"It can," said Sirius pensively. "Especially if the broom isn't maintained properly but mostly when it's produced by some shady broom manufactures. Happened to a Ravenclaw seeker in our second year. Poor bloke nearly died. The healers managed to put him back together, but he had to be held back for another year. He also developed a fear of flying, so Lily's initial reservations about brooms had solid foundations. And I cannot say that I don't share them."

"You dislike flying?" asked Harry curiously.

"I love flying," said Sirius with a smile. "But like Lily, I wasn't really into believing that charmed sticks were a good way for wizards to fly. I preferred more solid methods. Our grandparents kept a flying carpet at their home in Derbyshire, and it was a pretty great way to fly. Reg preferred brooms. He made the Slytherin Quidditch team in his second year, played seeker for the rest of his school career. He was good. He gave your dad a decent run for his money for as long as your dad played seeker. He called James a bloody coward for switching to chaser. He made it a point to rub it in that he was a better Seeker than anyone Gryffindor could come up with after your dad switched."

"Why did he switch?" asked Harry. "How did that work out?"

"Mostly because he grew," said Sirius pensively. "Mind you James wasn't overly bulky, not as bulky as our keeper or any beaters really but he was playing against Reg, Mirzam and some pretty tiny Hufflepuff seekers, and they were all far lighter than he was. He managed to wrangle few victories here and there, but by fifth year, it became evident that while skills obviously matter, so does the weight of the seeker. It was a hard lesson to swallow, but James really wanted to win, so when we lost one chaser due to N.E.W.T.s anxiety, he took his place and put some tiny second year in his own place. Even then, the only reason we didn't lose miserably was because James made a far better chaser even with less training than he was a seeker. And Slytherin had some pretty lousy chasers that year, so Reg was their saving grace. They still lost but only by ten points."

"I'm sure that went over well," snorted Harry.

"It did," chuckled Sirius. "As I said, Reg called your dad a bloody coward, and spent the rest of that school year calling him names."

"They really didn't get along, Reg and my dad?" sighed Harry.

"They were both pretty territorial where I was involved," grimaced Sirius. "James was a very sheltered only child with very limited contact with other kids before Hogwarts. In fact, the only children his age were the Abbott girls and a much younger bunch of kids from other families. So he kind of latched on to me in a way. And Reg? Reg was jealous because up until I went to Hogwarts, we were practically inseparable and suddenly he found himself replaced by James or so he felt."

Harry nodded slowly. "And my Mum?"

"Reg didn't interact with Lily, outside of prefect duties. At least I never heard of anything between the two of them. And from what little I could see when they were around each other, he was coldly pleasant towards her. Sure, he claims that he skulked around, but other than being a Muggle-born he had nothing really against her, and by the time he worked up enough bravado to try anything, Lily was quite a skilled adversary so he left her in peace. They might have had a common ground in Snape because Reg did follow him around sometimes, but since your mum was Snape's friend and
his fierce defender..." he grimaced. "It's hard to say. You will have to ask him when he gets back."

"What about after Hogwarts?" Harry changed the subject. "You said that you were an Auror. What about my parents? You said that each of you got your dream jobs."

"Your Dad went to play Quidditch professionally. He made reserve chaser of Puddlemere United straight after graduation and quickly made first string. There was a point in time when he planned to be an Auror like me, but he failed his Potions O.W.L. He could have still gotten into Advanced Potions, but by then Euphemia managed to convince him that being a professional Quidditch player was far more interesting than being an Auror. I can't really say, we weren't exactly talking by that point and by the time we started talking again James was really into playing Quidditch professionally."

"And Mum?" Harry asked eagerly.

"Your mum, on the other hand, was busy," smirked Sirius. "I can't say when she decided, but she was always drawn to either an Auror or a Healer. Both careers required a pretty heavy workload, and Lily's was the heaviest of all of us. By the seventh year, she'd decided Healer. She even managed to complete the second year of Healer training before she had you. Passed her exams with flying colours. She was planning to finish her training and use some of the Potter family fortune to open a free clinic for destitute families. That was Lily. She had this way of looking after people, especially when they had no one else to look out for them. She was one of the kindest, warmest people I ever met," he paused again and smiled fondly. "She could also be pretty bloody scary when you got on her bad side but you really had to work to get there."

"Like say bullying her best friend?" supplied Harry.

"Yeah."

"Then how did she and Dad get together? He didn't use some sort of love potion on her, did he?"

"Sweet Merlin, no," protested Sirius vehemently. "James was desperate to get her attention, but he wasn't that desperate. He entertained that idea for all of about ninety seconds before Moony told him that no love potion is actually capable of creating love just an intense lust and obsessive infatuation. If he still managed to entertain some notion to use one after that, new legislation had made all love and lust potions strictly forbidden, and if someone got caught using them, their victim could choose to press charges. It carried a maximum penalty of three years in Azkaban," he added grimly. "I'm not sure whether or not that law has been changed, but in mid-seventies, love and lust potions were a very big no-no. The only thing allowed were some pretty weak pheromone-based perfumes."

"Then how'd they get together? Because I'm living, breathing proof that they did."

"That you are," smiled Sirius. "I think to a certain extent my split from the rest of the group played a part. I wasn't staying in Gryffindor Tower, and it bothered Lily. I didn't go into details, but at one point I made it abundantly clear to her that I didn't have a choice when I left Gryffindor tower. She started bothering the rest of them instead. She started with Moony, who was a fellow prefect. Once she got to him, she went after James and since James couldn't really say no to her... He tried for a while because it meant that Lily was willingly talking with him, but even he caved in eventually. But they didn't really get together until seventh year, and it took a lot of wooing from James. It would have taken even longer if Lily hadn't decided that every seventh year Gryffindor girl was driving her nuts. Apparently studying in her dormitory became unbearable, so she wound up in ours. Supposedly it was quieter."
"Was it?" asked Harry dryly.

"Goodness, no," chuckled Sirius. "We were pretty bloody loud, always had been." He smiled fondly. "Moony and I liked to debate certain points from the lessons. James wisely avoided getting involved, but when two fuckwits argue in your bedroom about the dangers of an improperly sanitised cauldron, you do learn something. It didn't matter what subject, James learned best by listening."

"You can't learn wand movements from listening," Harry pointed out.

"True, but our study sessions were usually loud and we all tried to motivate each other and correct one another when one of us got something wrong. Weirdly, it also suited Lily and our arguments quickly turned into three and then four people arguments because James really tried to impress Lily. How do you study?"

"By reading, mostly," grimaced Harry.

"You don't talk about your lessons with your friends?" asked Sirius curiously.

"Mostly about how Potions suck," snorted Harry. "Ron isn't very studious and the other guys-" He grimaced. "Well, Neville occasionally helps with Herbology, but we would be both lost without Hermione," he admitted.

"Did you always had problems with studying?" asked Sirius pensively.

"Well, I wasn't exactly allowed to have better grades than Dudley, so it wasn't as if I had a good motivation at home," he grimaced. "But when stuff was really interesting, I did learn. I still couldn't get better grades than Dudley which didn't always go well since Dudley is pretty bloody dumb."

"But Dudley didn't go to Hogwarts with you so what's stopping you at Hogwarts?" asked Sirius curiously. "I mean I knew that I was a wizard all my life, but if I didn't, I would have tried to learn everything about magic I could get my hands on. Lily certainly did."

Harry shrugged and looked at his feet.

He remembered that there was a point in time after he learned that he was a wizard and the Dursleys left him in peace with his books when he paged through all of them pretty thoroughly. Granted, he hadn't learned everything by heart, he didn't have Hermione's visual memory, but he did manage to memorise some things, and he did read ahead. Especially in DADA.

"Ron was your first friend, wasn't he?" asked Sirius gently.

"For a while, the only friend I had," admitted Harry timidly. "So." He grimaced and waved his hand.

"You didn't want to lose that?" supplied Sirius, moving towards Harry.

"I'm going to lose that anyway, won't I?" Harry grimaced again when Sirius sat next to him. "I got expelled from Hogwarts for using magic on a Muggle and even if I hadn't..." He shook his head. "Would you really consider sending me back to Hogwarts?"

"With great reluctance," admitted Sirius with a heavy sigh as he shuffled closer and wrapped his right arm around Harry's shoulders. "And quite frankly, it's too early to tell whether or not you've been expelled from Hogwarts."
Harry opened his mouth but Sirius cut him off.

"We won't know anything for certain unless we will manage to get our hands on a Daily Prophet. I should have sent Kreacher after one, come to think of it. Dumbledore pulls strings all the time. He may be able to convince them to let it slide, since I'm supposed to be after you." He grimaced. "Anyway, your eventual expulsion or return to Hogwarts is theoretical until we know where we are. If it were up to me alone, I wouldn't send you back to Hogwarts because even after nearly twelve years in Azkaban, I can still teach you pretty much anything you need to know at least up to O.W.L. level, and in certain subjects beyond that. In some we could even go beyond N.E.W.T. level," he added pensively.

"But?" mumbled Harry. "Because there's a 'but' in there."

"But my private feelings about Hogwarts, its safety and Dumbledore notwithstanding are just my private feelings about Hogwarts, its safety and Dumbledore. They aren't your feelings or Reg's and Reg might find a different alternative once he has enough time to think calmly about it," said Sirius. "I don't want to see you in danger or become Dumbledore's pawn but..."

"I'll be one anyway," sighed Harry heavily. "Because of the prophecy and because Vold- the Dark Lord believes in it."

"Yes, V- the Dark Lord believes in the prophecy, that much we know," admitted Sirius. "But just because he does doesn't mean that you have to," he added stiffly. "The only reason I took Divination myself is because your dad picked it as an elective and I already knew that I wasn't going to waste my time on Care of Magical Creatures, and I knew that James wasn't going to go with me to Ancient Runes. Three long, miserable years in Divination taught me one thing. Most of it is bogus, and any branch of it relies heavily on the user's belief. All prophecies are self-fulfilling prophecies if you believe in them."

"You're saying that I shouldn't believe in it even though the Dark Lord does?"

"Do you remember what it says? The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies," he recited. "Do you have the power to change the family you were born in? Or when you were born? No, you will always be Harry, son of James and Lily, who managed to 'thrice defy' the Dark Lord before you were born."

"I can't change that he marked me, either." Harry pointed to his scar.

"But you can change the rest," said Sirius quickly. "The Dark Lord cannot die because of his horcruxes that keep him anchored to life. And yes, right now we don't know how to destroy them, but we can find out. If not in here, there's the Black Manor in Derbyshire, which holds the main Black family library, and if not there, then there are other Black properties that are filled with books about Dark Arts. That much I know; I've seen them. The library in Black Manor is the biggest library on Dark magic in the world. There will be something about horcruxes in there, I guarantee it."

"What about neither can live while the other survives?" asked Harry thoughtfully.

"Maybe it's about his fixation with you," supplied Sirius. "He's proved to be pretty bloody obsessed with you so far. He can't exactly live in peace as long as you live, and because of that neither can you. But that doesn't have to mean that you have to be the one to destroy him. It just means that for as long as you both live, you will be the target of his obsession."
"And the power the Dark Lord knows not?"

"Like I said with Reg earlier, maybe the power is knowing the horcruxes exist and knowing that as long as they exist he cannot die," answered Sirius simply. "Harry, prophecies can be that simple. They are only as complicated and as strong as the individual that believes in them." He sighed heavily. "Merlin, I wish Lily was here."

"So do I, but why you do?" admitted Harry.

"Because your mum was one of the most rational people I knew," explained Sirius. "She was a Muggle-born, and being raised Muggle always influenced her approach to learning magic. It wasn't enough that something worked. She had to know why. That's why she was so great in Potions, it's a pretty logical subject. If you screw up adding A then add B at the wrong time, you aren't going to get the reaction you wanted. Same with Charms where she was also a terrific student. In spite of many discoveries in Charms being the result of happy accidents, the subject itself is very logical. If you mess up an incantation or a wand movement, you can screw up pretty badly."

"You think that she wouldn't believe in it, in the prophecy?" asked Harry.

"I think that the only reason she believed in it for as long as she knew about it was because your dad and Dumbledore believed in it. When you add the constant fear for your safety, for their safety... Her belief was inevitable, but that doesn't mean that if she was given the opportunity to think clearly about it that she would come to the same conclusion."

"Dumbledore and the Dark Lord believe in it and they're pretty freaking strong," muttered Harry.

"But so are you. Don't you see that? You withstood events that would have broken lesser people; that have broken lesser people." He paused for a long moment. "I can't imagine what your life with the Dursleys was like, the unedited one I mean, and part of me doesn't want to imagine that because if I start, I know that I'll be out of the door and on my way to Little Whinging to live up to my alleged reputation as a mass-murderer."

Harry opened his mouth to protest that it wasn't so bad, but Sirius placed his finger over Harry's mouth and continued.

"What I do know for certain is that my own parents were the last people on the planet that should have married and had a child, let alone two," said Sirius grimly. "For as long as our grandparents were frequent and unannounced visitors here, they tried to maintain some semblance of normalcy, but they were still both very neglectful. For Merlin's sake, we were raised by house-elves and I pretty much had to raise Reg myself after I figured out that keeping a crying toddler in the dark room wasn't bloody right. I was four at the time." He removed the finger from Harry's lips and smashed his hand against his knee. "But the abuse?" he grimaced. "It was waiting just around the corner and Merlin, Harry, you have no idea what both of our parents were capable of together and individually." He grimaced again. "I wouldn't even trust them with a dog, let alone a child. I shielded Reg from what I could, but I wasn't always successful. I even went as far as trying to talk Grandpa Arcturus into holding me back for another year so Reg and I could enter Hogwarts together and maybe if I told him why..." He shook his head. "Maybe then our lives would have been different. Grandpa Arcturus wasn't the warmest and kindest person on earth, and he had his own faults." He shook his head again. "But at his worst, he was still better than our parents were at their best."

"How did you make it?" Harry asked timidly.

"Because I had to," sighed Sirius. "Because I had Reg, and I had to protect him at all costs. I had to
be strong for him because if something happened to me, then he would have no one. Maybe if I was alone I would have given up.” He sighed again. “But I wasn’t,” he mumbled, “and during the darkest hours I found strength in that and in distant future years down the line when I would no longer have to bow to my parents will and put up with them. It wasn’t exactly the wisest thing I could do but for as long as I lived here, I lived in a constant state of fear. I think that’s one of the reasons why I was sorted into Gryffindor. I wanted to be brave.”

"You are," mumbled Harry.

"Bravery, true bravery has nothing to do with bravado. It has everything to do with knowing that you're afraid, but still conquering your fears because something else is more important. My truly bravest moment didn't come in a fight against a group of Death Eaters, although they're pretty memorable, but at one of the lowest points of my life after I was broken into tiny pieces by someone who should have protected me above anything else. It came when I looked into a mirror and saw the shadow of myself and found in myself just enough strength to say that's it, I'm done and you can all go fuck yourselves, I'm out and I'm not coming back," he added vehemently. "That's true bravery, Harry, knowing that at any moment, at any time you can walk away from everything without turning back. Sometimes it takes more bravery to walk away than to stay, like Reg. I don't know exactly how much it cost him to walk away from the Death Eaters, or how terrified he was. He was serving a maniac and by the time he left, he had seen enough to know what they'd do to him for leaving. You don't have to be a pawn in someone else's game. I would burn the world down to make sure you get to make your choice, even if I didn't agree with it."

"You don't have to," Harry mumbled, truly touched.

How could running away take more courage than staying? Then again, how many times had he dreamed that someone rescued him from the Dursleys? How eager he was to get away from them when he headed to Hogwarts? Yet he knew he wouldn't make it if he left.

"But I do," said Sirius vehemently, tearing Harry from his thoughts. "I had precious few people in my life that I cared for and in a span of two years I lost nearly all of them. I wasn't there for my brother when he needed me the most and I couldn't even attend his funeral because I wasn't allowed. I lost my future wife and my son because I put Order duty above their safety and I couldn't even bring myself to even mourn them properly. And your parents?" He shook his head. "I thought that that plan was fool proof, but it wasn't because I was so terrified that I would bring danger to them that I thrust their lives into hands of a traitor. And then I lost you." He hung his head. "I allowed my grief and my anger to drive me and the price we both paid for my mistake?" He shook his head again. "That's it, I'm done, I don't care what it takes and I'm still not sure how I will do it, but I will personally destroy every single bloody horcrux that slithering scumbag has. And then? When there isn't a single one of them left, I will go after him myself and I will fucking destroy him personally. How is that for a prophecy?"

"Pretty bloody stupid, since you aren't the one it concerns," admitted Harry timidly.

"It will be stupid only if I'm stupid about it," snorted Sirius. "Only if I act like the bloody Gryffinder I allowed others to convince me that I am, unlike the fucking Slytherin I was raised to be. For years I denied it, and fooled myself that I was someone else." He looked around the room with a sour look on his face. "I'm a Black. I was conditioned to think and act like a Slytherin and I allowed myself to forget it. Well, not anymore," he said vehemently. "I'll make sure that the Dark Lord will be destroyed and you don't have to have anything to do with it. And when I'll be done with him, I'll go after that ever-twinkling goat and I'll destroy him too."

"Are you going to kill him too?" asked Harry sceptically. "Because I get Vol.. the Dark Lord…
"obviously, he has to go but..."

"Oh, I'll kill him," said Sirius grimly. "I'll kill him and I will let him live through it."

"How?" asked Harry, uncertain how that was going to work.

"I'll kill the legend, not the man," snorted Sirius. "When you live as long as Dumbledore has, you're bound to wind up with some pretty nasty skeletons in your closet and I intend to find them all and show them to the world."

"You're still forgetting one pretty major issue," sighed Harry.

"Fugitive," sighed Sirius. "I know but there are ways around that, too."

"You could turn in Pettigrew."

"Can't happen for a while because the bloody traitor is on vacation in fucking Egypt," snorted Sirius.

"How do you know that?" asked Harry curiously.

"Saw it in the Daily Prophet. I couldn't bloody believe it at first." He shook his head. "So until he returns to England, going after him is not an option and I can't exactly risk exposing him where he is because he already killed enough people that I don't need to add to that."

"But how can you be certain?" pressed Harry.

"Because I saw the picture. I'm dead certain that it's him," muttered Sirius. "I should have it somewhere in my..." he stopped suddenly and then added grimly, "In my Azkaban robes, which I burnt," he mumbled. "Great planning, Black, you bloody Gryffindor," he snorted.

"Tough luck," mumbled Harry. "Maybe Reg can get the paper."

"Or maybe he put it somewhere else," grimaced Sirius. "I showed it to him when he brought us here. I need to search this place."

"I'll help," offered Harry. "Was it a full paper?"

"Not even that, only the picture. I had to make it waterproof and I wasn't strong enough to put the entire paper under an Impervious spell wandlessly. I couldn't even do the entire article, just the picture."

"So we are looking for a tiny object in a very big house," summarised Harry.

"We should start here. Reg put me in this room when he brought us here, so it could still be here if he didn't take it with him." He moved towards the nightstand.

Harry stood up, moving towards the big wardrobe. He pulled open the door. It creaked ominously, and something smashed violently against the sides.

"Harry, step back," Sirius said, calmly but firmly.

"Why?" Harry turned to look at Sirius.

He looked anxious, and he had his wand drawn and pointed at the wardrobe. Harry whirled around, watching as the door was pushed open, and a glistening, greyish, slimy and scabby looking hand
curled over it.

"Harry, to my side, now!" Sirius hissed.

Harry ran to Sirius's side and, just in case, hid behind Sirius's back, grabbing on to Sirius's left arm just as the door fully opened and a tall, cloaked figure glided out of the wardrobe.

Sirius whimpered softly and that sound alone caused Harry to look at him. He was standing very still, with his right arm stretched out and wand pointed at the cloaked figure. His eyes were open wide and his mouth was moving as if he was casting a spell.

Except nothing happened.

In the meantime, the figure shifted closer, shaking its head mockingly before it shifted backwards, preparing to spring.

Then, a silvery light shot from Sirius's wand, turning in the air into a dog-shaped mist that sprung towards the figure just as it drew a slow, rattling breath. An intense cold swept through the room, and suddenly Harry felt that couldn't breathe. The intense chill swept through him, going into his body, into his very bones. There was rushing in his ears as if he suddenly found himself under water. The rushing disappeared and gave way to a terrified high-pitched scream.

Meanwhile, the dog was working to fight the figure back. As soon as it returned to the wardrobe, Sirius flicked his wand. The cold and the screaming stopped.

"What was that?" Harry choked out as he leaned heavily against Sirius, feeling as if his knees were going to give out under him at any second.

Sirius didn't answer, standing still with his arm still outstretched and wand pointing at the wardrobe. He appeared to be completely frozen.

"Sirius!" Harry hissed just as his knees finally decided to give up and still holding on Sirius's left arm he collapsed onto the floor.

Just as he landed, Sirius whirled around and hauled him up then onto the bed. Before he realised what happened he was lying flat on the bed, with Sirius wiping the sweat from his cold forehead. Sirius looked pale and mortified, but something in his pale, grey eyes was burning like fire.

"What was that?" Harry repeated weakly.

"Something I hoped to never see again for the rest of my life," whispered Sirius.

"Which is?" huffed Harry shakily.

"A dementor," muttered Sirius grimly. "A creature that was bound to Azkaban and serves as its inhuman guard. It wasn't a real one. They wouldn't be able to get here with all the protective wards in the place. But that puts a damper on my ability to clean this fucking hovel," he snorted.

"If it wasn't actually a Dementor, what was it?" whispered Harry.

"It's a boggart. A common household pest, a shapeshifter. Their defence is to take the shape of a person's worst fear. They're known for turning up in houses like this one." He waved his free hand around the room and Harry could see that it was shaking slightly. "They like small, confined space like wardrobes, boiler rooms, cupboards. They're relatively simple to get rid off normally, provided one doesn't summon something like that."
"How does it know?" mumbled Harry.

"Legilimency," sighed Sirius. "A decent Occlumens is capable of controlling its shape by feeding it with false images of what they want boggart to think that they fear the most. That's how the spell to get rid of them works, too. But you'd know that. It's typically one of the first spells you learn when you start Hogwarts."

"I didn't learn it."

"You had a Dark Lord for a teacher in your first year and an idiot in your second," snorted Sirius. "Laughter destroys a boggart. But to do that, you have to be able to turn your biggest fear into something funny. I can't, obviously," he muttered grimly.

"And the other spell, the silver dog?"

"That's the Patronus Charm. It's a spell designed as a counter to a dementor. Blessedly, I could pull that one out. For a moment, I was worried that I couldn't do that, either. It's far more complicated than the one for boggarts, and demands higher focus. Thank Merlin I was inspired." He tried to give Harry a small smile, but it looked more like a grimace. "I'm still going to turn all boggarts in this place over to Reg, provided that the bugger doesn't have the same problem as I do. If he does, we'll set all boggart infested stuff on fire."

"I could do it," Harry offered timidly.

"Possibly." Sirius sighed. "I'm not sure that you'll fare much better than I did. You see..." He paused. "When I first saw the hand, for a moment I thought that it was Vol... the Dark Lord. He's pretty bloody fixated on you, and I-" He stopped abruptly. "I was hoping that it was him. While he is scary, he's actually easier to deal with. My own fear might have been strong enough to overpower yours, even though you were closer. Or you fear what dementors represent."

"Which is what? Unbearable cold? High-pitched screams? Being unable to breathe?"

Sirius took a moment to collect himself.

"No," he said finally. "The coldness is just the effect they have on the atmosphere. They are the result of experiments performed by a dark wizard, Ekrizdis. He would lure people to his island to use. They were bred in the cold and damp of Azkaban Island, and they still breed in such conditions. They don't fear fire or light, and if they are decently fed they can survive in broad daylight, because they can alter their surroundings to their liking." He grimaced. "Granted to do that they need to travel in groups of minimum two, usually three. It really works best in higher numbers-"

"But what about the scream?" Harry interrupted him.

"Dementors feed on happiness, hope, love, everything that's bright and good. They feast on memories of such things, leaving behind only the worst, darkest, scariest memories. Ironically, the only thing that can drive them away is the very same thing they feed on. Happiness, hope," he paused and smiled gently at Harry before he added softly, "love. Patronus Charm represents all of them and summons a guardian that serves as a barrier between the caster and a dementor. Sometimes it allows the dementor to feed on it, giving the caster a chance to get away from the dementor. But occasionally, if the caster is strong enough, the Patronus can chase a dementor away. It can't destroy them, though."

"Yours chased it back," whispered Harry.
"Just barely." Sirius grimaced again. "Too many years in Azkaban, too many happy memories gone." He shook his head. "I'm not as strong as I used to be, and it was a strong memory, but it's too bittersweet to hold for too long."

"What was the memory?" asked Harry.

"You," Sirius smiled at him gently.

Harry felt himself blushing at that but he shook his head and asked, "And the scream?"

Sirius hung his head, remaining silent.

"It's a memory, isn't it?" said Harry slowly. "My memory," he added after a beat. "One of the worst that I have?"

"Probably," Sirius finally whispered.

Then he understood it completely. The high-pitched scream of pure terror.

"It's Vol… him," he mumbled. "Killing Mum." He felt the pinprick of tears in his eyes and his throat started to close up.

"I'm so sorry, Harry," whispered Sirius as he reached for Harry.

Harry was faster, and with strength he didn't feel like he possessed, he sprung up and launched himself into Sirius' arms. Sirius quickly wrapped his arms around him, and pulled him as close as he could without pulling him into his lap. Harry hugged him back, hiding his face in the folds of Sirius's clothes, allowing himself to cry into Sirius's shoulder for the second time that day.

Finally, after what felt like hours, he pulled away and, after wiping his eyes, he asked, "How did Pettigrew betray my parents? You said that at every opportunity he got… but how exactly?"

"There's a spell called Fidelius Charm. It's one of the most ancient spells in the Wizarding World. It's extremely complex, multifaceted and very potent. The complexity of the spell allows adding in some sort of anchors that, upon placement of the spell, become restrictions." Sirius paused. "The purpose of Fidelius is to protect information, like a secret, by placing the knowledge of it inside one's soul. Once the Fidelius is placed, only that individual can share the information with others. It has to be done willingly; the secret cannot be forcibly removed through any other means, no torture, no mind-altering spells or potions. If the Secret Keeper chooses not share the information with anyone, then the secret remains secret, even after the Keeper's death, until at some point, depending on the level of individual power of the Secret Keeper, the spell eventually erodes and reveals itself." He paused for a moment. "But even that takes ages, centuries really, often longer."

"Pettigrew was my parents' Secret Keeper?" asked Harry softly.

"Yes, although we did our best to convince everyone that I was the Secret Keeper," sighed Sirius.

"Why? If the information cannot be given in any other way but willingly..."

"Because we didn't want to completely cut James and Lily off from the world," grimaced Sirius. "You see, when a Secret Keeper dies after sharing the secret with someone, they become Secret Keepers, too. So while I trusted some people enough that they could visit your parents, I didn't trust them enough to become their Secret Keepers when I died."

"So you had Pettigrew do it," nodded Harry slowly.
"And it was one of the worst mistakes I ever made," muttered Sirius. "It should have been me, I should have quit the Aurors, quit the Order and holed myself up in Godric's Hollow with you and your parents," he spat. "But instead- It was supposed to be a fool-proof plan. The charm was placed; I was seen giving their location out. Whoever was spying on the Order would have seen, and the Dark Lord would assume that I was your parents' Secret Keeper. Then he would come after me with everything he had, and yeah, odds were that I wouldn't live long after that, but because I wasn't the actual Secret Keeper, I wouldn't be able to give up their location. Hopefully that distraction would work for just long enough for Pettigrew to hole himself up somewhere and keep himself safe. Turned out there was only one problem with that plan."

"You didn't expect Pettigrew to be the traitor," Harry answered grimly.

"So here we are," said Sirius sourly. "Pettigrew gave up the secret. Maybe he had a little loyalty left, maybe the Dark Lord saw an advantage to waiting, but it took him three months to attack after the Fidelius was placed. Didn't matter in the end."

"Why would he do that?" asked Harry sceptically. "If he considered me as a threat then why would he wait? Why he didn't go after me right away?"

"It could have been anything," sighed Sirius. "Maybe because he wanted to ensure your destruction or maybe..." he stopped suddenly, stayed silent for a very long moment. "Of course..." he mumbled finally.

"Of course what?" pressed Harry.

"Samhain," mumbled Sirius. "Halloween," he added after a moment. "The beginning of the darker half of the year and the day when the veil between life and death is the thinnest. Quite relevant to certain rituals and what better way to ensure his own triumph over the pesky toddler of the damned prophecy than by destroying him on Samhain night."

Harry frowned and mumbled, "He thought that it would be the moment of his greatest triumph."

"And what could be a better celebration than ensuring that he would be indestructible," muttered Sirius.

"You think that he created a horcrux then?" asked Harry slowly, not really wanting to know the answer.

"He might have," nodded Sirius and he grimaced. "He might not have been successful, but I imagine he intended to. If I were him, that's how I'd do it."

Sirius stayed quiet for a very long moment but his lips were moving as if he was trying to remember something.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered finally. "He wanted to turn the sword of Gryffindor into a horcrux! Truly ingenious, I'll give him that," he snorted. "The sword is made by Goblins, from the purest, finest Goblin silver, which is supposed to imbibe only substances that can strengthen it, including additional enchantments. It's rumoured to be indestructible and if he would manage to turn it into a horcrux..."

"Could he have had time to turn it into a horcrux?" asked Harry timidly.

"I'm not sure," grimaced Sirius. "When I showed in Godric's Hollow shortly after the attack, the sword wasn't there. It might have been there. There are supposed to be spells on it that allow it to come to true Gryffindors in their time of need. When they no longer need it, supposedly it returns
to Hogwarts." He paused. "It might have."

"Or it might have never been there," supplied Harry.

"Or it might have never been there," agreed Sirius. "Lots of attacks were against Gryffindor families. The Order was mostly Gryffindors. We assumed that was why. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe he was hoping the Sword would show up, and he would be able to take it."

"Except the Dark Lord isn't a Gryffindor, so how he would manage to keep it if he somehow managed to get it?" asked Harry.

"There's more than one way to skin a cat, Harry," said Sirius sourly. "And they are many ways to trap people and objects, especially if they poses some degree of sentience like the sword is supposed to have. There's at least two ancient wards that can do that. They require a pretty powerful wizard to cast them, but then again the Dark Lord was a powerful wizard. He could trap it once he managed to get his hands on it."

"So it disappeared from Godric's Hollow because he no longer had a body, and therefore no longer had the power to maintain the hold over it," finished Harry.

"But we won't know for certain whether it's a horcrux or not until we can manage to get our hands on it ourselves," said Sirius pensively.

"It's in a display case in the Headmaster's office. At least it was there the last time I saw it. Except we'd still have the same problem."

"Which is?"

"You're still a fugitive," answered Harry. "And somehow I don't see you marching into Hogwarts and breaking into Dumbledore's office to examine it."

"Harry, my sweet summer child," grinned Sirius. "You're forgetting one very vital fact. I managed to escape from an inescapable prison. What makes you think I couldn't break into a badly guarded castle?"

"How did you do that then?" asked Harry curiously.

"Magic," said Sirius simply.

"Would my mum have accepted that explanation?" snorted Harry. "Come on, spill."

"How about I show you?" grinned Sirius as he stood up.

He took two steps away from the bed and before Harry's eyes, he started to shrink while his hair started engulfing his clothes and the rest of his body. Before Harry could truly comprehend what happened, a big, black shaggy dog with pale eyes was standing in front of him instead of his godfather.

Sirius cocked his head to the right and raised his left ear before it turned his head towards the wardrobe and suddenly bolted in that direction. In seconds, he was half-buried under the wardrobe, tail wagging like mad.

Harry shifted closer on the bed just as he heard a soft, barely audible squeak followed by a bark, a huff, and a quite loud clack of jaws closing on something. The dog emerged from under the wardrobe with a quite pleased look.
"I don't even want to know what that was," Harry grimaced.

"A snack," answered Sirius, suddenly human again. He grimaced. "Bloody mice. We're getting a cat."

"Eww," Harry scrunched his face.

"Don't be so judgemental," snorted Sirius. "Didn't you live in a castle with a cat Animagus for the last two years?" he asked pointedly. "What makes you think good old Minnie doesn't give in to her animal instincts during patrols?"

"Eww," Harry grimaced again. "How can you do that?" he asked after a moment.

"Fast. You do that fast. At least I do," said Sirius dryly. "One snap of the jaws to kill it, and then you swallow it whole. It's not exactly a balanced meal but meat is meat."


"Moony, Padfoot and Prongs," he mumbled pensively. "Did Pettigrew have a nickname?"


"Does that mean he's an Animagus, too?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Sirius sighed again. "He's a bloody rat, which kind of bloody fits considering how big a rat the bugger turned out to be."

"Was my dad an Animagus?" asked Harry curiously.

Sirius nodded.

"Let me guess," Harry said, eager for a distraction from the Dementor.

"Okay," said Sirius and he smiled at him as he approached the bed before he sat on it.

"Could he fly?"

"No."

"Could he swim?"

"Only when pushed," answered Sirius. "Into a lake and not very gracefully," he added after a moment.

"Was he small?"

"No."

"Mid-sized?"

"Define mid-sized," said Sirius.

"Smaller than you?"

"No."

"Elephant?" guessed Harry.
"Not that big," chuckled Sirius.
"Giraffe?"
"Still within the same size range. A tad smaller."
"A lion then?"
"Wanted to be one but no."
"Some sort of big cat?"
"Still no."
"A bear?"
"No."
"A horse?"
"Nope."
"A moose?"
"Nah."
"Buffalo?"
"How about a hint?" Sirius grinned. "We came up with our nicknames after we became Animagi."
"So… Prongs," Harry drawled out and after a brief pause, he added, "You said no to a moose but Prongs could mean antlers, which means… Some kind of deer?"
"A red tail stag to be more precise," said Sirius with a smile.
"Well, that's not really a very practical form, is it?" said Harry pensively.
"No, it wasn't," snickered Sirius. "It was very helpful back when we had to control a werewolf, and very occasionally when spying on Death Eaters in the forest, but that didn't happen often so, after graduating from Hogwarts, James rarely used it."
"Could he have picked something else?"
"They didn't cover Animagi yet?" asked Sirius. He quickly answered his own question. "Of course they didn't, it doesn't really come up until later, although Minnie likes to show off earlier than that."
"Can anyone become one?" asked Harry.
"Not planning on becoming one behind my back, are you?" asked Sirius dryly.
"Me?" asked Harry innocently. "How could I?"
"I don't know," sighed Sirius dramatically. "Maybe it's this latent Black flair for dramatics or maybe it's this Potter flair for 'who says that I can't do that, hold my Butterbeer,'" he said pointedly. "Either way, I don't recommend trying it without supervision. The process is long and arduous, and when it does go wrong, it can go terribly wrong."
"But you still did it," pointed out Harry.

"Because we were a bunch of determined idiots," snorted Sirius. "Pettigrew had quite a lot of reservations but we bullied him into doing it. I wish we hadn't." He shook his head. "Add in that one of the most important part of the process is the preparation of a very delicate and complicated potion, and that the recipe has to be followed exactly word for bloody word. James came from a family of potion makers, but Fleamont and Euphemia never really encouraged him to follow Henry or Fleamont's footsteps, so he didn't. He did not like the subject, had no natural talent or instincts for it, and didn't exactly study beyond what was required of him. He knew that potion making wasn't his strength."

"Neither is mine," admitted Harry.

"Is it really or is it because of that particular teacher?" asked Sirius. "Did you ever try to brew unsupervised? You, yourself and not by minding a cauldron of Polyjuice Potion?"

"Not really. Never seemed worth the effort."

"We can try that again," said Sirius simply. "Potions is a very logical subject, and requires both knowledge and precision. Your mum thought it also required a little bit of daring to think outside of the box. Either way, you can't get far in without a solid knowledge of how to prepare ingredients properly. That wasn't really James's strength. Our first attempt at the Animagus Potion was a disaster because we turned it into a competition, and it turned out we could seriously fuck ourselves up. The second one was even worse, and by the third time I was so done with repeating the process that I strictly forbade them from helping. I did all the work myself, gave them the prepared base, told them what to do, and guarded the potion until it could be used."

"Apparently it worked." smiled Harry.

"Well, I told them we were doing it my way or I was going to rat us out to McGonagall because I wasn't going through it for the fourth time," said Sirius dryly. "By then James knew me well enough to stop pushing and Pettigrew never really had enough bravery to oppose me on his own."

"So what's so arduous about that process that you didn't want to repeat it?" asked Harry curiously.

"A lot of things are but one of the most annoying is keeping a single mandrake leaf in your mouth from full moon to full moon and if the following full moon happens to be cloudy you have to start over. During that month, you can't spit it out or swallow it, because if you do you have to start over. Speaking around it isn't a problem but eating was a nightmare." Sirius shook his head. "Let's just say that we botched up our very first attempt within the first week. Pettigrew didn't even last a day. He ate his leaf with breakfast, James sneezed out his on the third day and because they were jerks and wanted us to do it together, they spent the rest of the week trying to get me to spit it out or swallow it."

"That was it?" asked Harry. "Just that?"

"Well, then there's also keeping track of storms, because you need to take the potion during a lightning storm. Then you have to repeat the incantation at sunrise and sunset and then, to make the process easier or harder depending on how you look at it, you have to meditate to find your inner animal. Meditation isn't strictly required, more like a tempered suggestion but it can reveal your form so we decided to try it. That part didn't go well, either, at least for James and Pettigrew. They were both quite displeased with their forms. James was hoping for a lion and Pettigrew was hoping for something bigger."
"What had you hoped for?"

"I was happy as a dog," shrugged Sirius. "It was practical, big enough to hold down a werewolf if I
had to, and I liked what it said about me. You can't control what animal you're going to change in
to when you achieve the transformation. Imagine devoting months, years even, to achieving it, and
then finding out that you're a pig or a snail or a fish..." he grimaced.

"And what did being a deer say about my dad?"

"In some cultures, deer represent things like pride, independence, protection. James was at peace
with himself, and he was proud of who he was. He was also fiercely loyal and protective of those
he gave a damn about."

"What did being a dog say about you?"

Sirius chuckled. "There's some leeway with symbolism, you see. The meaning changes from
person to person, since every single person looks at things differently. To me, fierce protectiveness
and loyalty were always symbolised by Snuffles. It was a whoops puppy from one of Grandpa
Arcturus's Newfoundlands. It was a mongrel, so it couldn't be sold, but Reg and I loved him to
pieces so Grandpa Arcturus allowed us to take him home." He sighed heavily. "It didn't end well.
Bellatrix killed him within few weeks after we brought him home. But even as she was torturing
him, he was still trying to shield Reg from her and her wand. That, to me is the highest form of
loyalty. As it probably is to Reg, because when he saw me in my Animagus form, he immediately
recognised Snuffles."

"So we all ended up here together."

"And I will forever thank Merlin for that." Sirius patted Harry's foot. "It wasn't what I expected to
happen when I escaped, but now that it has, I wouldn't trade it for the world."

Harry felt himself flushing slightly before he asked, "What about that other place you mentioned?
The one with the library?"

"The Black Manor in Derbyshire," said Sirius with a sigh. "The proper ancestral house of the Black
family. Both the manor and Grimmauld Place belong to the current Head of the Black family, and
he can decide who can use them. Ever since Grimmauld Place was acquired back in the eighteen
century, they've been used interchangeably as the ancestral house. Individual Heads favoured one
or the other or travelled between both. Grandpa Arcturus favoured Derbyshire. He hated every
moment he was obliged to spend here and happily turned it over to my father and mother after their
wedding. He was a frequent visitor here in our early childhood, and spent an occasional night here
when Wizengamot was in session, but I don't think he bothered to show up after we went to
Hogwarts. In spite of my father's protests, all family functions were then spent in Derbyshire."

"Did you like Derbyshire?" asked Harry curiously.

"Far better than this hovel," said Sirius quickly. "It was a proper manor. Reg liked that. He always
hated how small Grimmauld Place was compared to his supposed friends' manors. It has lots of
room by any normal standards, but by pureblood standards, it's still pretty tiny. The Black Manor,
on the other hand, is huge and the library there alone would fill this place from top to bottom. But
it wasn't the size that I loved about it, although the number of rooms in which we could play hide
and seek was pretty amazing. What I always loved about Derbyshire were the grounds. It had
lakes, trails, copses of trees and a big, blue sky above it all," he smiled wistfully. " Granted, a
medium sized Quidditch pitch was a treat, I generally preferred to keep both my feet firmly on the
ground when I was younger. And when Reg and Cissy got together on the pitch, they had to be
chased back to the house. They sometimes had their brooms confiscated when they failed to show up to meals."

"Sounds like a great place," smiled Harry.

"It was," nodded Sirius. "The happiest memories from my childhood are from Derbyshire, not from here."

"Why can't we go there?"

"It's the ancestral house of the Black family and the actual home of its last Head," sighed Sirius. "Who, I believe, passed away two years ago, and there was no one else to claim the title."

"Because by family law it's supposed to be you," supplied Harry.

"And I was unable to take the mantle at the time of his passing. There's nothing we can do until I will meet with Proudclaw and accept the position as the Head of the Black family, at least semi-officially, until I'm no longer a fugitive," he sighed.

"How can you do that?" asked Harry curiously.

"By accepting the position and forbidding the members of the family from divulging that information with anyone not a Black," explained Sirius. "It's an ancient Fidelius Charm at work. It's anchored to blood so as Blacks, since you're the grandson of one, we can talk between ourselves. If you weren't, I wouldn't be able to talk with you about it until I could perform a blood adoption ritual with you."

"Then thank Merlin for Dorea Black," smiled Harry. "Otherwise we wouldn't be having much to talk about," he smirked.

"Oh, I beg to differ, four eyes," snorted Sirius. "I'll have you know that I'm an excellent conversationalist, I was taught by a master of that art. Now, what can you tell me about the state of the current culture of the wizarding world?"

"What culture?" asked Harry sceptically.

"Anything really. Theatre, opera, popular music, popular books, current popular sports?" Sirius counted out.

"Well, there's Quidditch, although I don't really have a chance to follow the league properly," he blushed. "And apparently I'm what Aunt Petunia calls an uncultured swine."

Sirius frowned and shook his head before he mumbled, "That's it, I'm going to really kill Dumbledore."

"So there's more to wizarding culture than Quidditch and Celestina Warbeck?"

"Oh, my sweet summer child," sighed Sirius. "Let me count the ways..."

And he did. He counted them out for a very long time and by the time he was done Harry was as pissed off as Sirius was for being kept in the dark about the wizarding world.

Chapter End Notes
Next chapter: Regulus makes his way home (with some difficulties). Probably (if Regulus's part doesn't get too long) Sirius ends up facing another old demon and Harry gets to show the Dementor what he thinks about it (either via description or through slight retrospect depending on the chapter's length).

As for the other thing, Mirzam thing. It was kind of hinted (very slightly) in The Blacks: Semper Slytherin. If you got through my other works (I'm not encouraging or discouraging going through the oldest of my works, only reminding that they were written ages ago) you can find her. Through various stories her appearance changes slightly and she's more or less of a Mary Sue in them (I'm not going to deny that, I was pretty young when I wrote some of that stuff and pretty inexperienced). But one thing I never wanted to change about her was her name, I liked it, I liked it's meaning, in fact, I still like it. But I also have to admit that it's a pretty wizarding name for a supposed Muggleborn. I know how she acquired it and why she acquired it but she needed to lose it. It would be a pretty big secret only someone who knew her prior to Hogwarts (however briefly) would know, hence Sirius being the one to divulge it rather than say Bathsheda (who doesn't know for various reasons). This story is named Secrets & Keepers for a reason, there are many secrets in here and those secrets have many keepers and there are layers upon layers of them. Some secrets stay secrets, others don't.

I'm very much on the fence about Sirius's secret and how well it's kept and will be kept in the future (as in whatever it will remain his alone or will he chose to share it). Yes, I'm not done torturing him and he can surely take a little more. Weirdly it makes quite a lot of sense, at least from where I'm standing, which is 'how it even got into your head if you knew how this stuff works and you knew that you would never choose to do that'. It's a very interesting question, one which begged an answer and I hope that I found it. At the same time it's very consistent with Sirius we get to see in canon (the one that succumbs to depression and alcoholism). So it's just me poking that beehive a little more. If anything the sings are all there. The fact that with, I think two exceptions, he doesn't get his own point of view also helps with it (note that when Harry is present for the conversation it's always Harry's POV and Harry doesn't see it). But I guess the Dementor has shaken something loose and it will come back to haunt Sirius, with vengeance.

As for the sweet summer child, I will explain it at some point, I promise.

Till next time.
Chapter 07 - The Great Escape

Chapter Summary

Regulus gets in trouble. So does Harry. Sirius is starting to question his sanity.

Chapter Notes

Author's note/personal ramble: I believe that in the original plan it was supposed to be chapter 3 or 4. Shows how much I knew back then how easy this merry bunch will be to handle. On the bright side, it's second to the last chapter with Regulus's, Harry's or Sirius's perspective from 7th August. The ones that will follow chapter 8 (between two to three since chapter 9 like chapter 8 is already written) will also be from 7th August but from different perspectives - that of this chapter's guest stars. I particularly enjoyed writing Tonks's chapter and I'm currently on the first chapter of Lupin's perspective since we left him collapsed on the floor in chapter 2.

Majority of this chapter was very funny to write. As for the rest of it... It was needed on an emotional level because things aren't as fine as they seem. There might be a confusing passage that will be clarified in the next chapter (and hopefully it won't take me three months to post it). Point of the matter, as fine as he presents himself to be Sirius is not fine. To put it on a visual: if fine was the North Pole then Sirius would be playing with penguins. He's just very good at pretending that he's fine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You can out-distance that which is running after you, but not what is running inside you.

~Rwandan Proverb

Chapter Seven: The Great Escape

Regulus Black, Little Whinging and London, 7th August, afternoon.

Martha Green’s trip home was unbothered, probably due to the hour and the fact that it was summer. If it were September, the streets would be filled with cars and mothers finishing their last-minute obligations before preparing themselves to pick their kids up from school.

Regulus hated rush hour in Little Whinging. It was bloody ridiculous and only existed because people were lazy and they didn’t want to bloody walk or bike. It wasn’t as if the entire population of Little Whinging worked in London.

However, that didn’t change the fact that he felt greatly relieved once he was home. If there were any Aurors in the area, they were under strong disillusionment charms and they didn’t seem to be bothering anyone.

That didn’t mean that he wanted to waste precious time.
First, he wrote his resignation letter to the headmistress of Little Whinging’s Primary School. He wasn’t sure how he was going to explain his changed employment or lack of thereof to his parents once September came around, but he certainly wasn’t going to worry about it now. He could mail the letter from London. Hopefully, it would arrive just in time for the headmistress to find someone to replace him.

Next came packing.

Thank God and Merlin that Undetectable Extension Charms existed and that he had placed one on his messenger bag, along with a Feather Light Charm. It allowed him to switch relatively freely between disguises by changing his clothes and, more often than not, his face.

Nearly his entire wardrobe went in his messenger bag. He left off some fancier clothes, both male and female, and his secret stash of lingerie. He wasn’t going to explain that to Sirius, and he still wasn’t sure how to bring up his Metamorphmagi ability. He would have to tell him eventually, but hopefully not anytime soon.

He also grabbed the file he had on Harry and the Dursleys. It was filled with whatever scrap of medical information about Harry he could find or duplicate, as well as every Child Protective Services report he could get his hands on before Dumbledore got involved. It also had his own records of every single incident concerning Harry he had witnessed. It wasn’t complete. Dumbledore probably had complete records stashed somewhere if he wasn’t destroying them immediately after removing them.

Finally, he added some trinkets and mementoes. Not enough to alert his parents if they got home before he did, just a few photographs of him and his parents from over the years, as well as a few books he particularly enjoyed, and some that Harry and Sirius might enjoy as well.

Finding clothes for Harry would be problematic, but he reckoned that he could purchase some when he was heading back to Grimmauld Place. There were plenty of outlets in London. Seriously, how hard could it be to find clothes for a thirteen year old who didn’t even actually care if they fit? Piece of cake.

He spent some time in the garden, making sure that it wouldn’t die miserably in the next few weeks. He cleaned up the mess he left before he hurried off after Harry. He collected every single stashed pound or penny he could find, and made a note to make a trip to the bank before he would go shopping.

When he was done, he changed into clothes that would be more suitable to a woman his mum’s age than a pair of jeans. A middle-aged lady wearing women’s clothes attracted less attention than a middle-aged lady that looked like she just left a rock concert.

He was so dedicated to not attracting any attention that he even put makeup on and he hated putting makeup on. He liked the effect, but he hated doing it. It took him months to learn how to do it without ending up looking like a train-wreck.

The effect was simply amazing. He congratulated himself. Mum couldn’t have done a better job.

He was wearing a simple, beige, knee-long, sleeveless summer dress with a thin beige sweater that he left unbuttoned. Trainers would have ruined the effect, so he wore heels instead. It was bad enough that his messenger bag would stand out.

He brushed his hair and transfigured his glasses into something that would fit a distinguished middle-age woman better than his own. It was irritating that he was still bloody myopic, no matter
the disguise.

He made a mental note to hunt down his medical file at 12 Grimmauld Place to find out what fixed his eyesight when he was a kid. If he could manage to duplicate the effect now, maybe he would be able to convince Sirius to use it on Harry, who would most certainly benefit from having his vision improved. Maybe he could also be able to save Sirius from needing reading glasses within the next few years.

Done with his disguise, he walked to the door just as the doorbell rang.

He froze and mentally cursed. Of all times…

He took a deep breath. Whatever it was, he could deal with it. Probably just some nosy neighbour.

The doorbell rang again, followed by knocking.

‘Go to hell,’ he thought as he plastered the kindest smile he could muster on his face and opened the door.

He didn’t expect what he found.

Dressed in a uniform of a South Eastern Electricity Board technician was one Remus Lupin.

“Good morning,” said Lupin cheerfully. “I’m Roger Lawson from SEEBoard. We’re making routine check-ups in the neighbourhood after the last night’s voltage surges.”

“Voltage surges,” mumbled Regulus. “And pray do tell what exactly you’ll do?”

“We’ll check your fuse box to see whether or not it was affected by the voltage surges,” replied Lupin quickly.

‘Voltage surges my arse,’ snorted Regulus mentally. That was an awful rouse to get inside. It may have worked on the Muggles but unfortunately for Lupin, Regulus wasn’t one of them. Unfortunately for Regulus, not letting Lupin inside would have done more harm than good.

“Well, come in then,” he smiled at Lupin brightly and led him inside the house and straight to the fuse box.

He tried not to hover too closely. Lupin appeared to have some idea of what he was looking for, but if his tools were the real deal, Regulus was going to eat his trainers for dinner.

“Everything in order?” Regulus asked cheerfully from the living room.

“Yes, it is,” Lupin confirmed when he finally emerged from the cupboard under the stairs. “I just need you to sign this form for me,” he added as he pulled a battered notebook from the largest pocket of his uniform.

‘Bloody amateur,’ Regulus scoffed.

Lupin leafed through the notebook until he found just the right sheet of paper, and handed it over. Regulus gave it a long, careful look. The paper was blank, but he could just feel the faint lingering trace of a Confundus Charm. The paper was probably charmed to appear to Muggles as an official SEEBoard form, and Lupin had been expecting to find a Muggle inside 11 Mistletoe Drive.

Great. Quite ingenious, in fact, considering that Lupin was dealing with a wizard at whom the Confundus wasn’t aimed and therefore couldn’t see the charmed text and had no idea where to put
his signature without giving himself away.

So, with a paper in his hand, Regulus headed to the kitchen, trying to push his magic into the paper just enough to reveal where he was supposed to sign without altering Lupin, who was following him closely.

He couldn’t do it so in the end, reaching for the nearest pen, he took a stab in the dark and signed the paper on the right side, slightly towards the centre of the bottom one-third of the paper with a big, swishy Martha Green.

He handed the paper to Lupin, who smiled at him. “Thank you, Ms. Green.”

“Mrs. Green,” Regulus corrected. “If that’s all, I have an errand to run, Mr. Lawson.”

“That’s all,” Lupin smiled again. “Have a good day, Mrs Green. I’ll let myself out.”

‘I bet you will,’ thought Regulus to himself as he watched Lupin’s retreating back.

The door closed behind Lupin, but Regulus remained rooted to the spot by the kitchen island for the next minute or two.

The werewolf was up to something. Clearly, the news of Harry’s disappearance had hit the press, and Lupin had come to Little Whinging to investigate. The question was if he was here on his own, or on Dumbledore’s orders. And how good he was at tracking.

Sirius would know. But Sirius was in London, not here.

Well, no time like the present. He shook his head, grabbed his messenger bag and headed to the door.

Once he stepped out of the house, he carefully examined his surroundings while locking the door. From what he could see, Lupin was gone. But just because Regulus couldn’t see him didn’t mean that he wasn’t there. Lupin had a Third Class Mastery in Defence Against the Dark Arts and in Charms. Anyone who reached that level in either knew how to cast a Disillusionment Charm. So did Regulus, but unless he came nose to nose with Lupin, he wouldn’t be able to tell if the man was actually in front of him.

Bloody werewolf.

Bloody Marauder.

If it wasn’t for Dumbledore and the extent of the sway he had on Lupin, Regulus would have been tempted to bring the werewolf on board. After all, the man was an experienced member of the Order of the Phoenix, quite an accomplished duellist, and he had plenty of experience with handling dark creatures. All of this would have made him a good ally. At the very least, he would be another set of experienced hands that could help clean 12 Grimmauld Place.

If only it wasn’t for Dumbledore.

Oh, well, time to take a werewolf for a walk. If he was following him, that is.

He headed back to the station the same way he had come. So as not to raise suspicion, he didn’t attempt to turn around to check if Lupin was following him.

How good Lupin was at tracking?
On one hand, he wasn’t a trained Auror. On the other, he was once a member of the Order of the Phoenix, and had been good friends with an Auror. Damn. Did Sirius teach him how to track a suspect? If he had, Regulus was in deep trouble.

Well, two could play this game, but only one of them could win it.

The first rule of tracking a suspect was don’t let them catch you following them. He first learned it from Mirzam. If you have to follow a suspect, follow them at a distance. It’s better if you can follow them from across the street, because people will generally only check what’s behind them.

The second rule was to blend into the background if you can. It was harder for Muggles than wizards, but even for wizards, it could get difficult. Disillusionment Charms would be the first choice for wizards, allowing the person under the spell to literally blend with the background. It was incredibly handy in suburbia, parks and places where foot traffic wasn’t very heavy, but in big cities with lots of people, it was a disadvantage. Sure, one could try to dodge impending collisions, but you risked being so focused on dodging that you lost your target.

Sirius could do it. Mirzam could do it. Regulus could do it, thanks to six years on the Slytherin Quidditch team. Lupin on the other hand? That remained to be seen.

Regulus wasn’t joined by anyone visible on the way back to London, which meant there were plenty of seats for a disillusioned werewolf. Oh, well. Time and a trip through London would tell.

He tried his best to pass the time by guessing which empty place Lupin occupied by pretending to use a compact mirror to check his hair and lipstick. He was so focused on the task he nearly jumped out of his chair when a nearby backpack fell to the floor.

He carefully looked around, first at the young man in the other seat who simply picked up the fallen backpack, and then ahead. There was no one there. Well, other than a possibly very clumsy werewolf under a Disillusionment Charm.

He internally fumed as he looked out the window.

He should have disapparated from the house. He was a bloody wizard for crying out loud.

Except, with the exception of yesterday, he hadn’t used apparation since that fateful day in the cave. If it hadn’t been for seeing Snuffles, he wouldn’t even have done that. Really, Harry was freaking tiny and had been stunned. Regulus could have simply disillusioned them and brought them home.

Seeing Sirius changed everything, for better or worse. No, definitely for the better. He got his brother back and finally, they were on the same page. Finally, they were reunited after nearly fourteen years, and they had a common goal. Protect Harry, destroy the Dark Lord.

Protecting Harry was imperative. Protecting Harry meant protecting Sirius as well, because Sirius was Harry’s godfather, and the only closest relative. Free of the charges against him and as Head of the Black family, he could protect Harry better than Regulus alone ever could. He would be damned if he would allow Lupin to screw it up.

Destroying the Dark Lord was a secondary goal, but hunting for Horcruxes would have to come later.

Now he needed to lose a tail.

The simplest way from Paddington Station to Grimmauld Place was hitching a ride on Circle or
City lines to King’s Cross St. Pancras tube station, then heading east. It was a quick road, it was a simple road. A reasonably intelligent seven year old could make it alone after receiving instructions.

That road, however, didn’t account for a tail, and Regulus found himself forced into designing a great escape that didn’t look like a great escape. It was a waste of precious bloody time but if Lupin was there, he had to shake him off.

The tube was always a good place to do that, the amount of foot-traffic in rush hours would certainly force Lupin into revealing himself at some point, and once Regulus was sure he was there, he would have no problem losing a visible Lupin by picking a different disguise.

Out of pure spite, he hopped on the Circle line that was heading west to Hammersmith. He didn’t have to wait long for Lupin to reveal himself to avoid being trampled over by Muggles.

Somewhere between Little Whinging and London, Lupin had lost the SEEBoard uniform, trading it for a weird jeans and jeans jacket combo that looked like it had seen better days back in the early eighties. Come to think of it, he could probably even guess the name of their previous owner. They were paired with a loose, black Pink Floyd t-shirt and a pair of heavy Auror issued boots, which also had have belonged to the same person as the jeans. He wasn’t even standing out too much, thanks to the loose curtain of salt and pepper hair. The last decade certainly hadn’t been kind on him. But hadn’t been to Sirius, Harry and even to Regulus.

If only Dumbledore didn’t have a hold over Lupin…

Not wanting to be caught staring at the man, because that would surely attract unwanted attention, he surveyed the rest of the train. Boring, ordinary, uninteresting Muggles, and therefore hardly a threat to him at the moment.

Once or twice, he allowed his eyes to linger on a pair of breasts or an arse if the face of the person that came with it seemed interesting enough. He wouldn’t mind getting laid, but now wasn’t the best of time for that. Still, a man could look.

Settling into separate rooms at Grimmauld Place would happen soon, and then there would be an entire floor between him and the other two. He could wank as much as he goddamn pleased then. Sex itself would have been better, especially some nice and proper pounding. He always got the best ideas when he was still feeling the residual effects of being thoroughly shagged.

Maybe he should swing by a sex shop and get a butt plug. Or not. Harry was a curious kid, and it was only a matter of time before he would find it by accident, even if Regulus managed to lock it somewhere far away from curious eyes. And come to think about it, a locked drawer would also tempt Sirius, and wouldn’t that be more traumatizingly embarrassing for both of them?

That thought tempered the itch he wanted to scratch just for the sake of scratching and the satisfaction that came with it.

How would you begin to move on from being a rape victim? When it occurred repeatedly for years? How would you walk away from that? How would anyone recover from years of continued sexual abuse? And most importantly, abuse committed by Orion Black.

How could he be so deluded that he never made the connection between his beloved estranged brother and those poor kids? Mirzam obviously did, there was no doubt about it. Looking back now, it was in her body language from the moment he told her that he saw his father leaving a Muggle pub with a young man who looked suspiciously like the murder victim whose photograph
he saw in Muggle papers a few days later.

It was nothing but a suspicion, born out of pure bloody spite that festered on his own guilt of doing harm to innocent people just because they were born without magic to protect them. Learning that it wasn’t just a bloody suspicion, or a singular incident…

Nature and nurture. It was no wonder he had easily fallen to the Dark Lord’s allure, and gave in to the demands to use dark magic on people. Murder was in his blood, after all. He was the son of a serial killer and serial rapist that evaded both Muggle and wizarding authorities for nearly twenty years. One that would continue to evade them, if his very own son hadn’t given up everything he knew to help them catch the bastard.

Sirius hadn’t know about the investigation, not when it was happening. Following the arrest in late August, the two of them were pulled in different directions. Sirius’s efficiency and skill made an obvious choice for an open post with the Hit-Wizards, and Mirzam’s interests in wizarding involvement in crimes against Muggles almost landed her in the Office of Misuse of Muggle Artefacts. She managed to put her foot down just hard enough to make the case that murders committed against Muggles were not a misuse of Muggle artefacts, but just plain bloody murders. That, in turn, landed her in Cold Cases at roughly the same time Sirius was promoted to be Bagnold’s bodyguard.

But had she told him?

The best option was to ask Sirius, but if Sirius didn’t know what kind of a cold-blooded bastard their father was…

Should he tell him? If Sirius didn’t know, and he found out the truth from him, he would keep pushing until he discovered their father’s methods. Of course he would. He was one of the victims, and it would only take a prod here and there to deduce why Regulus was asking him about it.

Did you notice that they were all adolescent dark-haired men with bright eyes? He wasn’t even that picky, grey, blue or green. As long as their eyes weren’t brown, no young, dark-haired man was safe in Orion Black’s vicinity.

What did he know about serial killers?

The majority of his knowledge on the subject of repeated criminal offenders had come from Dad and Mirzam, the only two members of law enforcement he had ever spent much time with. They didn’t divulge much, but occasionally a titbit or two had made its way into conversation.

Anytime he talked to Mirzam about his father, he always felt as if she had learned more than he had. That was to be expected. She was a good investigator, though not a very seasoned one. During the war, the life expectancy of Aurors had taken a nosedive. It hadn’t been terribly high to begin with. She was observant and intuitive, which worked in her favour. Unfortunately not enough to keep her safe from Bellatrix.

God, how he missed her.

He barely managed to stop his left hand from reaching into his bag to touch the dog tags.

‘Focus, you idiot. Priorities. You can have a meltdown at home, but you need to get there.’

He looked carefully in Lupin’s direction, letting his gaze travel past him to stop on the woman standing six feet away, who was looking in Lupin’s general direction. There was nothing special about her, at least on a first glance. But the longer he looked, the more there seemed to be
something off about her. He couldn’t put his finger on it.

She was tall, thin and young, at least younger than him. A university student maybe. Even that seemed off. Sure, she was dressed for the part, in dark blue bootcut jeans with a flimsy blue t-shirt and flashy, cheap bracelets. Even her short, spiky turquoise hair made her look the part.

Turquoise hair.

Her hair wasn’t turquoise now, was it? He was observant enough to notice that the green had faded, leaving the woman’s hair dark blue.

He turned his head away from the woman, and Lupin, and allowed his gaze to settle on the Muslim woman in the seat opposite his. Her whole demeanour was quiet, and she seemed completely uninterested in the other passengers. It was calming for a reason he couldn’t explain.

‘Oh, you surely know why.’ He could practically hear Mirzam’s voice in his ear.

‘No, I don’t,’ he scoffed internally.

‘You do, you’re just deliberately not seeing it. Is she a Muslim?’

‘Yes,’ he decided immediately and found himself frowning inwardly.

She was wearing a hijab, which made her look the part. Soft, wispy, dark green fabric covered her hair, neck and shoulders perfectly. It was also partially covering the shoulders of her black dress that, on first glance, might have passed as something an Arabian woman would wear. Upon closer inspection, like her hijab, it appeared to be made from a wispy fabric that accented the curves of her body. The sleeves of the dress, while long, didn’t reach her wrists, and were just loose enough for him to spot tan lines.

‘Which indicates someone who spent an extended time abroad. The upper sides of her forearms being more tanned than the undersides indicates someone who spent a lot of time under the sun, but not sunbathing. Writing, I think, and quite a lot of it,’ Mirzam’s voice continued. ‘But you can see that, too. What’s really wrong with this picture?’

‘I have no idea,’ he admitted.

‘Oh, come on,’ she snorted. ‘You noticed. You know you’re being tailed, so you’re on high alert. You noticed; you just weren’t worried about her, so it didn’t register.’

‘I’m not as good at this as you or Sirius were,’ he protested. ‘I wasn’t trained.’

‘But you were,’ the voice protested. ‘What do you think I was doing when I was with you? A comment here, a comment there. The long-winded explanation why this instead of that? Was I wasting my time?’

‘I’m not good at this,’ he objected. ‘I’m not.’

‘Who was capable of picking out Dumbledore in a crowd? Who could take one look at a family and know if the kids should be removed, or if the family just needed extra support? I wasn’t there, I’m not even here now. I’m dead, remember? No, Reg, this is all you. You’re panicking, and you’re pushing all your rationality into the corner and giving it my face. You picked it for a reason. Now tell me why.’

He closed his eyes and took a slow, deep breath through his nose, before he opened them again.
‘Her hijab looks like your shawl. You adored that thing. You took exceptionally good care of it. It was a gift from someone.’

‘So who is she?’

‘And why is she reading a book in Hebrew?’

‘Atta boy,’ she chirped. ‘That would be our stop.’

He barely kept from making a beeline to the opening door only by a small miracle. Behind him, Lupin and the blue-haired woman were caught in the surge of incoming passengers. Before either of them could get out, the door closed and the train whisked them away.

He couldn’t help himself. He grinned. Then he remembered the fake Muslim woman, and he looked around worriedly. He almost jumped when he saw her standing barely ten feet away from him, with her back turned to him as she was slowly unwrapping her hijab.

Once the cascade of dark-brown curls trailed down her back, she glanced over her left shoulder and winked at him.

“Trade with me?” she asked cheekily as she approached him

“For?” he asked suspiciously.

“Your clothes for mine,” she replied simply. “I think there’s a bathroom around the corner. I would hurry if I were you. You have about three minutes before Pinky and Perky catch up.”

He frowned, but while his instincts screamed at him to just bloody run, he followed her into the bathroom.

As soon as the door closed behind him, the woman started to remove her dress.

“Hurry up, Grandma,” she muttered.

He snorted and started to remove his own clothes.

“Why are you helping me?” he asked once he was down to his underwear.

“Good question,” she shrugged, before reaching for his dress. “Why you were wearing my dead sister’s face, dead man?”

He froze with her dress still in his hands.

“I know who you are. I knew from the moment you stepped out of that house, wearing my sister’s face. You’re incredibly lucky that you’re still breathing. I should kill you.”

“Thank you?” he mumbled, gripping the dress tighter.

“Oh you’re welcome.” She rummaged through her own bag. “It took me the entire trip to make up my mind.”

“Thank you,” he snorted. “Why not?”

“I need to sit down with your brother and have a long overdue heart to heart. You also have something I want to look at, and you’re not going to just hand it over. That’s fine. I can take a supervised look. Finally, unlike the rest of the world, I believe your charge is much safer with
“That’s a novel approach.”

“Start getting dressed,” she chided. “He told you something, didn’t he? Something that didn’t sit well with either of you. Something other people have a problem with, too.”

“And you’re one of those people?” he asked. “What did he do to you?”

“It’s not a question of what he did, but what he didn’t do,” she replied. “And that conversation requires a lot of liquor or cigarettes or both.”

“Will you be coming with me?” he asked sceptically when he finished putting on her dress.

“Not today. And I’m keeping the shawl,” she added as he reached for it.

“You hair is wrong,” he pointed out.

“You don’t say,” she snorted. “You remember how my sister did disguises?”

“A seriously disturbing amount of hair-altering concoctions,” he replied. “Would have made a fortune if she wanted to.”

“She just perfected the dye. The rest was standard stuff you could get in any apothecary. She was lucky her hair could take everything she put on it. I never was. Unlike her, I’ve got this rebellious mass of hair. Then there’s the bloody curse. You shall age gracefully and you shan’t hide your age, my arse. I can’t dye my hair to save my life, so my wonderful, brilliant sister came up with this.” She held up a short red wig.

“It’s in the wrong colour.”

“I know,” she huffed, piling her long, curly hair on top of her head before she put the wig on.

The wig miraculously covered all her hair. It was evident why when the wig also lengthened and turned the same grey as Regulus’s hair.

“She was brilliant,” he admitted softly.

“You knew her well, did you?” she asked gently.

“Not as well as I wanted, but well enough to miss her terribly,” he sighed. “She wasn’t just your sister, you know. Not all family is flesh and blood.”

“Yeah, she had that effect on people once she cared about you,” she admitted. “She loved you, you know. She wouldn’t give you the mark of that love if she didn’t find you worthy of it. And you still wear it.”

“You kept her shawl,” he pointed out. “That’s what gave you away, you know.”

“I thought it was the Star of David,” she muttered.

“The shawl and the book. You make a lousy Muslim.”

“I’m not Muslim, I’m Jewish,” she snorted.

“I can tell the difference between tichel and hijab,” he pointed out.
“I never said that I was a shining example of Jewish modesty,” she said. “I was too Irish to comply with traditions, my mother, too, and Father had to live with it. But we’re running out of time, and while I would love to stay and chat, we will have to reschedule this conversation for tomorrow.” She opened the door to the stall.

“When should I expect you?” he asked as he stepped away to allow her easier exit.

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow has twenty-four bloody hours,” he called after her.

“You don’t say,” she called without turning around.

He snorted, closed the door and sat down on the lid of the closed toilet to sort himself out.

Bathsheda Bloody Babbling in all her screw-you-and-the-donkey-you-rode-on glory.

At school, she was an insufferable know-it-all that breezed through the Ancient Runes curriculum with the ease and confidence of a descendant of one of the oldest family of curse-breakers. But unlike the rest of the family, she didn’t go into curse-breaking. Even if she had been so inclined, when she wound up pregnant in her seventh year, and her family decided to handle it like all self-respecting pureblood families. She rebelled. Violently.

She refused to give the name of the child’s father, refused to have a discreet abortion, refused the order to marry whatever idiot had been chosen for her as a supposed baby daddy, and handled the casting out of the family with all the grace of a woman who believed that she was doing the right thing.

When her daughter was born at the end of September, Bathsheda Babbling was still unmarried, the name of the baby’s father was still unknown, and the date of the sham wedding came and went without her. There were, of course, whispers that indicated that Bathsheda’s baby’s father was none other than Sirius Black, but they were just whispers. Sirius didn’t publicly recognise the baby as his daughter, and he didn’t marry Bathsheda.

Mother was beside herself with shame when she first heard the rumours. Father appeared to not care about them and busied himself with work. Or murder. Who knew for certain what he was doing when no one was watching his every step.

Having more sense than his mother and caring more about Sirius’s name than his father, Regulus went to the only person who could confirm whatever or not little Bathsheba was a Black. It was one of the most uncomfortable conversations he had ever had with Grandpa Arcturus. He tried his best to get the answer to his question without asking the actual question. Grandpa Arcturus spent the entire afternoon playing the oblivious idiot.

Finally, towards the end of the afternoon, he got his answer when he gave up and asked.

“Unmarried and childless,” said Grandpa Arcturus with a smirk. “But not all family is flesh and blood, Reggie. Your brother is the only father figure that little girl will ever know if her mother continues to rebel against Solomon’s choices.”

“And how do you feel about it?” asked Regulus sceptically.

“You know how I feel about it, Reggie,” shrugged Grandpa Arcturus.

“I’m not naïve enough to believe that blasting him off one tapestry and officially casting him out of
one house equals permanent removal from the family,” replied Regulus sourly. “I don’t approve of his choices, Grandpa, probably never will, but he was, is and to his dying day will remain my older brother.”

“Little Bathsheba Babbling, provided that her ipso facto godfather will at some point decide to check with the family solicitor, will receive the status of Black family ward and as such she will be sponsored,” answered Grandpa Arcturus. “Because, unlike me, Salomon Babbling was thorough when he cast his daughter out. I reached out to a contact in the Hogwarts’ Board of Governors to make sure that her status as a prospective student was reinstated, and that the usual Babbling family traditions were fulfilled.”

“Solomon isn’t going to like it,” said Regulus. “Also, sponsoring a Muggleborn…”

“It’s their tradition,” shrugged Grandpa Arcturus. “And Solomon knows where to find me. But I wouldn’t worry about it for the next twelve years. A lot can happen in twelve years, Reggie. For example, that old goat could kick the proverbial bucket.”

“This particular old goat has a son you know. His father’s word is the word of their god,” pointed out Regulus.

“But that son also has younger brothers, and bends to peer pressure. And not all of his brothers are happy with their father’s decision. Either way, time will tell.”

It did. Scarf turned tichel/hijab aside, Regulus didn’t see a wedding ring on Bathsheda Babbling’s finger. If she got married in the meantime, she was either a widow or a divorcée. Odds were she actually hadn’t. Not many men would put up with Babbling’s stubbornness. He didn’t see Bathsheba, either, but her decision to single-handedly raise a child notwithstanding, Bathsheda Babbling was a paragon of responsibility. If Regulus had a child, he wouldn’t take them on a chase after an escaped mass murderer, even one who was a former friend.

He shook his head. Nothing good came from counting chickens before they hatched. He had a job to do, and a face to change. So, with a deep sigh, he concentrated on a disguise that could go with the clothes he was wearing.

Secrets & Keepers – Keep Us

Harry Potter, 12 Grimmauld Place, London, 7th August, afternoon

After a discussion about the Wizarding culture that spanned for long enough for Sirius to lead him downstairs to the kitchen for chocolate and a snack and back again to the topmost floor to the room he shared with Sirius and Regulus, Harry had, quite frankly, had enough of culture.

Not that it wasn’t an interesting discussion, but the sheer amount of information he had to take in had made his head hurt.


He paused for long enough to ponder who else had instilled cultural ignorance in him. The Celestina Warbeck songs and the wizarding equivalent of telenovelas that he occasionally heard at the Weasleys last year came to mind. The Weasleys hadn’t been obliged to take him in, and he was still grateful for being rescued from the Dursleys, and being allowed to stay at the Burrow for the rest of the summer. That didn’t change the fact that not a single one of them decided to take him aside and tell him that there was something more to Wizarding culture than Celestina Warbeck, Quidditch and boring dramas.
Aunt Petunia was right. He was an uncultured swine.

He told Sirius as much.

“I wouldn’t worry about it.” Sirius crossed his legs and leaned against the headboard. “The Weasleys, while pureblood, are basically lower middle class. Participating in culture is never cheap, so there are families who don’t care at all or will only care for specific performances or a specific form of culture. Then there’s nature and nurture and the bloody patriarchy comes to play.”

“How so?”

“I know Molly’s family,” shrugged Sirius. “They didn’t live in destitution. They fared fairly well for a middle class family, but the men had a certain type of woman they ended up marrying. Middle class or working class, hardworking, hardened by the toil of work. Good wives, good mothers, present and courteous when necessary, but not heavy social thinkers. Molly grew up with that, raised by her mother to be a wife and mother when the time came. She married a good man, but one that was much like her father. There’s nothing wrong with Arthur Weasley, I never had anything against him, but the sole financial responsibility for the family had always rested on him. I know that Molly never worked officially before her marriage, and after she was too busy popping out kids to entertain the idea.”

“You’re sounding awfully judgemental,” pointed out Harry.

“Because I am judgemental. I lived in destitution, Harry. When I ran away from home, I had nothing but my wand, the clothes on my back and what could fit in a school bag. The Potters did take me in, and they made sure that I had clothes and the stuff I needed for school that year. But I hit a growth spurt that year. I couldn’t stomach continuing to accept help. Uncle Alphard left me a small inheritance, which allowed me to keep my head afloat for a while, but even then, I knew that to have a chance, I would have to work bloody hard. And I did. I worked three jobs. I knew that my future depended on doing well on my exams and scoring additional points on entrance exams to the academy. I studied harder than I ever studied before.”

“And you got in.”

“I got in,” sighed Sirius. “Everything I had before I went to Azkaban, I had because I worked hard for it. I paid for it in sweat and blood and in sleepless nights. I earned the money I spent, put away money for others in worse situations. I never looked down on anyone who had trouble making ends meet when I could see that they were making an effort,” he said swiftly. “Take Moony for example. Being a werewolf in the Wizarding society is bloody hard. Societal prejudice towards affected individuals makes it hard for them to get and keep work. Moony never gave up. He worked his ass off, took menial jobs he was overqualified for. He turned every goddamn Knut ten times before he spent it, and he still had times when he had trouble making ends meet. He never complained though, never asked for help, and had trouble accepting it when it was offered. So, we learned a way around it when we saw that there was something he needed.”

Harry nodded.

“Then there was Larry,” continued Sirius. “He lived in our building, in the basement apartment. Tiny as fuck, just big enough to sneeze without knocking into furniture. He lost both legs and part of an arm way back during Grindelwald’s war, couldn’t afford anything that would serve as a prosthetic. He spent his life as a shoemaker. Heart of gold and excellent taste in classical music. Never asked for help, never refused to give it. Because of that, he couldn’t always afford even the cheap seats. But if you could see his joy when someone sneaked him into New Year’s Concert, the tears in his eyes, saw him taking in the music…”
“You snuck him in?”

“I told him that I snuck him in,” Sirius clarified with a smirk. “The first violinist owed me a favour, and I cashed it in for us. Professionally a waste of time but what a performance,” he smiled fondly.

“You like classical music?” smiled Harry as he stretched out on the bed next to Sirius.

“Hard not to when your godfather was the first violinist in Wizarding London’s Grand Orchestra for many years,” shrugged Sirius. “It wasn’t always just classical music but until I met your father classical music was the only music I listened to.” He paused to ruffle Harry’s hair. “It’s nature and nurture. You grow up with music, and as you grow up you look for your own. Sometimes you hate what you grew up with, sometimes you love it and keep carrying the tradition on. Sometimes you take from it what you like. If you listened to Dodo Éclair, I would continue to love and support you regardless, but I would ask you to contain your enthusiasm for her music to your own room, preferably with headphones on,” he added with a fond smile.

“Who is Dodo Éclair?”

“A popstar from the seventies,” explained Sirius. “Tone deaf and a plagiariser, it turned out, but she was your dad’s favourite singer. Red-head and filled in in all the places that are interesting to teenage boys, so that could be the allure,” he smirked. “It couldn’t be her music. She always sounded like a particularly vocal cat during skinning off.”

Harry smirked at that.

“Your mum had a better taste, in Muggle music at the very least. But she also liked Stubby Boardman. Beats me why because he always sounded like a slaughtered moose,” added Sirius.

“Must be all of the posh classical music you listened to,” said Harry cheekily.

“Excuse me, there’s nothing posh about Parisian Brothel,” Sirius objected. “Couldn’t keep track of their musicians because they were always changing, but I always adored their founder and first violinist. I swore I’d marry her one day, until I realized she had decided all men pale in comparison to her girlfriend.”

“Why would you do that?”

“I was ten or eleven, I think,” shrugged Sirius. “Pureblood families. I knew that Mother would be making designs for a proper pureblood wife, so I decided to take preventative measures by choosing which one of my female acquaintances would make a good future wife and mother.”

“And you chose a lesbian,” nodded Harry.

“She didn’t know either, back then,” chuckled Sirius. “Back then, she was just a daughter of a pureblood family of neutral standing and quite progressive views. Also, she was a friendly person, whom I actually liked. It wasn’t a bad foundation for a marriage,” he shrugged. “I was probably the first person she came out to, aside of her girlfriend obviously. Her twin brother used to send me mournful looks when the two of them were passing by.” He chuckled. “He was gay, too. Met the love of his life on the Hogwarts’s Express and last I heard, they both buggered off to study ancient magic in Tibet.”

“How did that go with their family?” Harry asked curiously.

“They had two older brothers and an older sister, and their family was quite extended,” shrugged Sirius. “I think that their niece is in your year at Hogwarts, probably in Ravenclaw or Slytherin. Do
you know a Greengrass?"

"Daphne’s in Slytherin," confirmed Harry. "Pansy Parkinson’s clique. Could be the future Mrs Malfoy, if she has anything to say about it. Pansy, I mean. I don’t see Daphne making cow eyes at that git."

"Knowing Cissy?" snorted Sirius. "She could never stomach what’s-her-face Parkinson, and she would rather poison the entire Parkinson family than allow her only son marry into that family."

"Whoa, back up," Harry interrupted him. "Cissy, your cousin Cissy, is married to Lucius Malfoy? She’s Draco’s mother?"

"Narcissa married Lucius Malfoy by her own bloody choice. In her marriage contract, she negotiated to retain all naming rights to all of their future progeny. I heard it from her own mouth," snorted Sirius. "At the time, she was directing Abraxas Malfoy to take his complaints to the man he negotiated the marriage contract with." He chuckled. "Cissy was nothing if not fierce, Harry. A deadly opponent on a broom, and a terrifying adversary in social settings. Told me once that if it was expected of her to sell her hand in marriage, then she wouldn’t sell it cheaply. In that regard, she couldn’t have done better than the Malfoys."

Harry, feeling that it might be a sore subject, asked, "So what does it feel like to turn into an animal?"

Which was how he ended in his current predicament.

It could have been worse, he decided from his vantage point. He had tried to take Sirius’s warnings about not letting his human mind panic when the animal mind would take over to heart, but he hadn’t been counting on the strength of the animal instincts. Almost as soon as Sirius turned him into a puppy, he took off running as if his tail was on fire. He nearly tumbled down the stairs, distracted by all of the smells he was suddenly aware of.

And mice. He ate a bloody mouse before he managed to stop himself. It tasted as bad going down as it did coming up. Puking as a dog was just as disgusting as it was when he was human. This distraction gave way to animal instincts again, and he took off.

Through the hallway, around the dining-room table, up the stairs to the drawing room and then back down to the kitchen again, with Sirius at his heels the entire time, until he slipped on the pool of Harry’s sick. The puppy in Harry tried to open every door he saw on his way up before Harry wrestled control back long enough to stay in Sirius’s old bedroom.

It was a ridiculous and exhilarating experience. The puppy wasn’t worried at all. Nothing was weighing him down. No expulsion from school. No Dark Lords. No scheming headmasters. No worries. Just a big house full of new and exciting smells, and playing with the long-legged human that chased him. Even now, consciously thinking about them, all his worries seemed as if they weren’t his own, as if they belonged to someone else.

He could spend the rest of his life like this.

The puppy found something to complain about, however, and, realizing what was wrong, he tumbled off the bed. The puppy shook itself, and then, as it zeroed its gaze on the wardrobe, Harry decided.

"You can pee on that, you wanker," is what he tried to say, but all that came out of his mouth was a mix of yips and growls.
Nevertheless, the puppy trotted to the wardrobe, stuck out his right hind leg up and peed happily at the dementor-infested wardrobe.

Just as he was avoiding stepping into the puddle of his own piss, he spotted Sirius. In his dog form. With a very unimpressed look on his muzzle.

‘Whoops,’ human and animal thought simultaneously. A plan to avoid the confrontation with the bigger dog flashed through his mind, but this time Harry’s luck ran out, and he collided with the much sturdier animal.

He yipped mournfully and tried to back away from Sirius, but a paw to his back held him down firmly enough for Sirius to clamp his jaw on the soft spot on Harry’s neck. Before Harry realised what was going on, he was being carried like a bloody kitten back to Regulus’s room.

Without ceremony, Sirius closed the door behind them with one of his hind paws and jumped on the bed where, after a right amount of arranging the bedding to his liking, he lied down. Only once he was lying down did he release the hold on Harry’s neck. When Harry tried to make a break for it, he was once again stopped by the bigger, heavier paw.

He whined, actually whined. What a spoilsport! What was the point of transforming into a puppy if he wasn’t allowed to… well, puppy his way around the house?

He huffed and was prepared to argue further when he felt a lick running from the top of his head down his spine all the way to his tail.

It was weird. Not bad weird. Just weird. The puppy instincts stopped trying to squirm away just long enough for the lick to come back. Once again from the top of the head to the tip of the tail.

Maybe it wasn’t so bad if the puppy liked it enough to stop trying to escape.

And then it hit him. He wasn’t the only dog in the room. He wasn’t the only one that was driven by animal instincts. His instincts were longing to investigate the new place he found himself in. Because, let’s be honest, he had only been to the bathroom by himself since he woke up here, and, while he was curious, he wasn’t brave enough to attempt scouting the house on his own after all of the warnings from Sirius and Regulus.

Beware of this family, Harry. Beware of this house until we will tell you that it’s safe for you to wander alone. Beware, Harry. It’s not a happy place. It’s a house full of misery and hurt. It's filled with an emptiness that comes from the lack of warmth that places like the Burrow are filled with.

Beware.

And wasn’t that what Sirius was doing? Dog or human? He was wary, wary of his own brother from the very moment Harry met the two of them together. Wary of this house. Worried by everything he heard.

He had to be aware, more than Harry, of the enormity of what was ahead of them. He had lived longer, seen more, experienced more, remembered more even if he said that his memories were jumbled and seemed incomplete.

One thing hadn’t changed since yesterday. From the very moment his eyes landed on him, Harry was Sirius’s top priority. The whole talk yesterday night was for Harry’s benefit alone. A distraction meant to calm Harry down.

And again and again. Always his priority. His to calm down, his to reassure, his to protect and his
to educate. His, period.

How much of this now was Sirius, and how much of this was the canine instincts?

They weren’t necessarily separate, like Harry and puppy. The dog was part of Sirius, and Sirius was part of the dog, the only difference being the skin they were wearing.

Sirius found him in the skin he gave Harry, not by human means but by the dog’s nose and, upon finding him, he stayed as one. He gave in to animal instinct without hesitation.

As a dog he felt more. A dog’s mind wasn’t as complex as a human one. It didn’t recognise human boundaries of what was or wasn’t appropriate. It didn’t feel human doubts. It lacked that filter. The dog didn’t feel ‘we just met yesterday after nearly twelve years of not seeing each other’ apprehension. To the dog, Harry wasn’t a stranger, regardless of how long it had been since they had seen each other. Even in his human form, Sirius was doing his best to bridge the gap. There wasn’t a question he didn’t answer, even if some of them were uncomfortable or painful, it was Harry, not Sirius, who changed the subject. The dog form allowed him to give in to his instincts, and his instincts focused on protecting and caring for Harry.

By the time Harry hashed it out in his head, the puppy had given up scouting, and had laid down to simply enjoy the bathing experience, as well as the warmth emanating from the bigger dog. It was surprisingly pleasant, just as much as Sirius’s entire Siriusness regardless of the form was comforting to Harry.

Voldemort won’t know what hit him. Neither will Dumbledore. And with that thought, he yawned, laid his head on his paws, and drifted off to sleep, knowing that with Sirius by his side, nothing would harm him.

Secrets & Keepers – Keep Us

Sirius Black, 12 Grimmauld Place, London, 7th August, early evening.

He told himself firmly that he wasn’t going to fall asleep until Regulus came back. If he does come back, his treacherous mind added. No, he will come back, he decided as he tried to shove his doubts to the back of his mind.

Regulus was Regulus. There was a lot he didn’t know about his brother, but there was one thing he did know about the man he had met again after fourteen years. He was sincere, brutally so. Like Sirius once was. That didn’t change the lingering feeling in his gut that Regulus knew more than he let on, but then again, not everything could or should be said in front of Harry, at least until the two of them hashed out what Harry should know.

But chasing the doubts in his head wore on him, and it was enough for Padfoot to yawn before he laid his head over the puppy’s back and closed his eyes.

‘Oh, stop trying to drive from the backseat you mongrel,’ he fumed internally, as he forcibly pried his lids open. ‘Enjoy it’ soared from the back of his mind.

There were wards, solid doors and several flights of stairs between Harry and any danger, and it wasn’t as if he would be able to do more than chase the tail of his own doubts. No, he could do that safely once Regulus was back and able to look after Harry. So, he sighed and closed his eyes again.

He was roused from his nap by the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Calm, confident, a tad slower
than he heard them before. He scented the air. The smell of Harry and the familiar scent of his human form, as well the less familiar scent of Regulus, filled his nose. There were, of course, hints of dust and the alluring smell of mice that had been in the room before, but no other bothersome foreign smells.

They were safe and with that thought, he opened his eyes just as the door to the room opened with a slight click, and Regulus walked into the room.

Something was off. He was still wearing the same clothes and glasses he had left in, but something felt wrong about the entire picture. Cocking his head to the left, he looked at Regulus once more from the top of his head and just as his gaze slid down past his shoulders, he realised what was wrong.

Regulus had breasts, barely visible under his shirt.

Regulus quirked his left eyebrow at him, gesturing to the dog pile on the bed with his left hand while removing his messenger bag with his right.

Sirius, while quite adept at having lengthy conversations as a dog, knew Regulus wouldn’t be able to answer to his questions if he wasn’t using his human mouth, so he gave in.

He forced his body into human form with ease and grace he had always possessed. Unlike Wormtail, who could never transform gracefully, and James, who had to master that particular skill, Sirius instinctually knew what to do with his limbs during transformations back and forth. He could easily control where the transformation started, and he did it this time too, allowing his hands to transform first so he could still hold Harry’s sleeping form to himself while the rest of his body caught up with the transformation.

“So, what was that?” asked Regulus as he stepped closer and placed the bag on the bed.

“There’s a dementor inside the wardrobe in my old bedroom,” answered Sirius, adjusting to sit cross-legged on the bed, with Harry lying in his lap. “It was a… harrowing and enlightening experience for both of us, and we unanimously decided to turn deboggarting of the household over to you. Cheers,” he quipped. “Also, are you aware that you have breasts?” he asked curiously as he petted Harry’s head.

“Everybody has breasts.”

“Sure,” agreed Sirius. “I meant a pair of very visible ones. Enough for you to need a bra, if you’re planning to wander around with them.”

Regulus looked down at his own chest, then hooked his finger in the collar of his shirt just enough to look down it. “Whoops.”

And then, miraculously, they disappeared.

“Whoops?” Sirius echoed questioningly. “And wandlessly? I have on good authority that this particular counter curse usually requires an aid of a potion.”

Regulus shrugged. “It happens occasionally.”

“It rains occasionally. Men don’t grow a pair of female breasts without aid, even occasionally, and they most certainly can’t shrink them at will.”

“Well, some men do,” Regulus said finally with an air of resignation. “I happen to be one.”
Sirius frowned. He would have noticed if he was growing up with a Metamorphmagus for a brother. He was a frequent enough guest at Andromeda’s to notice the swiftness and exuberance with which Nymphadora circled through her favourite forms. He would definitely realise if he was growing up with one in the same household. Not to mention, Regulus wouldn’t be able to control the transformation early on without the help of a binding bracelet. Dora hated hers with a flaming passion.

“You couldn’t before. Trust me, I would have noticed if I was growing up with a Metamorphmagus.”

As Harry began to stir, Regulus waved his wand and, instead of a puppy, Sirius wound up with a human version of Harry on his legs. “Wanker,” he growled at Regulus, “you could have warned me.”

“No,” answered Harry as he pushed himself up, leaning slightly on Sirius’s right shoulder to stabilise himself. “He is your brother and if I learned anything about brothers at all during the last two years, it’s that occasionally, brothers act like arseholes.” He arranged himself to sit cross-legged by Sirius’s side. “What’s a Metamorphmagus?”

“That arsehole, at a guess,” grunted Sirius as he waved in Regulus’s general direction. “And our baby cousin, Andromeda’s daughter. Metamorphmagi can’t be taught like Animagi. Seems to me that someone disregarded that particular rule,” he huffed.

“So he wasn’t always like that?” asked Harry.

“No, he wasn’t like that at all,” confirmed Sirius. “I lived in the same house with him for nearly fifteen years. I would have noticed if my younger brother could change his appearance at will. He could not.”

“Well, that particular version of your brother could not,” shrugged Regulus, summoning a chair from the desk and flopping in it. “That particular version of your brother burned down his magical core, which would usually kill you. Luckily for me, and thanks to Muggle medicine, I didn’t die, I just put myself out of commission for an extended period of time.”

“Still.”

“The magic came back eventually,” Regulus continued over him. “Not everything at once, and since I’ve had enough time to theorise on the subject, my best guess is that it came back mutated.”

“Like some comic-books hero?” asked Harry sceptically.

“No, not like that,” said Regulus dryly. “How is your biology?”

“Not completely forgotten, at the very least,” answered Harry.

“Good, because it’s pure biology. Magic, like anything else in the human body, is an effect of a genetic mutation, which is why we have squibs and Muggle-borns. It affects a certain percentile of the general population, and that percentile forms a wizarding society. With me so far?”

“Yes, sir,” nodded Harry.

“Metamorphmagi is a further mutation of an already existing mutation. From a biological standpoint, it’s a condition in which genes responsible for one being magical is fussed with genes responsible for one’s appearance,” Regulus continued. “It affects a very small percentage of the general wizarding population. In other words, it’s pretty bloody rare. There have been one hundred
“fifty reported cases since the Ministry of Magic decided to keep track of them.”

“The actual number of cases might be higher, because not all people like to follow Ministry’s regulations,” interjected Sirius.

“But we’re still talking about a very small number of affected individuals. A Metamorphmagus child can only be born if their parents both carry the gene responsible. The mutation can very rarely happen spontaneously. Odds of having Metamorphagus abilities increase if you’re related to someone that has them.”

“There was one in the Black family,” said Sirius. “Some sort of great-great-something grandfather.”

“So almost all of his descendants would have that particular dormant gene,” continued Regulus. “Sometimes it manifests in individuals that have it, sometimes it doesn’t. Both our parents had it, and in one way or the other, were more or less affected by that gene. Sirius has it, too. So do you, Harry.”

“Really? Seriously?” asked Harry eagerly and Sirius looked at him.

“The gene seems to affect the same area,” Regulus smirked. “It’s probably wired similarly, which too isn’t weird since you’re a descendant of a Black family.”

“I’m a Metamorphmagus?” Harry asked in awe.

“You carry a gene that is responsible for Metamorphmagi abilities,” said Regulus and he shook his head. “Which means that while you yourself aren’t one, your children could be. Granted the odds are astronomical but it can happen.”

“Then how did it happen to you?” asked Sirius grimly. “Metamorphmagi are born.”

Regulus shrugged. “I burnt down my magical core, or maybe I didn’t and whatever of it was left went dormant as it was recovering. I don’t know, I made a point of avoiding the Wizarding world after my unfortunate demise.” He smiled softly. “What I do know for certain is that when the magic came back, it came back with this. I’m not a born Metamorphmagus. My transformations aren’t as swift and effortless as that. I have to consciously force my magic into changing my appearance. Superficial changes are easy, but more drastic changes, like height-”

“Or sex,” interjected Sirius.

“Aren’t easy,” finished Regulus. “That?” He motioned to his chest. “That was superficial change, and by now I can do it effortlessly. Try growing a bloody vagina yourself, you berk.”

“No, thank you,” snorted Sirius. “I’m quite pleased with my family jewels.”

“As am I, most of the time,” shrugged Regulus.

“Most of the time?” Harry asked curiously.

“Well, a vagina occasionally has its uses. Sex as a woman is quite nice. Not that it isn’t as a man.”

“Then why change at all?” hummed Harry.

“Because I can,” Regulus shrugged. “Because I’m paranoid. Because a female form offers me security and anonymity, which my male form doesn’t.”
“You can still change your superficial appearance as a man,” Sirius pointed out.

“Tell that to the paranoia,” snorted Regulus. “Also, people habitually trust women more easily than men. I’ve exploited that for years. It got me what I wanted when I wanted. There was anonymity that came with being someone completely different than myself. I mean,” he paused and shook his head. “I’m still me, I never lost sight of who am I or wanted to change that after I discovered that particular ability.”

“But you wouldn’t be complaining if rather than Regulus you would have been—” started Sirius.

“Say Regina, and I will hex you into next century,” grunted Regulus. “No, Regina was a disaster. Also, ugly as fuck. I mean, I haven’t tried it in years, but male to female with my own face looked weird. Maybe it’s just me, but my female face without adjustments is too bloody androgynous for me to like it and consider it attractive.”

“Maybe because you’re used to your male face?” offered Sirius.

“Maybe,” sighed Regulus.

“So, what face do you like?” asked Sirius curiously.

Regulus grimaced and he shrugged before he finally answered, “You aren’t going to like it.”

“Try me,” Sirius challenged him.

“I don’t think that it’s a wise idea,” sighed Regulus.

“Reg, no more secrets,” whispered Sirius. “Not now, not ever again. I can handle it. It’s not going to change anything between us. Your ability to change your appearance is not going to change that. Male or female, you’re still my family, and if you prefer one over the other, whichever form it is, it’s not going to make me care less about you. Whether you’re my brother or my sister or if you want to go by a different name, I’m fine with it,” he said earnestly, meaning it from the bottom of his heart. “So please, let me in.”

“Well, I like my own name, both of them actually,” said Regulus slowly. “They’re, well, me, and I never thought of myself as anything other than Regulus or Martin, even when circumstances required of me to occasionally go by different names. That’s the bottom line, I’m still Regulus and your acceptance is…”

“Unexpected?” offered Sirius. “After befriending a werewolf?”

“Well, it’s a lot to take in,” mumbled Regulus. “And not something I’ve ever shared with anyone, as much as I love Mum and Dad. I don’t struggle with my identity, you need to understand that. I know who I am, I don’t care about the pronouns. I know that some people do, but that’s them and this is me. I’ll be fine if you will refer to me as he or she if you want, it won’t bother me.”

“But you will feel bothered by showing me your preferred face?” asked Sirius gently.

Regulus stayed quiet for a long moment before he said softly, “You see, it’s not exactly my face but over the years I came to think of it as…” He sighed. “It was a source of comfort when I needed it. I just want to say I never had sex while wearing that face. That would be a new low, and I would never do that, not after everything she had done for me. I never looked at her that way.”

“You’re stalling,” sighed Sirius.
“Just remember that to me this is the highest form of respect and a testament of how much I came to care and owed to…” whispered Regulus and he closed his eyes and bowed his head.

The change was gradual. With his head bowed, Sirius couldn’t see Regulus’s face, but he could see his hair lengthening and curling. When Regulus raised his head, Sirius had to close his eyes. But even then, he couldn’t stop imagining the mirror of Mirzam’s beloved face instead of his brother’s, and how accurate that mirror image was. He knew, he had stared at her face for ages. He spent hours gazing into her eyes. He memorised the expressions it made. Every laugh line, every frown, every smile. Everything.

“I’m sorry,” whispered Regulus, in his own voice.

Sirius opened his eyes and to his relief, he saw that Regulus was wearing his own face again, though his hair remained long and curly.

“Don’t be,” he mumbled. “Though,” he added after a deeper breath, “I do wonder how she came to mean that much to you. Your paths didn’t exactly cross after we left school. Or did they?”

“She came to me after you were attacked,” said Regulus softly. “Towards the end of my seventh year. Took me to St Mungo’s, gave me her invisibility cloak and let me stay there to keep vigil.”

“‘You were there?’

The entire memory of his stay at St Mungo’s was jumbled, full of missing pieces even before Azkaban. He got better, but there were setbacks, and it took him weeks to get out. He always felt as if he wasn’t told everything about his stay there. Still, he didn’t expect anyone from the Black family to be there.

“Until morning,” nodded Regulus. “Saw that whole,” he gestured at Sirius. “I was relieved, even back then. If we met under different circumstances that night, odds were that I would have killed her on the spot but she left a lasting impression, and by Merlin, if it had to be a Muggle-born, it needed to be that one. Even if she wasn’t one, exactly.” He smiled softly. “I can’t pin a moment when it started, maybe it was there from the beginning and I did my best to shut it off because listening to that gnawing voice of conscience would have gotten me killed.”

“You were already considering changing sides?” Sirius asked.

“Well, the attack certainly opened my eyes to the possibility,” shrugged Regulus. “By the next raid I was definitely having doubts. I royally fucked up, in the worst company possible, but I got away. I found myself holding a sleeping orphaned baby, decided that fuck it all, I would rather spend the rest of my life in Azkaban than do that again. I took the baby to the only person whose opinion of me ever mattered.”

“Who?”

“You, you idiot,” said Regulus fondly. “‘But you weren’t there. You were still at St Mungo’s. But Mirzam was there. I told her everything. There wasn’t a single detail I omitted, a single crime I didn’t confess to. I named names. Bawled my eyes out too, couldn’t even keep myself upright by the end of it.”

“And then what?” asked Sirius. “Because you aren’t in Azkaban and never had been questioned in any official capacity as far as I can tell.”

“Well, you know Mirzam,” Regulus smiled softly.
‘I thought that I did,’ thought Sirius as he felt a stab of something to his gut. It was a confusing feeling. It wasn’t really betrayal, because Regulus was his brother and Mirzam was Mirzam, but she let him rant and rage and grieve after Regulus’s death and didn’t say a word.

It couldn’t have been that or could it? He knew when it started but he was very careful about when and where and never did anything when Mirzam or Bathsheda or most certainly little Bathsheba were around.

But Mirzam was observant and she lived her childhood years around certain individuals, saw enough of what her step-father’s choice of work did to other people. She had to at least suspect that something was up even if it took her months and an actual pregnancy scare to confront him.

“She saved me, you know.” Regulus’s comment jarred Sirius back to the present.

“No just that night after the raid,” Regulus continued. “It just took me years to figure out that I owed to her both my soul and my life. I got out of that cave because of her.” He unclasped the thin chain around his neck and slowly handed it Sirius.

Sirius took it. It was a medallion with a man on a horse sharing his cloak with another man. The engraving around the edges of the oval claimed that it was St Martin of Tours. It was old, but in pristine condition, cleared regularly.

It couldn’t have been that medallion.

“I lost it somewhere,” she had said he noticed she wasn’t wearing it anymore.

It didn’t make sense, even back then. She cherished that medallion, took care of it reverently. If she truly lost it, she would have been beside herself with grief. It was one of the very few family trinkets she was allowed to keep after her family died. Her mother’s green shawl; Reginald’s medallion of St Martin of Tours, inherited from their maternal grandmother; a beaded bracelet Radoslav made for her; and a tiny silver locket, a gift from her step-father with a lock of little Zdzislaw’s hair inside. She guarded all of them ferociously and wove protective enchantments around all of them. She usually wore them all, especially at home.

“It belonged to her brother,” said Sirius finally, hearing his own voice as if it was coming from far away.

“Which one?” asked Harry curiously. “Reginald?”

“Yes, Reginald,” confirmed Sirius. “His full name was Reginald Martin, named after their maternal grandfather. He died in the second Muggle World War when their mother was very small. This medallion was sent back to his widow, and she gave it to Reginald at his christening. They both adored it. He called it his lucky charm. He wanted to be a soldier, like his grandfather,” he paused for a beat before he continued. “After they died, Mirzam had very few family trinkets left. Her mother’s shawl, this medallion, a beaded bracelet Radoslav made for her, and a locket with a lock of hair from Zdzislaw. She always wore them. At least until she lost the medallion.”

“This belonged to her brother? She had more than one?” Regulus asked softly.

“There were three of them, all younger. Reginald was the next oldest. He would have been in your year, too. I would have paid good money to see your face during the sorting if Black Reginald was called before Black Regulus.” Sirius chuckled.

“I thought that her name was Verascez.”
“She was born Miranda Black, Miranda Martha Black to be exact. By the time she went to Hogwarts, it had been legally changed,” he explained.

“Black?” mumbled Regulus and then shook his head. “Listen, I’m not as ignorant as I used to be. I know that in the Muggle world, that surname is pretty popular but still.”

“It used to amuse me to no end,” chuckled Sirius. “And I was grateful her step-father took her mother’s surname, because I would never have been able to pronounce his family name. It was either Czech or Polish. His family had always lived on the border of both.”

“Hence the names of the younger ones,” nodded Regulus. “Czech or Polish?”

“Both, I think,” shrugged Sirius. “Zdzislav had to be Polish because she never said it as I do, she used to replace l with w like in will. Radoslav, on the other hand, was sometimes Radoslav or sometimes Radoslav with w instead of l. She always claimed that it annoyed her step-father to no end, because even though he knew three languages, he was bad at all of them. Mirzam and Reggie thought they were fun. She could cuss in both of them quite well.”

“If he had problems with languages then why bother with those names?” asked Harry curiously.

“He didn’t pick them. Mirzam named them both because her step-father was too drunk on liquid joy to name them. They were named after the step-father’s father and grandfather, and she liked their meanings.”

“What about her mother?” asked Regulus curiously. “She had no say in it?”

“They both had English second names,” shrugged Sirius. “And her mother wasn’t the brightest bulb in the box. She was barely seventeen when Mirzam was born. She had fallen for whatever line Solomon Babbling told her. I don’t know who Reginald’s father was. It could have been Solomon, or it could have been someone else.”

“You aren’t painting a very nice picture,” Regulus observed.

“She had a very complicated relationship with her mother, and it was worse with her step-father. If there was anyone in that family she loved without reservation, it was her brothers. She loved them all fiercely and was devastated when she lost them.”

“You don’t recover easily from something like that,” Regulus whispered.

“I’m not sure she ever did, but she wouldn’t have given this medallion to you if she didn’t find you worthy of wearing it, Reg, and no one would have been able to remove it by force.” Sirius handed the medal back to Regulus.

Regulus swallowed. “You don’t want to keep it?”

“No,” said Sirius, though a huge part of him wanted to say yes. He found himself wanting to honour Mirzam’s choice. “It was given to you and you should wear it. I just wanted you to know how much it meant for her.”

“I’ve got something else, and I do think you would want it back,” Regulus whispered as he reached into his bag. “I actually asked for them, and she gave them to me.”

He fiddled inside the bag for a moment before finally pulling another chain with four medallions. He handed them to Sirius.
Sirius recognised his and Mirzam’s Auror dog-tags immediately, smiling softly at the sight of them. He sucked in a breath in shock when he saw the other two medallions. One was his Naming Day medallion, and the other looked like a Naming Day medallion Mirzam should have received as a Babbling offspring, but never had. He turned that one around. The other side had her birth and death dates.

“Thank you,” he whispered finally. “It’s…” He choked on his words. “It means a lot.”

“There’s something else,” said Regulus as he fiddled with another medallion in his hands. Sirius couldn’t see what was on it from the distance. “It’s not the real thing. I think that’s probably at Godric’s Hollow. It wasn’t even commissioned in official Potter fashion but until we can retrieve the original one…” He handed the new medallion to Harry.

The poor kid looked as surprised as Sirius felt. It was very touching, even if metal work was completely wrong.

“What is it?” he asked softly.

“It’s a Naming Day medallion,” explained Sirius gently. “Traditionally, they are commissioned by your godparents for your Naming Day ceremony. Sometimes they’re engraved with a full first name or sometimes with an initial, and they always have a birth date on the back. Each family has their own designs and traditions.”

“It’s wonderful,” Harry breathed out.

“It’s a Black family Naming Day medallion,” explained Regulus. “That’s why it’s platinum. I assume the original was gold?”


“Also knowing Sirius, like a responsible godfather he can occasionally be-”

“Wanker,” Sirius muttered.

“-he had it properly enchanted. It probably was far more superior than this thing,” Regulus admitted.

Sirius touched the medallion and willed his magic to pull magic in the medallion to the surface. “It’s still enchanted.”

“Well, I’m not Bathsheda Babbling, but I know a thing or two about enchanting. It’s nothing too strenuous or complicated,” shrugged Regulus. “I always meant to give you that but I never had a chance to do so, not without attracting much-unwanted attention.”

“What did you enchanted it with?” Harry asked.

“The usual. Masking spells to keep the enchantments hidden, another to keep it hidden from sight if you wish. Protective runes. Nightmares dispersing spells. They don’t remove nightmares completely, but they do make it easier to wake up from them. Then there are the usual mild agility and reflex-improving spells. Then, a compulsion Portkey that will take you to a place you consider safe.”

“Is that how you actually escaped from that cave?” asked Sirius.

“I think that it was a mix of that and will. The cave had anti-portkey and anti-apparation wards
around it. In the end, I think the Portkey and my determination managed to push through them. Anyway, the Portkey itself is keyed to activate with certain levels of adrenaline in your system, and with any thought like ‘I want to get out of here’. That activates the compulsion to reach for it, but you can resist it if you want. I highly encourage listening to it, though.”

“Wow,” whispered Harry as he sprung from the bed to hug Regulus tightly. “Thank you.”

“I did literally nothing,” mumbled Regulus. “Thank him,” he added, waving his free hand at Sirius, the other being wound around Harry’s shoulders. “He is your godfather. If it wasn’t for that, I probably wouldn’t have dared to do half of the things I did. I’m a Slytherin, I do have some sense of self-preservation.”

“Yes, that of a self-preservation-challenged Gryffindor,” quipped Sirius. “And if you didn’t care about Harry beyond of a sense of a family obligation, you wouldn’t have done nearly all you did.”

“Well, he’s like moss, he tends to grow on people,” Regulus quipped as Harry released him from the hug. “You’re right, family obligation brought me to Little Whinging but it didn’t keep me there. It was basic human decency at first and then fondness second.”

“You do love him,” smirked Sirius.

“So do you, you flea-ridden fur bag,” snarked Regulus. “You escaped Azkaban because you thought that he was in danger.”

“You taught him in primary school,” Sirius pointed out.

“Believe it or not, I actually enjoyed teaching. That wasn’t a hardship. Resisting the urge to grab you and run away to Chile after continuous failed attempts to remove you from the Dursleys was tougher,” Regulus sighed. “Speaking of which, what are we going to do about them?”

“We can’t kill them,” Harry interjected. “I don’t want to ever see them again but I’m really against the murder as an option.”

“Sometimes murder is the only option,” said Sirius and Regulus in a grim unison.

“Sometimes,” agreed Harry. “For a homicidal Dark Lord. They aren’t actually on that level.”

“Well, once we have a little more liquid assets, we might consider relocating them to, say, Australia, maybe?” suggested Regulus.

“Beautiful continent,” agreed Sirius.

“And flora and fauna that wants to kill you at every corner,” added Regulus. “That way, if they get themselves killed, it won’t be on us.”

“Can you actually do that?” asked Harry sceptically. “How?”

“We’re sitting on a substantial amount of money. The family goblin can buy your uncles company quite easily.”

“Once we’re the majority shareholders, we can relocate him to the bloody moon. And if he won’t go, there would be other options to make him miserable,” Sirius added.
Shameless plug-in for those interested in a prequel to this story in which I attempted to hash out Severus's and Bathsheda's relationship. I hashed it out, it was great fun to write it because these two... Seriously read it. It's an angstfest with lots of snarking. It's named Secrets & Keepers - Beware Us (pun very much intended). It's not exactly completely finished (because if I had I would be writing that one instead of this one) but it lies the groundwork for their relationship as it is now. I'm not fishing for reviews but I'm not going to lie that any sort of feedback is not inspiring because it is (especially if anyone wants me to go further from where I ended it btw, and I ended it in an interesting place indeed).
Chapter 08 - Things Past

Chapter Summary

Sirius reaches a breaking point, Regulus delves deeper into the family history and Harry is both cute and a little shit (because he finally starts feeling comfortable enough to act like one when circumstances allow it).

Chapter Notes

Additional warnings: profanity, frank discussion of a lot of things.

Word count: Around 18 500 words.

Author's note/personal ramble: The thing Regulus discusses with Harry has been shamelessly lifted from the original version of chapter two (and myself if you ever read Dormant Life). It didn't make that chapter because back then it was absurdly long already and at the time served no real purpose other than having Severus (at the time) explain to you how Phineas Nigellus managed to become the worst headmaster Hogwarts ever had. Since I never lose anything I ever wrote (with the exception of Dormant Life) I saved it with hopes to eventually use it later on.

As for Sirius... A few months ago I was binging Harry Potter related videos on YouTube and I stumbled into SuperCarlinBrothers video on the subject of Fidelius Charm. It was a very enlightening experience and got me thinking about what possibly could be going through Sirius's head to come up with what he had. Sirius is not an idiot. Pure sheer dumb luck might have been working in his favour when he was studying to become an Animagus and JKR herself stated that he was a talented wizard. That means talented enough to not be an idiot about things that mattered to him. And the fate of the Potters mattered to him. Then why this whole thing went sideways anyway. What he missed? How he missed it? Why he even came up with this charade? Anyway, this is my take on an answer on something that might be a plot hole in the original story but to me is an excellent opportunity to explore Sirius's character. Because why not.

Also, it's the last Harry, Sirius & Regulus chapter up until the events of 8th August because the rest need to catch up with them.

Not beta read due to some communication issues with my beta. Treated with Grammarly.

Dedicated to all of my readers who stuck with me for so long. Thank You, I hope that You will find this story enjoyable. I would be the most grateful for constructive criticism.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
"Of this alone even God is deprived, the power of making things that are past never to have been."
~Agathon

Chapter eight: Things Past

Sirius Black, 12 Grimmauld Place, London, 7th August, evening.

The second dinner at 12 Grimmauld Place was far more cheerful affair than the first one. Harry certainly was more at ease today than yesterday and convinced Regulus to regale him with the tales about his own godparents, Uncle Ignatius and Aunt Lucretia. From time to time Sirius chirped in with a thing or two about Uncle Alphard but for most of the time, he just watched how Harry and Regulus interacted with easiness born from years of knowing each other and on Regulus's part, freedom to finally express his fondness.

It should have been me. That thought hit him more than once during the dinner. I should have this easiness; I shouldn't have to hold back for the sake of propriety and not wanting to make Harry uneasy or frightened.

It made him itch but not on the skin level and he tried his best to avoid even thinking about it. At least until at some point, Mirzam materialised somewhere behind Regulus's back, leaning against the counter with a bemused expression on her face.

Her hair rather than long and braided, like she usually wore them, were reaching her chin and she had a fringe. It was a hairdo that suited her face but for some reason always annoyed her. She was wearing a pair of old washed off jeans and a black, stretched out woollen jumper that was so washed off that it was nearly grey. As far as he could tell she was also barefoot.

Of all places and all times and in all incarnations.

She quirked her left eyebrow at him but remained silent through the duration of the dinner but nevertheless steadily and annoyingly present.

The itch grew stronger with each passing minute and he readily welcomed the excuse to clean up after dinner while Regulus and Harry headed upstairs to make Harry try on the clothes Regulus brought for him.

Once left alone in the empty stone kitchen Sirius busied himself with cleaning after dinner. Muggle way, with drying the dishes just to have something to do for as long as he could.

Mirzam didn't say a word and he was grateful for it, but still, he knew that the very moment his hands will be empty and his mind will start to wonder she would speak. He didn't want her to, he knew why his mind summoned that particular image of her.

The itch intensified.

He dried and put away the pan before he hung the drying cloth on the rack.

Now, he thought.

"Eleven years, nine months and five days," she said finally, her voice calm and even. "Are we counting hours?"

"Between twelve to ten," he answered. "I don't know, I wasn't keeping a good track of time back
then. I had other things to worry about on my mind."

"Worry wasn't the only thing that was clouding your mind," she said swiftly. "You can fool anyone else but you cannot fool me, Sirius. Couldn't back then and you still can't, especially now."

"I still managed to do so for nearly seven months," he replied. "Longer if you take into consideration that incident in Glasgow. Though to give it justice it was an isolated incident."

"But a very illuminating isolated incident," she said grimly. "I should have known. I should have seen that. I've seen that," she paused. "But it didn't occur to me that you of all people would have been so foolish."

"I wasn't foolish," he denied petulantly. "I was exhausted."

"That's not an excuse and you know it," she scoffed. "If you were truly exhausted you would have bowed out of the Order of the Phoenix or at the very least asked for lessening your duties due to your actual duties as an Auror Lily Potter and her moral judgement be damned."

"It wasn't because of Lily," he scoffed in return.

"No," she agreed. "It was because you liked it. Have the courage to admit it, Sirius."

"Yes, I liked it," he sighed. "Are you happy now?" he spat as he whirled around to face her.

"Do I look happy to you?" she asked bitterly.

She was frowning, her mouth was set in a thin line. But her eyes were wide open and glassy. He remembered that look, he saw it before, on the day when the proverbial shit hit the fan. The day when…

He shook his head. Years had passed since then and she was dead for most of them. Even now he knew that the woman in front of him was nothing but the creation of his own mind at war with itself. She wasn't a ghost; she was simply a hallucination.

But how real she looked to him.

"I liked what it gave me," he continued, more softly. "I can't deny that, probably never will. I liked the hypervigilance and the ability to connect things faster it gave me. I liked how it lowered my inhibitions about having sex."

"Thanks," she snorted.

"You know what I'm talking about," he sighed. "I didn't hate it, not all of it, but it certainly made the uneasy parts easier."

"So, what you're actually saying is that aside from one isolated incident before our sixth year we never had sex while you weren't high?" she asked grimly.

"I wasn't always high," he objected.

"No, at times you were just coming down from one," she scoffed. "Trust and openness, a good foundation of every relationship."

"Speaking of which," he snorted. "When you were planning to tell me about Reg?"

She shrugged and hung her head before she muttered, "You knew that as much as I liked Harrison
Ford Black, I did like Regulus Martin. Reginald Regulus or Regulus Reginald would just sound weird."

"Except back then I thought that you were planning to simply honour our deceased brothers," he muttered. "And I would have given you that. Just not on the first, though. I would even give you Zdzislaw Radoslav and learn how to speak it like you did. But it's not about that, you know that. It's about you hiding the connection you had with my brother."

"It wasn't a sexual connection," she snorted.

"Did I suggest that it was?" he growled. "Yet, whatever it was, went deep enough for Reg to consider your face as a source of comfort. To consider your skin as a safe space. You gave him Reggie's medallion for crying at loud."

"Borrowed," she shrugged. "I just wasn't able to pick it up before I died."

"That's not the point," he scoffed.

"That's exactly the point," she said simply. "As individuals were plagued by our experiences, by our own doubts, by our own conscience. Reg had a lot on his shoulders for someone so young, due to the choices he made. Unlike the majority of his peers, he rose above those choices and worked towards making amends for them. That didn't mean that he was a shining example of someone with good mental health. That whole business with your father? Recon how big were the odds that he didn't figure out that your father was up to something not good?"

"Knowing Regulus, my father and you?" sighed Sirius heavily. "Reg was always pretty damn smart, even for someone who fell for Death Eater recruitment. But his inability to sometimes make good choices didn't mean that he was an idiot, quite the opposite. If you ever questioned him as a witness at any point of time chances are that he would have figure out what you were up to pretty quickly."

"Or maybe we finally focused on your father because someone else made that connection," she suggested. "You know that you aren't actually talking with me but with yourself."

"I'm well aware of that, Mrs Doom & Gloom," he sighed. "It's easier this way somehow."

"Not exactly healthy," she pointed out.

"I'm not exactly a paragon of excellent mental health in case you didn't notice," he muttered. "Long-time exposure to dementors does that to a person, as does having your entire world turning upside down on the top of battling an insistent call of drugs."

"Want to talk about it?" she suggested.

"Which part?" he asked. "We're already talking about drugs."

"We just scratched the surface of drugs," she said simply. "We both know that there's more to it. Like why did you start using again? Or why did you keep using? What about people who lost their lives because something you planned while drugged to the gills went sideways?"

"All right," he huffed.

"It's not all right and you know it," she muttered. "What about Harry? When you're planning to tell him that the main reason he doesn't have parents is because you came up with that entire scheme while high?"
"Mirzam!" he growled.

"Truth hurts, doesn't it?" she asked simply. "What about the others? And speaking of others do you seriously think that no one aside of me ever suspected that you were using drugs?" she continued with ease. "James obviously didn't have a clue; he never had a clue unless someone pointed it out to him after smearing him in a clue musk and making him dance clue mating dance. Never about important things, they just went over his head like the fucks he gave, you know that better than anyone."

"Stop it!" he hissed angrily.

"But Lily," she continued without much of a pause, "you remember Cokeworth. Even that safehouse which was supposedly in a good neighbourhood wasn't in what is technically considered as a good neighbourhood. You know who was her friend. You never thought that she would never try to follow him to that seedier part of the town? That she was so blinded by her optimism and her morals to not see alcoholics and drug addicts on the streets? That she wouldn't be able to see the signs of someone who was high? Think again."

"I'm thinking," he sighed. "You're that thinking part," he shrugged. "You're saying exactly what went through my head over the last eleven years and nine months."

"And yet here you are, still itching," she scoffed. "It's an old house and Kreacher didn't exactly keep it in good condition due to a prior obligation. Odds are that you can find something in your mother's medications that will get you high."

"I don't have to look," he muttered. "I know that there's a vial of cocaine in the potions cupboard and that it isn't simple Muggle cocaine that I preferred with all its side effects but wizards distilled drug."

"Which you avoided like a plague because wizards are idiots and geniuses at the same time and rather than for the drugs themselves the tests they run are for masking agents in wizards distilled drugs," she said simply. "That's why you were never caught using even when you were drugged to the gills while they took your blood for testing."

"You have to admit that it was actually a genius idea," he snorted.

"I will, when I will admit that getting addicted to drugs was a genius idea in the first place," she scoffed. "Which is never. So, what's stopping you now from going to the potions' cupboard? Or from good old-fashioned summoning charm? You had about four or five proper meals and you slept properly last night. Granted you aren't on the top of your physical strength but you're strong enough to summon some quantity of cocaine from an unspecified place. You could do that while high, what stops you from doing so while you're still sober?" she asked pointedly.

He looked at the ceiling.

"Ah, so there it is," she said gleefully. "Then why are you still thinking about it?"

"Because it made me smarter," he sighed before he lowered his head. "Because I need to be smart now."

"You believe that it made you smarter, it didn't actually make you smarter," she muttered. "Under the influence of drugs, you were still you. The brain the drugs affected was still yours and sober you were still smart and observant. Far more observant than when you were high because sober you never had the overconfidence which cocaine gave you. It was cocaine and not your sober brain
that made you overlook the obvious. It was your cocaine-addled brain that looked at Peter Pettigrew and never saw the minuscule signs of treachery because Peter was a friend even if you yourself didn't consider him as a particularly good friend of your own. He was always more James's and Remus's friend than yours, you didn't confide in him like you confided in the rest of us. Wonder why?"

"Because I grew up seeing Peter Pettigrews all around me," he sighed. "This?" he waved his hand around the room. "With my status in the Black family?" he grimaced. "I saw it all, Mirzam. I sat with them at the same table, I listened to their family stories. I knew people like Peter Pettigrew, I didn't trust them before I went to Hogwarts and even though I learned to trust Peter specifically with some stuff it was never stuff that truly mattered. I could never overcome the years of instilled distrust. Not even for him."

"And to be quite frank he didn't really like you either," she said simply. "You were simply a competition to James's attention but he was too afraid of you to challenge you publicly. No, he just ripped the benefits of you not holding James's attention when he had a chance."

"You aren't suggesting that he sold James and Lily to Voldemort out of pure spite," he shook his head.

"People died for less," she shrugged. "But spite, no. Pettigrew was too much of a coward to sell the Potters out of spite. Fear on the other hand?" she grimaced. "He always felt the safest when he had you, James and Remus between him and bullies. He just got into the big, bad world and saw that compared to his enemies his protectors weren't much of the protectors."

"So it was that easy," sighed Sirius heavily. "I thought that he liked them, enough…"

"To feel guilty?" she suggested. "Probably. Pettigrew wasn't Bella, he wasn't a psychopath. At the end of the day he was, is and will still remain a coward which makes him even more dangerous adversary than a psychopath like Bella. Actually, if I was you, I would prefer dealing with Bella rather than him. At the very least she is predictably and certifiably insane and fearless in her insanity while Pettigrew in his cowardice is unpredictable."

"He values his own skin above everything else," nodded Sirius.

"I don't envy you," she sighed.

"You could suggest something," he pointed out.

"If I was truly here, I would suggest avoiding making him believe that you're out to get him," she said simply.

"I got out to get him so he won't help Voldemort finish what he started," he pointed out.

"But Pettigrew doesn't have to know that," she shrugged. "If only there was a way to say instil some doubt that he wasn't the only traitorous Marauder…"

"You know that at some point in this whole ordeal I would like to be a free man again," he asked pointedly.

"But for that you need Pettigrew or at the very least someone in a position of power in the Auror Office that would reopen your case and re-examine or more precisely examine the physical evidence," she said simply. "Or did you manage to alienate all of our co-workers before the whole thing went up in flames?"
"Well, the manner in which I spent the last eleven years and nine months didn't make keeping up with office gossip an easy task. I managed to get my hand on a Daily Prophet here and there but Azkaban is not a Muggle prison and wardens and dementors don't care about human rights. Not that some individuals there deserve it."

"But some do," she pointed out. "You can't equate a simple thief to a murderer and you cannot deny that even murderers deserve more than one meal a day."

"Some do," he snorted.

"You know that in public's eyes you're as much of a murderer as Bella, don't you?" she asked simply.

"Well, you know my opinion about capital punishment. Being a prisoner of Azkaban didn't change that. It's not a form of justice that should be used lightly but it should be used in certain separate and meticulously examined cases," he said grimly. "It's not my fault that our justice system is ridiculous and that unlike Muggles we don't have something like a Court of Appeal because if we had I would be out of Azkaban before Christmas of 1981."

"If we had proper justice system you wouldn't be in Azkaban in the first place," she snorted. "So, what are you going to do with the cocaine in potions cabinet?" she asked curiously.

"I want to take it," he admitted sourly. "It would stop this bloody itch…"

"Until it will wear off," she pointed out. "Then you would need another and another and another."

"That's why I don't want to take it," he sighed. "I can't do this to Harry. I can't do this to Regulus. They deserve me at my best and we both know that I'm not on my best on it."

"So?" she asked.

"Tonight, I won't," he sighed heavily.

"And tomorrow?" she smiled at him.

"Tomorrow I will try not to," he said softly.

"And the day after tomorrow?" she pressed.

"Ask me again tomorrow and my answer will probably be similar," he shrugged. "Or not, I don't know. I didn't exactly choose to be sober second time around in the first place."

"Why did you choose to be sober first time around?" asked Regulus quietly.

Sirius whirled his head around to look at him. Regulus was standing by the entrance to the kitchen. His shoulders were hunched to appear smaller than he was even though he was still bloody tall. His hair was back to their earlier shoulders reaching length but his face was an unreadable mask.

"Because my son deserved a father who was sober," said Sirius softly. "Because his mother deserved a partner whose mental capacities she could trust."

"Not because you deserved to be sober?" whispered Regulus as he looked at him with a sad look on his face.

"That was a side effect," sighed Sirius. "Don't look at me like that, Reg. It wasn't your fault."
"Then pray to tell when you started not being sober and on what exactly?" asked Regulus gently.


"Jesus Christ," whispered Regulus. "How long?" he asked as he started to approach him, slowly, as if he was approaching a scared animal.

"A singular incident in May 1979 then isolated incidents through mid-August till early October 1979 and since then up until the end of February 1980 is hard to tell. Then there was a pregnancy scare and aside from one hiccup in early March I remained sober until 8th August 1980," he replied quietly.

"And since then?" asked Regulus softly as he lied his left hand on Sirius's shoulder.

"A day here on there," admitted Sirius. "Maybe several in a row but not enough to call it being completely sober and free of its effects all of the time. I didn't take it just because I could, I took it because it was helping me think and I needed to think, to plan, to make tactics…"

"To survive?" offered Regulus. "Or help others survive?" he added quietly.

"It helped," mumbled Sirius. "At least I thought that it did. It didn't," he sighed. "It allowed me to overlook the obvious because my drug-addled brain wouldn't consider something which my sober brain would have considered. I missed the signs and…"

"The Dark Lord killed the Potters and it was Pettigrew who sold them to him," said Regulus sternly.

"But Pettigrew wouldn't sell them to him if I didn't suggest that he should become their Secret Keeper," Sirius pointed out simply. "I do have their blood on their hands, Reg. I didn't directly kill them but the choices I made led to their deaths. That's on me. That will always be on me and I can regret making that choice but I can't take it back because if I could, I would have…" he mumbled the last words into Regulus's shoulder because he suddenly found himself drawn into a tight hug and Regulus's arms wound tightly around his shoulder blades.

"And they locked you up with that in your head for nearly twelve years," whispered Regulus. "You aren't responsible for other people's choices, Sirius."

"No," whispered Sirius as he turned his head just enough to not speak into Regulus's shoulder, "I'm responsible for my own. At the bottom of it all my addiction to cocaine isn't that much different from your decision to join the Death Eaters. We made that choice and we have to live with the consequences."

"The difference is that I don't have to battle with choosing to not be a Death Eater every day," muttered Regulus. "There are drugs in the potions cabinet, aren't they?" he asked grimly.

"Cocaine amongst other things," confirmed Sirius. "Quite a big vial that would have seen me through a significant number of doses. I never took a lot, not while Mirzam was alive. And even after she died the doses varied but I tried to avoid bigger ones."

"You were talking to her, weren't you?" whispered Regulus.

"To a hallucination of her, yes," sighed Sirius. "She is dead and isn't a ghost. The bottom line is that I'm arguing with myself."
"You aren't the only one," sighed Regulus in return. "I see her, occasionally. During panic attacks mostly. She talked me through one back then, a big one. More often than not I just hear her voice or what I remember how she sounded like but sometimes I'm able to summon her face to go with it when it's a bad one. Sometimes she also shows up out of the blue when I psych myself into hypervigilance," he clarified. "There's really no rhyme or reason to it. She was always an epitome of calmness and reason to me so my mind tends to push all of its remaining rationality into an image of her," he added softly.

"Well, then you saw only a fraction of Mirzam Verascez and never when she was angry," chuckled Sirius softly. "I did," he sighed. "The biggest fight we had? It was about drugs, my reasons for taking them, my ways of hiding that I was using them," he sighed heavily. "Fair warning, if you ever, ever suspect that I'm on something that alters perception never look at my arms or nose or mouth. I never snorted coke or smoked crack, it was always intravenous and I used the veins in my feet to do that. Even people who are trained to look for signs of drug use don't look at other people's feet. At the very least our sad excuse of a vice-squad that made occasional drug tests on Aurors never had," he added grimly.

"I trust you," whispered Regulus.

"You shouldn't, not about this, not completely," Sirius shook his head. "I'm not saying that you shouldn't trust me at all but you should never forget that it's a part of who I am and that there will be days when I will be craving drugs like a man dying from thirst craves water. Odds are that on those days I will be the most unpleasant person you ever met, odds are that I will find a way to give in to drugs, that I will lie to your face about it…"

"Is that day today?" asked Regulus softly.

"No, it's not," sighed Sirius. "Although it's quite close. I can feel the itch but as long as I have something to concentrate on, I can ignore it. If I will ignore it for just long enough it might go away completely, for a while at least. It used to do that in the past."

"It was me and Mirzam, wasn't it?" whispered Regulus. "Because I'm sorry if I wanted to keep it away from you," he sighed. "I wanted to protect you, I wanted to protect you both but there was stuff…" he hung his voice.

"Father?" asked Sirius pensively. "It's something she said. What I thought, I mean," he clarified. "She questioned you in the course of the investigation," he added.

"In a manner of speaking," sighed Regulus heavily. "I found him leaving a Muggle bar with one of the men I identified a few days later in Muggle papers as a victim of a very gruesome murder. It struck me as odd, the whole ordeal but we weren't exactly on good talking terms for me to outright ask him about it before I saw the paper. Then I saw the paper and this shadow of a doubt about his involvement in it kept me from asking. Part of me wanted to pin it on him while the other part didn't. It kept me awake for several days until I gave up and went to Mirzam to vent my spleen on the subject. She wasn't surprised."

"She wouldn't have been," admitted Sirius. "Neither would I," he added grimly. "Cold Cases were always understaffed and during the war employment turnover was huge, even for them. Then there was the matter of investigators involved, not all identified victims were considered as victims by the Auror Office but Mirzam was meticulous about it. She picked that case as an investigator to be contacted if something similar would show up and then she went through Muggle police records. The sheer number of victims…" he shook his head.

"Fit a certain physical type," finished Regulus quietly. "They were substitutes," he added softly.
"For the man he eventually killed," sighed Sirius heavily.

"What?" yelped Regulus as he pulled away but he still kept his arms around Sirius although his hold lessened slightly.

"And what's better he actually got away with it," added Sirius grimly. "If you were capable to identify the physical type of his victims there's really no point from hiding the truth from you."

"I thought that it was you," admitted Regulus quietly.

"I wasn't even born in the spring of 1959 when he killed his first victim," said Sirius and he grimaced. "The only thing that varied amongst the victims was their eye colour. Blue, green, grey anything was acceptable as long as it wasn't brown," he added.

"Yes," nodded Regulus quickly.

"It was because the person whose substitutes he has killed suffered from a condition called central heterochromia. On a grand scale of things, it's a rare condition but when it occurs it tends to occur in relatives. To not look too far away, I will give you the other Blacks. Mirzam and Reginald had it, sort of in reverse, her eyes were mostly hazel green with several blue specks in her irises while his were blue with specks of green and grey," he explained. "From what I heard her mother and her maternal grandmother had it too and as far as I can tell some variation of it also occurred in the eye colour of the younger two but I cannot recall their primary eye colour. But it doesn't matter. What matters is…"

"That Grandma Irma had it," breathed out Regulus.

"And that she passed it to her sons," added Sirius. "Only one of them was gay though."

"Alphard," whispered Regulus. "He killed Uncle Alphard."

"And up until he did and after that he was killing his substitutes," said Sirius grimly. "Alphard's death wasn't pinned on him but then again no one would question his presence in his brother-in-law's and also a cousin's house. Especially people who knew that they were and used to be very good friends. No one knew how good."


"And he and mother weren't?" asked Sirius pointedly. "Luckily or not Uncle Alphard had some sort of a moral compass and wouldn't violate the sanctity of his sister's marriage. Who knows maybe if he had all those poor bastards wouldn't be dead and maybe I would avoid being his bedwarmer," he added sourly.

"And you kept all of this inside through all these years?" whispered Regulus.

"I had Mirzam," shrugged Sirius. "We talked about both sides of it together and separately, mostly separately. Alphard's death didn't exactly sit well with me when it happened but at the time, I was nothing but a worm compared to father but I knew how I looked in my teenage years and the last week of it…" he shook his head. "I couldn't reopen the investigation into Alphard's death without alarming him but as long as Mirzam could manage to pin all the others on him it was good enough for me."

"Did she?" asked Regulus quietly. "The Prophet was maddening unhelpful."

"Not officially," sighed Sirius. "But she did meet with Grandpa Arcturus after his death, one on one
and he didn't issue an official request for an inquiry into the suspicious circumstances of his death. The official cause of death was the actual cause of death though. Massive heart attack caused by stamina enhancing potions, followed by a very strenuous activity that wasn't what they were intended for and coupled with high levels of adrenaline. Probable panic of being wandless in unfamiliar parts of the city and having an anti-apparation charm placed on your person probably didn't help either. Not exactly a mournful loss if you ask me."

"I didn't cry after him either," snorted Regulus. "I was only glad that he wasn't out there killing innocent people. Sure, toppling over that bloody castle on ice would have been great but having a deactivated serial killer for a father was good enough for me."

"As it was for me," nodded Sirius. "Although that depended from the day. I wasn't exactly a highly functioning individual at the time. I just got back from enforced bereavement leave after my idiot brother got himself murdered in suspicious circumstances in one of the many of the Black family summer houses," he added pointedly.

"I didn't exactly die that day," said Regulus sheepishly.

"I didn't exactly know that back then," said Sirius simply. "Dead is dead and I actually saw the autopsy report, as did Mirzam."

"Oh," mumbled Regulus.

"What do you mean by oh?" asked Sirius sceptically.

"The medallion," whispered Regulus. "When she gave it to me, she made me promise that I would never remove it until she would remove it herself. She knew that I would honour that request."

"Which means that she knew that the body that turned up in the morgue as yours wasn't yours," said Sirius pensively. "Which means that she had to suspect that whatever end you had met that particular one wasn't it."

"Yeah," sighed Regulus heavily. "Through the better part of my earlier stay at the hospital, I kind of expected her to walk through the door and say: there you're, we've been looking for you for ages. I was put out that she didn't and then I learned that she died in the meantime," he whispered softly.

Why kept it secret though, thought Sirius grimly. She knew that he would have jumped at the chance that his brother was still alive and that after learning that Regulus supposedly died at the hands of Death Eaters he wouldn't rest until he finally got into the bottom of it all. Until he would find him.

"That's why," said Mirzam simply somewhere from behind him.

"Piss off," harrumphed Sirius. "I'm pissed off at you."

"She's still here?" asked Regulus curiously.

"She's here now," clarified Sirius.

"Do you know what I had?" she asked pointedly. "Ask him what I have to go on. Aside from a Muggle medallion which a proper son of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black would have removed from his neck within seconds of having it put there?"

"It would have been more helpful if you were an actual ghost and we could both see you at the
same time," muttered Sirius.

"You can't always get what you want," she snorted.

"But if you try sometimes you might find you get what you need," he quipped.

"And you did, didn't you?" she asked simply. "You have him now. I'm sorry that I didn't tell you
time.," she snorted.

"You can't always get what you want," she snorted.

"But if you try sometimes you might find you get what you need," he quipped.

"Well, I thought that I knew you better," he admitted. "Turned out that I didn't know you as well as
I thought."

"I'm feeling excluded from a conversation I believe to be important," said Regulus grimly.

"She's making excuses, justifiable but still excuses," said Sirius grimly.

"She loved you, you ungrateful berk," she huffed.

"And now there are profanities and love proclamations," replied Sirius.

"I'm with her on that," said Regulus quickly. "Listen you didn't see her after the attack, I did. I
doubted everything else back then but I never questioned the depth of her love for you. And no one
better than me knows that sometimes you do incredibly stupid shit for people you love," he added
quickly. "Like trying to singularly screw up the Dark Lord's plans."

"Like concocting an elaborate scheme that fell apart only because you trusted the wrong person," she supplied. "You don't have to trust me to still love me."

"I do," whispered Sirius. "I just wish that you weren't so bloody secretive."

"I have trust issues," she said simply.

"So do I," he huffed. "Happens to victims of continuous abuse."

entertaining as this conversation is it's actually tiring and as far as I can tell maddeningly unhelpful
to you," she added. "How about instead of arguing with a hallucination you try the stuff that
worked in the past?" she suggested.

"The stuff that worked in the past has been buried in your empty grave for ages," answered Sirius
grimly.

"What worked in the past?" asked Regulus curiously.

"What you loved and he hated with a burning passion," she quipped before she disappeared.


"I didn't exactly hate playing the violin," shrugged Regulus. "I just intensely disliked the way we
were taught how to play violin and Uncle Alphard's approach wasn't exactly helping. As was my
supposed tone deafness. It's not my fault that you have a hearing range of a bloody dog even in
your human form and had one for far longer than you knew that you're one," he snorted. "I can
play just fine without start again and don't make mistakes."

"Because you do make mistakes," chuckled Sirius.
"Piss off," snorted Regulus but without actual heat in it. "He traumatised the entire experience of playing the violin when I once caught him talking to the fellow violinist about rosining his bow after the concert. That bugger actually replied that he thought that he was planning to take it up the ass that night. It wasn't a pretty mental image back then and as much as I love innuendo music related innuendo to these days makes me cringe."

"So, you won't be rosining the bow anytime soon?" chuckled Sirius.

"No, but I might polish a broomstick if the mood strikes me," snorted Regulus. "I found it an excellent pre and post deboggarting practice. It's better than chocolate."

"So it's a dementor too," sighed Sirius.

"I don't mind," shrugged Regulus. "I will just need some privacy, peace and quiet before and after taking care of boggarts."

"And a silencing charm," supplied Sirius.

"Harry is thirteen and lives in a dormitory, the puberty will hit him before you know it," said Regulus simply. "He might not see the merits now but it won't stay like that forever."

"One can hope that he's a late bloomer," retorted Sirius.

"Of course, you would prefer parenting the boy who's technically still a child rather than a hormonal teenager," snorted Regulus.

"Of course, I do, I was a teenager once," chuckled Sirius. "And you teach at primary school, you don't exactly come in contact with hormonal teenagers."

"You didn't get to teach the sixth year," sighed Regulus. "Puberty these days starts earlier than when we were teenagers. In girls mostly but occasionally you get a hormonal rage-ball with a prick on the brink of puberty. And for most of the time, you actually want to beat them to death with their own school bag."

"Are you talking about Dudley?" asked Harry curiously from the doorway.

"No, just teenagers in general," answered Regulus. "Weren't you reading The Hobbit when I left you?"

"I was," answered Harry simply as he started to approach them. "But then I saw a mouse and I did have a traumatic experience that involved one today. And I also think that you didn't get rid all of the instincts when you transformed me back into a human," he added sourly.

"Residual effect of enforced transformation, should wear out within a day," said Sirius with a fond smile.

"That doesn't mean that I want to want to eat one," said Harry and he huffed as he stopped in front of them. "How do you live with that?" he asked as he looked at Sirius specifically.

"I just eat them," shrugged Sirius as he reached out for Harry to draw him into a hug. "Meat is meat and through the better part of the last decade it was scarce so…"

"Eww," mumbled Harry as Regulus wrapped his arm around his shoulders.

"If it's any consolation if it doesn't wear out within a day but rather over a much longer period of
time it's usually a good indicator for a future Animagi form, Fluffy," supplied Regulus with a grin. "And I'm not making that up, it's an opinion of the actual Animagus and a properly registered one," he added gleefully.

"She never shared that detail with us," snorted Sirius.

"Well, your year didn't have Charity Burbage in it," shrugged Regulus. "For some reason, she was convinced that our DADA teacher that year was an unregistered Animagus."

"Oh, so that was her," muttered Sirius. "For some weird reason, we got blamed for the stuff she pulled on him."

"Well, a lot of things feast on rodents," said Harry sceptically. "So, you can take your indicator, stuff yourself with it and stop calling me Fluffy."

"Why not?" chuckled Regulus.

"Because every time I hear Fluffy, I think about Hagrid's Cerberus," replied Harry. "What would I use the additional two heads for?"

"Eating more mice?" supplied Regulus.

"Why don't you try that yourself?" suggested Harry. "You have an experienced Animagus on hand. It might be useful."

"Being a Metamorphmagus is always useful," said Regulus simply. "Being an Animagus, on the other hand, can be useful and in certain cases only occasionally. Unless you're planning to become some sort of bug or relocate to the area in which your animal counterpart is native it's not a very useful ability."

"Don't I know that," quipped Harry. "Dad was a deer of all things, hardly useful."

"He would have been very disappointed if he heard that," pointed out Regulus.

"Well, he isn't around to express his disappointment in me finding his Animagi form useless," said Harry simply. "I'm not saying that in certain ways it isn't magnificent but it still is bloody useless. Let's move on."

"Then what you would prefer if you could choose a form?" asked Sirius curiously.

"Something inconspicuous," said Harry pensively. "I wouldn't mind an ability to fly but it isn't exactly a must have for me. I mean, I have a broom for flying. But if it was something that could blend easily with the surroundings, I would be grateful."

"I hate to point that once you rule out birds that eat rodents, you're actually down to a choice between a house cat and a dog. Pretty much everything else sticks out like a sore thumb, Fluffy," chuckled Regulus. "Or doesn't eat rodents."

"Can a wizard become a magical animal?" asked Harry curiously.

"That's debatable," shrugged Sirius. "And not a widely researched subject considering the reasons why people become Animagi in the first place."

"So, there's a minuscule chance that I can turn into a three-headed dog and have him for dinner?" asked Harry pointedly.
"Why would you do that?" asked Regulus sceptically.

"Because you're annoying and you're still calling me Fluffy, Dinner," said Harry dryly.

"Sirius," sighed Regulus.

"You started it, apologise or keep being called Dinner, Dinner," snickered Sirius.

"Your parenting technique is a whore of Babylon, it sucks," snorted Regulus.

"Well, I was taught to actually respect the elders that respect me and do my best to pretend that I respect the others that don't," quipped Sirius.

"What sort of parenting technique is that?" asked Harry curiously.

"A Black family one, courtesy of one Arcturus Sirius Black and his forefathers," explained Sirius as he ruffled Harry's hair. "Our parents..." he grimaced, "weren't winning parents of the year awards even on their best days let alone worst but Grandpa Arcturus and Grandma Mel tried their best to make up for that. Some stuff stuck; some fell off over the years. Lessons about respect stuck because unlike our parents they did honour that."

"It was simple stuff really," nodded Regulus. "Like respecting the right to privacy. They always knocked before they entered our rooms and instructed the elves to do the same. They never went over the stuff we kept in our rooms even though in some regards they had a right to do so. Our lives certainly would have been different if they had," he added grimly.

"You know that the only reason you aren't having a room on your own now is because this hovel needs a thorough cleaning," added Sirius.

"I don't really mind," said Harry simply. "I'm used to sharing living space. Quite frankly even shared space is an improvement after ten years in a cupboard under the stairs and about fourish months in Dudley's second bedroom."

"Australia?" asked Regulus quickly.

"Australia," agreed Sirius eagerly.

"Or tundra," supplied Harry.

"Too majestic," muttered Regulus. "The view would be wasted on them."

"Well, northern parts of Canada or Alaska could do if you want them to mostly freeze," mused Sirius.

"Well, Dursley and his progeny could afford to sweat out some of the fat and extreme heat isn't pleasant to obese people," pointed out Regulus.

"Extreme heat isn't pleasant to all people," quipped Harry.

"I wouldn't mind," said Sirius simply. "Nearly twelve years on a rock island in the middle of the sea will make you re-evaluate your weather preferences."

**Secrets & Keepers – Keep Us**

*Harry Potter, 12 Grimmauld Place, London, 7th August, late evening*
I love magic, thought Harry fondly as he settled himself on one of the sofas in front of the fire with The Hobbit in his lap before he got himself lost in the world of adventures of one Bilbo Baggins.

Grimmauld Place wasn't so bad. Sure, it was gloomy and had a dark aura that seeped through the skin but the idea to magically fuse official dining-room with official sitting-room that according to Sirius also served as an office was truly ingenious. As was the easiness with which they could be changed just by a simple touch of the right place on the wall.

And if this grim old place to a certain degree was filled with curious and amazing innovations like that, he could only wonder how the Black mansion in Derbyshire looked like upon close inspection.

He looked at Regulus who was lying on the other sofa but in reverse direction than Harry, with his feet towards the room and Sirius rather than the fireplace. Sirius himself was somewhere in the middle of the room and was fiddling with something

"Depends on what you like," answered Regulus from the other sofa without tearing his eyes from the book he was reading. "The grounds and Quidditch pitch are amazing as is the library and the music room. The billiard room is quite nice if you're into playing it. There's a ballroom that occasionally moonlighted as a dining-room for very big gatherings and about three different dinning-rooms that vary in size depending on the number of people that are supposed to attend the meal. The breakfast room is quite nice and cosy and has an amazing view of the surrounding lake."

"As does the music room," supplied Sirius from his corner of the room.

"Well, I liked the view from breakfast room better," said Regulus simply. "Then there are several different sitting rooms."

"Studies," interjected Sirius. "Bear in mind that at one point or another quite a big number of people lived there until maintaining separate residences become popular. Hence the overwhelming number of bedrooms and a slightly less impressive number of bathrooms. It was also one of the very few pureblood mansions that was fitted with proper indoor plumbing."

"And that plumbing wasn't butchered up as the one in here," added Regulus. "Sure, this house has bathrooms on all floors with the exception of the attic and the basement but for some reason, you can't use together any utilities at the same time in first and fourth-floor bathrooms just like you can't use the master bathroom on the second floor with the bathroom on the third floor. As for the half-bath on this floor, the plumbing there works without any rhyme or reason which means that for most of the time it doesn't."

"And let's not forget the fact that as a house it's pretty cramped," added Sirius.

"And let's not forget the fact that as a house it's pretty cramped," echoed Regulus.

"And how many bedrooms this cramped house has?" asked Harry pointedly.

"Eight," answered Sirius.

Harry snorted.

"Well, the mansion in Derbyshire has eighteen of them and I'm only counting the ones that weren't expanded into ones from cropping the number of walk-in-closets," said Regulus simply. "Oh, and I have another amazing thing for you. In the attic above the main wing, there's an astronomy room with a skylight that magnifies the view of the sky above the mansion, pretty great place when you want to camp indoors."
"You're forgetting the swimming pool," added Sirius.

"It masquerades as a luxury bathroom really," shrugged Regulus. "But to give it justice it makes prefects' bathroom look like a dingy water closet and not only because the existence of that place is bloody senseless," he added with a huff.

"Why?" asked Harry curiously.

"For starters because there's only one prefects' bathroom in the entire castle that's supposed to serve all of the prefects including head prefects and Quidditch captains. Then to make matters worse it's coeducational which in a place filled with hormonal teenagers, even supposedly responsible ones is just simply bloody stupid and just asking for an unwanted pregnancy amongst that particular crowd," explained Regulus. "Then there's the fact that it was designed in times when indoor plumbing was considered a luxury. The cherry on the top of all of it is the lack of privacy in it."

"Reg was a firm believer that the actual prefects' bathrooms should be assigned to houses and separate sexes," quipped Sirius.

"And that bathrooms for head prefects should be assigned to their own living quarters that would be located outside of their houses dormitories," added Regulus sourly. "There was once an incident in my sixth year that required the presence of at least one, preferably both head prefects, both Gryfffindors when the majority of the teachers weren't available. I couldn't bloody get to them because that judgemental cow that guarded the tower wouldn't let me in on behalf that I wasn't a Gryffindor even though I was a prefect and swore to not move past the common room. The good thing is that I was making so much ruckus outside that someone opened that bloody portrait and collected them both on my request. That's another thing I find ridiculous in the whole system. What's the point of appointing head prefects if they aren't bloody accessible to everyone when they're needed?"

"Don't ask me," said Harry simply.

"He isn't asking," chuckled Sirius. "He's just venting his spleen."

"He spent entire seven years of schooling in a system that segregates students by a traditional but outdated measure that's rigged against unity the school for most of the time is supposed to promote," muttered Regulus. "Then, once he was done with that kind of schooling, he was subjected to higher education in a state-funded university and once he was done with that, he went to work in a state-funded primary school. He also has very radical believes about the system of public schools."

"And let's not forget that he's an education unionist," added Sirius with another chuckle.

"A what?" asked Harry curiously.

"Education unionist, a noun," continued Sirius. "Person who longs for the reestablishment of imperial values and who believes that all English-speaking countries should be led by the enlightening crowning jewel of the British empire that is England."

"He's actually pulling your leg," huffed Regulus.

"Not really," quipped Sirius.

"He is," sighed Regulus. "There is a difference between imperialists and education unionists."

"In some maybe but not in the majority," interjected Sirius. "At least when it comes to the British
"Isles," he paused. "Education unionist is a specific group of majorly former Hogwarts' graduates that long for the time when Hogwarts was the only magical school on the British Isles."

"You're telling the story from the middle," muttered Regulus. "Don't listen to him, Harry. He's a separatist."

"No, I just believe that all nations that can and afford maintaining their own government and schooling should be allowed to do so," said Sirius simply.

"As I said, a separatist," huffed Regulus and he finally closed and put his book down before he continued. "Hogwarts, as a castle was built in the eleventh century by the founders. Majority of the castle's structures remained unchanged over the following centuries. Granted some adjustments were made to accumulate such inventions like indoor plumbing and the growing number of students, teachers and occasionally their families. But the initial structure stayed in the same way it was built.

"As a school, since it was founded up until seventeen century Hogwarts remained the only school on the territory of Great Britain and Ireland that taught magic on a regular basis. Granted here and there sprouted small magical communities, that were too poor to pay Hogwarts fees that taught their children basic spells and most basic potions but on the great scale of things their existence was usually short-lived. As was the existence of their students.

"It was during these dark times in wizarding history while Wizengamot was too concerned with the general safety of wizarding citizens and Ministry of Magic was only starting to develop when nationalist movements all over the territory of Great Britain and Ireland started to tentatively rear their heads. Granted, the wizarding community was a wizarding community and every witch and wizard was a sister and a brother but one had to have his or her national pride.

"It ended as well as expected, roughly three years after the British Ministry of Magic was formed magical Ireland claimed its independence from the British Ministry. Shortly thereafter they also said stuff yourself to the current Headmaster of Hogwarts, pulled their children out of it and formed their very own school: Kells Institute of Magic. Ireland was quickly followed by Wales. And while Wales didn't outright claim its independence it was thoroughly fed up with Hogwarts fees and decided to follow Ireland's footsteps and created its very own school: School of Common Magic. Shortly after Wales, small magical Cornwall, too small to bother with creating their own government decided to follow the footsteps of the former two and created Arthur's Convent for Gifted.

"After that for some time magical communities of England and Scotland were on the fence whatever or not Hogwarts as a school was supposed to be English or Scottish. Granted the independence was alluring and Scotland had a ready-made school on its territory but by then Ministry of Magic took preventive measures to keep magical Britain from splitting further. Irish rebellion was pretty bloodily put down and their Ministry was disbanded. As for the parents who took their children out of Hogwarts some pretty substantial tax benefits were offered and hated fees for Hogwarts students were finally removed.

"Curiously enough that didn't cause the other schools to cease to exist. Even better, they thrived, unlike Hogwarts which started struggling under the weight of the competition due to diminishing quality of the education offered. Granted after a decade of thorough reorganisation Hogwarts came back to its former glory but the absence of students that were supposed to go there and hadn't was felt and keenly on that.

"The diminishing number of students annoyed pretty much every single Headmaster or Headmistress of Hogwarts to the point of thorough dusting off Quill and Book of Admittance
which up until that point was used only to find Muggle-born or Muggle-raised students since wizarding families that planned to send their children to Hogwarts sent the letters to Hogwarts themselves that a child in their family was about to turn eleven and will be attending Hogwarts.

"It was Headmaster Amrose Swott's idea to start sending Hogwarts acceptance letters to all students whose names were in Book of Admittance. Ministry of Magic and Wizengamot agreed with him wholeheartedly and ensured that the Unspeakables strengthened anchoring points all over the territory of Great Britain to make sure that no child was missing from the book. They fervently hoped that now that the tutoring was somewhat free and everybody was informed about being able to attend Hogwarts the number of students would improve drastically.

"However, Headmaster Swott, Interim Chief Warlock of Wizengamot Sirius Regulus Black, ha bloody ha, and Minister for Magic Damocles Rowle didn't expect the flooring responses they received in an answer to Hogwarts acceptance letters. Obviously, some of these letters were received quite happily and some families thanked Hogwarts, Wizengamot and Ministry of Magic for spreading up the information. Other families, especially of Irish ancestry, were at least mildly displeased and voiced their displeasure via Howlers or letters that suggested where they all could stuff Hogwarts Acceptance Letters.

"Naturally the number of students remained unchanged. Granted some fresh blood did arrive at Hogwarts but also by that point families who were on the fence about sending their children to Hogwarts decided to look for alternative schools.

"Within two years open warfare for the students was declared and for a while, Hogwarts was winning it since it had the Book of Admittance which gave it access to all students. Then, however, a former Hogwarts student, that returned to it as a Professor of Ancient Studies managed to uncover enough enchantments on the Book to duplicate it before he defected from Hogwarts and he turned up at Kells.

"Aidan O'Leary, Headmaster of Kells Institute of Magic greatly appreciated the gift his school received and while he was making arrangements to duplicate the system all over Ireland, he happily shared his knowledge with the Headmasters of School of Common Magic and Arthur's Convent for Gifted.

"The rest of the eighteenth century was spent by Hogwarts staff at trying to get ahead of the other schools by showing on the doorsteps of prospective students more and more early. Apparently, towards the end of the eighteenth century, it was quite common for a Hogwarts teacher to show up at home of the new parents within a few hours since the child's name appeared in the Book of Admittance. That didn't mean that Kells, Common Magic and Arthur's Convent were slouching. Oh no, in fact, brawls between the faculty of rivalling schools were quite common. Some parents even swore to send their kids to the school of that teacher who would win the brawl."

Harry snorted at that.

"In the meantime, Wizengamot and the Ministry of Magic were trying to pass the legislation that would lead certain families to abandon other schools. A nice tax benefit here, a comfy Ministry position there, all was fair in that fight. Their successes varied from family to family until it became evident that there was only as far as they could get with bribery. They managed to win some families who used to send their children to Common Magic and Arthur's Convent but Ireland stubbornly refused to cooperate no matter how hard Ministry tried to convince them to send their children to Hogwarts. In fact, the harder they tried the more vehemently Irish families refused."

Regulus paused the story for long enough to summon a glass and magically fill it with water.
"They don't teach us that in History of Magic," whispered Harry while Regulus was drinking.

"Of course, they don't," huffed Regulus. "It's Advanced History of Magic and to get to that level you have to get through first five years of what is considered as necessary levels of History of Magic which every Hogwart's graduate should know," he paused to take another sip. "Add to that the fact this particular curriculum hadn't been revised since old Binns was still alive and that was during all of this bloody mess, mind you. New material was steadily added but for some reason, mentions of it never made it to lower forms levels. Even worse, all the stuff that I'm telling you now isn't in the official curriculum, the entire subject itself covers a singular lesson and if you wish to know anything more you have to research it and not in the books that are available at Hogwart's."

"Unless you're a descendant of an Education Unionist," quipped Sirius. "In response to the Irish educational rebellion very slowly an Education Unionist movement had started," he continued. "At first they attempted to work towards unifying the curriculums of all of the magical subjects in all magical schools but for some reason, that attempt hit the wall on all fronts. It was then when the entire movement turned less pleasant. Because quite a big majority of the members were graduates from Hogwart's and came from well-connected families, they turned to Wizengamot and the rest of the story isn't pretty."

"Why?" asked Harry curiously.

"Because that's when the educational segregation had started," answered Regulus. "It was milder towards graduates of Common Magic or Arthur's Coven but Kells graduates had it rough, even in Ireland. There were laws issued that prevented manufacturers and business owners from hiring Kells graduates before other graduates, especially from Hogwart's and they had to be obeyed because if they weren't the people who violated those legislations were supposed to pay a substantial fee for doing so."

"Hence another Irish rebellion and another bloody end of it," supplied Sirius. "Anti-British feelings ran quite high during that time. Not that they kept a lot of families from abandoning the country and looking for their luck outside of Ireland, mostly in North America."

"But Kells, though the population of its students was severely decimated, remained against all odds and during those grim times produced the elite that together with Muggle rebels accomplished the independence of Muggle and Magical Ireland from British Empire," added Regulus. "They also challenged internationally segregation laws until they were publicly removed."

"Not that it bloody helped a lot on the long run because while the laws no longer bound people to follow them the extreme prejudice with which they were forced to be followed instilled in the magical community a prejudice towards graduates of schools other than Hogwart's," said Sirius grimly. "Arthur's Coven was constantly on the verge of closing down and maybe they closed down for good."

"They bloody did not," quipped Regulus. "They're faring fairly well, as a part of the entire Cornish community. Common Magic got the worst of it but they reformed itself at the cost of the level of advanced education, it's very limited to the point they actively encourage further schooling via tutors or by issuing letters of recommendation to other schools."

"Does it mean that instead of Hogwart's I can go to either of them?" asked Harry curiously. "It's not that I particularly want to abandon my friends but if being a student of Hogwart's isn't safe for me and I'm supposedly expelled…"

"Err…" muttered Sirius.
"That's a no if I ever heard one coming from his mouth," said Regulus simply.

"That wasn't strictly a no, it was my knowledge on the subject of magical education in schools other than Hogwarts is pretty limited," said Sirius slowly. "It was also, I will allow you to explain that, Reg."

Regulus snorted and shook his head before he finally said, "The problem with other schools is their own finicky system of admittance. Arthur's Coven and Common Magic managed to wrestle out of Ministry of Magic permission to accept Muggle-born students from their areas if their families decide that they aren't able to finance their children's education at Hogwarts because Hogwarts gets its additional funding from entrance fees that are applied to Muggle-born students. It was grudgingly given due to pureblood prejudice because it removed quite a substantial number of Muggle-borns from the list of future Hogwarts graduates and the Ministry of Magic is aware of the lingering prejudices against the graduates of other schools."

"That's…" started Harry.

"Sick, I know," grumbled Regulus. "But unfortunately, true. You aren't a Muggle-born and as a Boy Who Lived, you're recognisable. We could try to weasel you into Arthur's Coven but it would require a constant regime of potions that would alter your appearance."

"What about Common Magic?" asked Harry.

"I would subject you to home-schooling rather than sending you to Common Magic," snorted Regulus. "Up until O.W.L.s levels the education in there doesn't wary from the ones at Hogwarts but as I said on advanced levels it simply sucks."

"What about Kells then?" asked Harry curiously. "Does it have educational restrictions you object to?"

"No," sighed Regulus.

"But?" Harry drawled out.

Regulus remained quiet and he reached for his glass of water.

"But you are on the official list of blacklisted students which Kells will never accept," said Sirius sourly.

"Why?" asked Harry, surprised by the statement.

"Because Kells Institute of Magic upon Ireland's independence blacklisted the descendants of every member of the Education Unionist movement up until I think seven or tenth generation," he clarified.

"Why and why I'm on it?" asked Harry incredulously.

"Because they could," mumbled Regulus. "Because they're the solitary school on Irish territory. Because they can afford to be picky about accepting students from beyond Irish borders."

"Because you're a fourth-generation descendant of a known and universally hated Education Unionist and one of the worst headmasters Hogwarts ever had," said Sirius grimly.

"And they do pay close attention to that," snorted Regulus. "They have a member of the faculty whose sole responsibility is following the gossip columns and keeping track of all the descendants
of every single education unionist. Trust me, you're on it. Your father might not pay attention to who gave birth to him but Kells Institute of Magic most certainly did."

"Well, there's always bribery and public humbling," supplied Sirius. "But that can't happen as long I'm a fugitive."

"What's next? Claiming that you're Irish?" asked Harry pointedly.

"Technically…" drawled out Sirius.

"Technically speaking Grandma Mel's mother was Irish and she was even a Kells' graduate but that's a singular great-grandmother amongst seven mostly English great-grandparents and on that subject yours and not Harry's," said Regulus pensively. "And I just remembered that he's double if not triple blacklisted as a descendant of both the Flints and the Bulstrodes as well."

"I am?" whispered Harry.

"Your father was a pureblood, all purebloods are more or less distantly related to one another," answered Regulus simply.

"To not look too far away you're related to your friend Ron through the Black family members," added Sirius. "You're third cousins, I think?" he added questioningly.

"Ronald, Arthur, Cedrella, Arcturus, Phineas Nigellus, Cygnus, Dorea, James, Harry," counted out Regulus on his fingers quickly. "Yes, third cousins," he confirmed. "On that side at the very least."

"There's more than one side?" mumbled Harry.

"Well, Molly's uncle Ignatius married our own Aunt Lucretia so there's that side but don't ask me to count how distantly related you're to her and that's only taking into account the relation through the Black family," explained Regulus. "I'm sure that if I was able to take a look at the Potter family tree, I would be able to find you a Prewett in there and not as far as you think," he added pensively.

"I would and not very far," supplied Sirius pensively. "Henry had a mother you know. Secundo voto Potter, primo voto Hopkins and that's the surname under which she was memorised on the Potter family tree but de domo she was a Prewett though beats me who she was in relation to Molly. Probably a grandaunt or great-grandaunt of some sorts."

"She never said," said Harry pensively.

"Why would she? She married a Weasley," said Regulus simply. "The Weasleys are mostly purebloods in their lineage but as purebloods go, they're considered blood traitors because they don't give a flying fuck about pureblood traditions amongst which is maintaining the records of their lineage. At least not since Septimus's great-grandfather burned down the family mansion to the very ground. And it's not that the Prewetts would instil in their daughters the idea of keeping track of very distant relatives," he snorted. "No, that was always men's job to do so," he muttered. "As far as I can tell that information might not be considered as important enough to pass it to her."

"Why not?" asked Harry curiously.

"Patriarchy," said Sirius simply. "I don't know who the current Head of the Prewett family is but I do know that it wasn't her father."

"Percival probably, the poncy git," snorted Regulus. "Unless he did the world the courtesy of dying before he procreated and it went up and sideways because he only had sisters," he mused. "But still
not high enough to reach Molly's father."

"Who as far as I can tell is dead," supplied Sirius pensively. "He was one of the younger ones, wasn't he?"

"How would I know?" shrugged Regulus.

"Well, you slept with 'Nature's Nobility' under your pillow for a certain period of time," said Sirius dryly.

"Because I was looking for the furthest related to the Black family viable future spouse and not because I wished to memorise that bloody book you git," scoffed Regulus. "My advice," he added as he turned to Harry, "if you ever wish to marry without getting a headache over whatever or not you and your future wife are related take a leaf out your father's book and go for a Muggle-born."

"Advice noted, consideration pending," snorted Harry. "And might be for a while but if I will ever wish to date anyone, I will run their names by you."

"So, you can get a headache," chuckled Sirius.

"Thanks a lot, you berk," snorted Regulus. "I'm surrounded by berks."

"Heard you the first time," quipped Sirius.

"Speaking about hearing. For all of your fiddling over there with that violin I'm distinctly not hearing you play, your monumental bell end," scoffed Regulus.

"Because I was taught manners by someone who believed that it's rude to play over other peoples' conversations, you undescented testicle," retorted Sirius. "Plus," he added, "in case it somehow escaped your notice I didn't play for thirteen years and I'm taking pity of your ears."

"Please don't, I can see your fingering from here and unless my eyesight had gone worse in last half of hour and I forgot how its fingering went over the years you're constantly playing 'For Elise' under silencing charm," muttered Regulus.

"He can play?" asked Harry curiously as he sat up and turned his head around to look at Sirius who was indeed fiddling with a violin.

"He has a hearing range of a bloody dog, always had," snorted Regulus. "Even before he knew that he could turn in one with proper training. He was also a very dutiful godson and accepted every gift his godfather bestowed on him with genuine joy and eagerness, amongst which was violin lessons with the man himself."

"And you were?" asked Harry.

"Tone deaf idiot that always made mistakes and had to start over," replied Regulus. "It took the majority of the joy out of playing. Along with a few cringe-worthy incidents with parts of Uncle Alphard's private life that I didn't wish to be made aware of at that age or any age for the matter."

"So, you cannot play," stated Harry.

"Yes and no," said Regulus simply. "I can read music just fine. I also remember which strings pressed in which places correspond with which notes but I hadn't played the violin since I was ten or eleven. Our mother believed that it wasn't a very masculine instrument to begin with."
"Our mother was tone deaf and could only play the piano and very badly on that," interjected Sirius.

"But the piano was an acceptable instrument I could spend hours at playing undisturbed so I did that," added Regulus.

"So, I could but the problem with the piano was that you couldn’t just pick it up and leave the room with it if you didn't want to be in the same room with her," quipped Sirius.

"Am I supposed to learn how to play an instrument?" asked Harry pensively.

"Only if you want to," answered Sirius. "Your dad could only play Mary Had a Little Lamb on a grand piano that was in the Potter Mansion and only by using his right hand, he never got around using both at the same time. Lily, on the other hand, knew how to play the flute but she wasn't very enthusiastic about it."

"Was that an innuendo?" asked Regulus pointedly.

"No, you cock," snorted Sirius. "It was a simple wooden flute, child-sized as far as I could tell. Some sort of family trinket or a Christmas or birthday gift from some relative, I'm not sure. What I know for certain is that one should avoid her at all cost when one heard her playing because it meant that she was pissed off."

Regulus snickered and Harry smiled at that.

"For some reason, your dad never got that and sought her out when she was playing because like that plonker over there," he gestured with the bow at Regulus, "he believed that playing the flute was a prelude to adult forms of entertainment…"

Harry actually laughed at that.

"And I had to be the one to explain him at some point that his girlfriend and then wife found flute playing a very intimate activity that she wished to do alone," continued Sirius. "Lily, of course, worded that message differently but I wasn't about to tell him that if he won't stop seeking her out when she was pissed off and usually at him when the flute playing happened then she might end up showing that flute down his throat or up his ass."

"Did it happen often?" asked Harry pensively.

"Well, they married young," sighed Sirius. "They also had similar hot-headed temperaments and they got along splendidly as long as they had the same or very similar opinions on certain subjects. But when they did fight it was usually better to not be in the same house with them or at the very least not in the same room. Lily's parents were dead and James's died early on into their marriage when they were going through honeymoon period when everything is great and nothing really bothers you. So, they really didn't have an experienced married couple that they could ask for advice on how to handle domestic disputes."

"Were they really bad?" asked Harry curiously. "Did they quarrel a lot?"

"They bantered a lot," said Sirius pensively. "But they did have a couple of very big fights. I think the biggest one was about Lily's desire to finish her second year of healer training when she was pregnant with you. It also dragged out never really settled down issue of her working at all which dragged out the dispute about the actual number of children they wished to have and how spaced out over the years they wanted them to be…"
"Correct me if I'm wrong," said Regulus quickly, "but isn't that something you try to settle before the actual wedding?"

"I would, you would, James didn't," snorted Sirius. "At the time he was simply over the moon that Lily agreed to marry him and actually did so. Then there was the actual planning of the ceremony but the subject itself never arose until they found out about the pregnancy. If it was sorely up to your dad and Vo... the Dark Lord never happened you would have between five to probably eleven younger siblings at the most spaced out every two years between each."

"And what Mum thought about that?" asked Harry curiously.

"Three to five at the maximum. For most of the time, it was four at the maximum if they would have a pair of each and five only if none or just one of them or earlier four would turn out to be a boy. She was willing to indulge your dad for the sake of extending the Potter family line but no further than past five kids," answered Sirius thoughtfully. "And with bigger spacing out between kids. She wasn't actively planning for number two until you would go to primary school. Of course, all of that was before the Dark Lord took interest in them and we're just discussing the theory."

"What about you?" asked Harry. "You said that's the stuff you would have settled before marriage."

"Well, considering that Mirzam and I started off with pregnancy and no marriage," sighed Sirius. "Four was the total number we agreed on if our financial situation would be good enough to support them although we would have settled for two in overall if it wasn't. Preferably boys since we both knew how to raise them; we didn't really discuss spacing because that would depend on our financial situation but four was the most optimistic scenario and two was a realistic one."

Regulus smiled softly at that.

"What about you?" asked Harry as he turned to him. "Did you have any plans on the subject?"

"Provided that I would miraculously survive the clusterfuck I got myself into?" asked Regulus pensively. "Well, I was hoping to be the mostly gay uncle who spoils his nephews and nieces rotten. I wouldn't terribly mind being a godfather of one or more of them and I would quite happily ship your dad to Tibet for the sake of beating him to that honour. I would also resort to bribing Lupin to convince him," he waved at Sirius, "that he will accept the request for being a godfather of the next one."

"Well, you would be having their mother in your corner so odds are that you would have won that honour," said Sirius slowly.

"Sorry?" mumbled Regulus.

"Don't be," sighed Sirius. "And since we're talking about it. Mostly gay uncle?" he asked pointedly.

"Well," drawled out Regulus. "I'm attracted to both sexes but predominantly men. Mostly because sexual encounters with them were to me less problematic than with women. Maybe it's just my luck but the majority of females I found myself sleeping with couldn't understand the concept of no strings attached mutually beneficial sexual relationship. Not that I slept around a lot on the whole."

"But," drawled out Harry.

"But my university years..." grimaced Regulus. "Sex is a form of stress relief and higher education can be stressful, especially to someone who tries to get used to being a Muggle after spending the
majority of their life as a wizard. So, at that point of time, I slept around a lot with anyone that said yes and agreed to use protection. I got myself burnt slightly in several encounters with women who equated the readiness to have sex to the readiness of having a fully functioning relationship which I didn't. So, after the last one, I just turned to men exclusively."

"Did you consider that you were going after the wrong kind of women?" asked Sirius pointedly.

"I was going after the ones I was sure that they would say yes to the question: do you want to have sex," shrugged Regulus.

"Hence your problem," snorted Sirius. "Desperation is not a good look on anyone."

"Speaking from experience?" quipped Regulus.

"Yes, I'm sharing with you my wisdom as the self-taught master of pinning," deadpanned Sirius.

"How about we shelve that wisdom and this particular subject to the unspecified point in time in hopefully a near future when the Dark Lord would kick the proverbial bucket?" asked Regulus pointedly.

"We can," agreed Sirius. "At least I know who can Harry use as a wingman if he would decide that he's into guys," he added cheekily.

"You were into a guy too," pointed out Harry.

"A straight as an arrow one," replied Sirius. "His," he pointed with the bow at Regulus, "sexual endeavours into that territory seem to be far more successful. I will stick to helping you pick girls because Reg definitely sucks at that," he added dryly.

"You didn't take it as a confirmation of anything, did you?" asked Harry sceptically. "Because I really have no interest in any at the moment."

"What you're interested in at the moment?" chuckled Regulus.

"Hearing him play for example," said Harry as he pointed at Sirius. "He spent the majority of the time while you were gone at regaling me with tales about culture and his sophisticated fondness for classical music."

"It's not that sophisticated," objected Sirius. "And don't you have a book to read?" he asked pointedly.

"Now I definitely want to hear you play," quipped Harry. "You're awfully defensive about playing to actually play well," he added cheekily.

"Word of advice, do not, ever, issue a challenge to a Marauder if you're planning to embarrass him. It doesn't work," said Regulus quickly.

"Especially by asking him to do something which he definitely can do," added Sirius.

"Oh, let me be the judge of that," said Harry with a smirk. "Maestro, please," he added to Sirius.

"Piss off, Potter," quipped Sirius.

"Then get on with it, Black," said Harry dryly.

"I think I'm having a flashback," muttered Regulus. "And not a very good one."
"Only because last time you heard that particular exchange you've been blue-skinned for three
days," chuckled Sirius.

"And let's not forget having boils in very uncomfortable places for an entire week," added Regulus.

"Because you were the Black involved in that conversation?" asked Harry curiously.

"Unfortunately, yes," nodded Regulus. "Now stop evading and start playing," he added as he pointed at Sirius.

Sirius smirked before he stuck the violin under his chin and ran the bow over the strings swiftly without them making a sound. Then he straightened himself in his chair and plucked one of the strings which this time made a sound before the familiar sounds (even to Harry who heard it enough times at school to recognise it) of 'For Elise' filled the air.

Harry didn't have an excellent ear for music. He wasn't a particularly good player by any chance either. At least he wasn't one when music teacher in primary school tried to teach their class how to play the flute. But he did get used to hearing 'For Elise' quite a lot when back at the age four or five Dudley was going through a phase of wanting to sleep in his parents' bedroom. And while there were a lot of things which Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon let Dudley get away with it was one of those things that weren't even remotely negotiable.

Because they wanted to have sex in peace, he mused and immediately cringed. Theoretical information that there probably was something going behind the closed door of your guardian's bedroom was to a certain degree enlightening but also to a certain degree unsettling.

Naturally, he realised that during the biology lessons on procreation, unlike Dudley over whose head this sort of realisation soared without touching him at all, that if adults had sex for the purpose of procreation or merely for fun it also meant that his Aunt and Uncle occasionally had to have it. It didn't make him lose his lunch back then, only barely but since then he resolved to empathically not think about the older Dursleys and mechanism of sex in close quarters. Not that he spent a lot of time thinking on sex since then. He took at face value the information that at some point in a relatively near future he or his peers would feel the urge to touch themselves in a sexual manner and that it was a healthy thing to do and nothing to be ashamed of and decided to shelve that thought until the point at which he would actually want to do that. Which he didn't.

Nevertheless, previous experience with 'For Elise', regardless of how he acquired them had made him capable of telling that Sirius was playing it very well, without glaring mistakes or hesitation. His movements were fluid and sure and he was even smiling to himself as he played. He played it twice before he switched to the melody which Harry recognised as 'Greensleeves' which was followed by another gentle melody which Harry didn't recognise exactly but for some reason found himself remotely familiar with.

Regulus, on the other hand, appeared to recognise it, and the one that followed it too because Harry saw him mouth the words that probably went with them when he looked at him. He was also looking at Sirius with a soft and fond expression on his face as he did so.

This was something intimate and not something Sirius did just for anyone, realised Harry. It made him wonder whatever or not Sirius ever played for his parents or even his dad alone.

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Probably not, he mused. The more he learned about him from people who actually knew him well and not just taught him or weren't close friends with him the more he realised that his dad was a bit of an oblivious idiot and kind of an arsehole. Not that it probably made him a bad person. If he truly was a bad person Hagrid wouldn't like him. But he wasn't a saint as Harry believed him to be.
Just like Snape had claimed.

Snape and revelations concerning the man was another thing that lodged itself in the back of Harry's mind. With everything that was going on and had been discussed through the last twenty-four hours they were just a blip in the entire picture but a blip visible enough to remain annoyingly present even though Harry tried to focus on whatever was discussed at the time and mostly not think about it.

It was mind-boggling, the idea that Snape of all people was a good friend of Harry's mum at some point and that even though they weren't friends anymore once they become adults Snape still remained loyal to his mother's memory to keep trying to protect Harry from harm even though he actively hated Harry's guts. And to give Snape some justice, not a lot of it on that, Harry himself didn't know how he would have behaved if say he was forced to teach and look after Draco Malfoy's progeny if by some weird twist of fate Malfoy would convince Hermione to marry him and their child would have wound up with Malfoy's face.

Granted, understandable burning hatred towards his father wasn't absolving Snape from his atrocious behaviour towards Harry himself while he had done nothing to deserve it other than by existing. But at least the newfound perspective allowed Harry to understand the bastard a little better. Snape had a good reason to hate James Potter, period. He also had a very good reason to hate Sirius and probably accounting Snape's proximity to Dumbledore and his machinations he had a far longer list of reasons to hate Sirius for than he had for James.

Snape was also smart and educated enough to not care about the sake of propriety that was not using dark magic to find Harry and unless Sirius and Regulus wouldn't come up with some sort of a plan he would be able to succeed in locating Harry whenever Harry would be outside of the range of the protective wards of the Black Manor.

Who knew, maybe in a different life if Voldemort didn't happen or in a parallel universe where Snape didn't botch up his friendship with Harry's mother maybe the man would have wound up as Harry's godfather.

That thought actually almost made him burst out with laughter but he managed to contain his mirth for the sake of listening to Sirius play. It was a nice accompaniment to Harry's thoughts and for some reason, he found it soothing.

He could almost imagine that. The arguments on the subject of godfathers in that particular universe that his parents would have had and standoffs that would probably inevitably end up in a compromise to actually appoint both as Harry's godfathers. As well as never-ending and loud arguments between the two which one of them was de facto the godfather and which one served as a godmother.

It would have been a nice universe, he mused. He would most certainly have younger siblings in it. And childhood friends from the earliest age because he couldn't picture Harry Black not being alive in it. He could also picture Quidditch matches like Sirius described them, that they would have looked like if his Mum and Mirzam were alive.

There would be no Dursleys in that world, no Voldemort. Dumbledore would be just a whacky headmaster and not a puppet master or he wouldn't be present at all.

Then he realised that he would have been different too. He would have been always surrounded by the love of his parents or his probable siblings. He would grow up under watchful eyes of people who would share their wisdom with him. He might even get to be a little bit spoiled but not too much because Mum and probably Mirzam would see that the enthusiasm of his dad and godfathers
trying to outdo each other would be tempered. He would be more confident in himself and in his abilities and he wouldn't have to constantly worry about doing something that would cost him friends who wouldn't be able to accept him as he was.

It was a nice place, that world and quite a big part of him longed to be a part of it.

He didn't realise that he was lying down and had his eyes closed until he felt a blanket covering and tucking him up gently but he was already so drowsy and the violin music was so soothing that all he managed was to yawn before he fell asleep.

Secrets & Keepers – Keep Us

Sirius Black, 12 Grimmauld Place, London, 7th August, night.

"Is he sleeping?" asked Sirius softly once he finished playing Brahms's lullaby.

A few minutes earlier when he just started playing it Regulus covered Harry with a blanket he silently summoned from upstairs before he quietly returned to his own sofa and leaned against the back of it.

"Like a baby," whispered Regulus. "Merlin only knows that he needs it too."

"I noticed," admitted Sirius before he put the violin down.

He didn't return it to its original state which was some eyesore wooden fruit-bowl which was once a gift from Aunt Druella to his mother. No, it was best to keep it that way. As a violin, it would require constant tuning but it looked far better. And would probably end up being used more often.

"They turned him into a bloody house-elf," muttered Regulus. "They started feeding him better since he started Hogwarts and Petunia got worried about him talking about his life at home but it's still not as much as he should be getting," he added. "He has good genes. Potter didn't tower over you but neither he was a midget."

"They were the Black family genes," muttered Sirius. "Fleamont and Euphemia were both of average height and Lily was on a tall end of it," he added. "But it's not his height that worries me, Reg. There isn't a lot that we can do to affect that," he admitted.

"What worries you in particular?" asked Regulus pensively.

"Twelve years of the Dursley upbringing on the whole and how it affected his character," sighed Sirius. "Like you said he has a non-existent confidence in himself and his abilities. The friendship that he made with young Ronald Weasley and fear of losing it affects his overall grades, not drastically but it doesn't exactly help him achieve grades he would be able to achieve if he wasn't worried that Weasley would ditch him."

"Sounds kind of familiar," muttered Regulus.

"Piss off," snorted Sirius softly. "Because I'm guilty of the very same thing means that I'm capable of recognising the cause and the effect. The difference between me and Harry is the fact that I already knew the majority of the stuff I was deliberately getting wrong. He doesn't have that knowledge. From where he would get it?" he added sourly.

"Well, unless the return to Hogwarts is an option, we won't have to worry about Weasley's influence on him," mused Regulus.
"Speaking of which, is it?" asked Sirius.

"I don't know," shrugged Regulus.

"You were out," Sirius pointed out.

"In Muggle London," grimaced Regulus. "We will know more tomorrow."

"You're planning to go out again?" asked Sirius.

"No, I'm planning to stay in and wait for a guest you might be moderately happy to see," said Regulus and he sighed heavily.

"Moony?" asked Sirius cautiously.

"Saw him too," hummed Regulus. "Speaking about the werewolf. Did you teach him how to track people?" he asked pointedly.

"Yes," nodded Sirius. "If not Moony then whom?"

"Bathsheda," muttered Regulus. "Caught me coming out from here, followed me around all day and created a diversion for me to get away from without my tail. Aside from that, she was maddeningly unhelpful and quite tight-lipped."

"And you couldn't open with that when you returned?" asked Sirius incredulously.

"I was still assessing the risk when I returned," Regulus grimaced sourly. "What I know for certain is that she's willing to talk and outright murder isn't on the table. If it was, we wouldn't be talking. What I know is that she has something on Dumbledore and what I suspect is that she knows more about what's going on outside."

"Then what you're worried about?" asked Sirius sceptically.

"Her ability to shake a tail for example," said Regulus. "Lupin found me at home, in Little Whinging. I'm not sure whatever or not he was there on his or Dumbledore's behalf and I have no idea how he got there. For all that I know he was questioning the entire neighbourhood or he tracked me to that house in particular because I'm not sure how his lycanthropy affects his tracking abilities. Could it be a stroke of luck on his part or was it an effect of a good and thorough detective work…"

Sirius mentally cursed but quickly shook his head. He took a deep breath and tried his best to summon everything he knew about werewolves which he learned from an actual werewolf.

"You have to understand that lycanthropy is a disease and not a superpower," he said grimly. "That said there are certain perks or drawbacks depending from the point of view that affect werewolves on regular basis," he added and paused before he continued. "The most important thing which you have to remember is that a werewolf as a being is at its most human on the new moon because that's when the pull of the moon is the weakest. That's when individuals like Fenrir Greyback and his chums are the easiest to kill because they're at their physically weakest."

"The most human," nodded Regulus. "What about Lupin?"

"Moony as an individual from the standpoint of the ancient werewolf traditions which likes of Greyback follow is to werewolves the equivalent of what a vegetarian is to meat-eaters. Because, at least to my knowledge, he never tasted human blood he doesn't get physical benefits which likes of
Greyback do. I'm not sure how it looks on a biological level but, in some way, the more human blood they consume the physically stronger they become. Not inhumanly strong but strong enough to make beating one in a physical fight a challenge which not many individuals survive," explained Sirius. "Individuals like Moony who avoid living in traditional and constantly migrating packs just as much as they avoid giving in to the bloodlust, however, get these perks or disadvantages like the others do. Some can very accurately predict the movements of the moon better than astronomers. Some got keener hearing, some don't. Some got an enchanted sense of smell, some don't."

"And Lupin in particular?" pressed Regulus. "What I was against?"

"In the past a very keen hearing that made him an excellent look out guy once he learned how to fixate it on specific sounds. That also made him quite a good lip-reader. Quite lousy sense of smell due to oversensitivity which was partly responsible for his poor potion making. He never managed to get around that while we were at school anyway," said Sirius.

"But would he be able to pick a scent and follow it?" asked Regulus insistently.

"Depends on the phase of the moon," sighed Sirius. "The full moon was when exactly?" he mumbled more to himself than to Regulus. "It was either on the 2nd or the 3rd. Probably on the 2nd which means that we're closer to the third quarter than we're to the full moon which means…" he stopped abruptly.

"Which means?" asked Regulus quickly.

"That depending on the level of determination on his part to pick up and follow the scent he would be able to track you regardless of whatever face you would be wearing," said Sirius grimly. "In your favour might work public and crowded places but if he truly fixated himself on your scent…"

"He would be able to follow me right to the front door," groaned Regulus.

"On the bright side it's something he's capable of doing between the first and the third quarter and as we're quite close to the third quarter so he might have been easily distracted," said Sirius pensively.

"I wouldn't count on it," grimaced Regulus. "That's not how my luck works."

"How does your luck work?" hummed Sirius.

"In so far it doesn't," shrugged Regulus. "The only lucky thing that happened to me in so far was running into you and I might have used all of the odds that were working in my favour on that," he snorted. "Let's not forget that if he was able to track me back to the house and that it wasn't just a stroke of luck on his part then at some point, he managed to find the place where all of our scents," he waved his hand in circling motion, "had met. If he found that then he knows that for a brief period of time we were together and that we might be working together."

"Which we are," nodded Sirius slowly. "What works in your favour is the fact that the two of you didn't come in contact since we left school. Unless you're about to inform me that you had," he added pointedly.

Regulus shook his head.

"If he's completely convinced that I'm a Death Eater and working for the Dark Lord and I have an accomplice that helped me to kidnap Harry then he would be looking for one amongst the Death Eaters that are still alive," he continued. "So, if you managed to get yourself into a place with a heavy foot-traffic and he managed to lose you we're safe."
"However, if he didn't and he's still as persistent fucker as I remember him to be, we're in very deep shit," snorted Regulus. "If he's capable of following my scent right to the front door and he's determined to keep looking for it until he will find it, we're literally minutes, at best, a few hours away from being captured."

"If he isn't working alone," mused Sirius.

"What are the odds?" huffed Regulus.

"Depends from what kind of an order Dumbledore issued him with and how willing he's to follow it," replied Sirius with a grimace. "If Dumbledore asked him to aid the Aurors in the investigation then we're screwed. But if he didn't," he paused and pondered the idea, "if he told Moony to sit and to not get involved and Harry still went missing on his watch..." he paused again and he smirked. "Make no mistake, Moony used to adore Harry. He knew that he wasn't going to have children on his own and that any children any of us would have would be the closest he would have to his own. He was a quite willing and eager babysitter in the past."

"So, if his feelings towards Harry didn't change with passing time and Dumbledore's hold on Lupin is as strong as Dumbledore is capable to ensure Lupin that Harry is safe and sound..." added Regulus pensively.

"Which he isn't, at least from their point of view," nodded Sirius. "Was he alone?" he added thoughtfully.

"For most of the time," grimaced Regulus. "Or maybe it was my paranoia, I'm not sure, not anymore," he grimaced again. "He was under Disillusionment Charm for all the way to London. I forced him to reveal himself by getting on the tube. There was a young woman," he paused, "her appearance bothered me for some reason. Not that she was ugly or anything," he grimaced once more. "It's just her hair. I could swear that when I first glanced in her general direction, they were turquoise but next time when I looked at her, they were dark blue."

"It's probably paranoia," said Sirius slowly. "No one better than me knows what hypervigilance can do to you," he offered with a small smile. "How about instead on some woman with weird hair we will concentrate on what we're going to do if Moony turns up on our doorstep with the company?" he asked pointedly.

"My first instinct would be getting as far away from here as humanly possible," snorted Regulus. "Preferably with the present company but I have no idea where we can run to."

"I do," admitted Sirius. "Go pack your wonder bag with everything you want to bring with us and shrink it if you can. Then come back here and I will explain to you what I'm planning."

He could explain it now and he knew that. It would calm Regulus down considerably if he had but at the moment Regulus's mental comfort wasn't as high on the list of his priorities as was figuring out the identity of the mysterious woman that followed Moony and consequently Regulus. But to do that he needed either to silence Regulus or remove him from the room for long enough to think.

"Is it some sort of retribution for not telling you about Mirzam?" asked Regulus sceptically as he stood up.

"No," answered Sirius simply. "It's a simple let me think in peace while you will do something potentially useful for us if we will have to leave this place," he added quickly.

It was true but for a different reason but Regulus didn't need to know that, yet.
Regulus shook his head and walked out of the room and only when Sirius heard his footsteps on the stairs, he muttered to himself, "Who are you?"

The simplest, most obvious answer was that paranoia got the better of Regulus and he freaked himself out by some trick of the light. Regulus was paranoid, there were no questions about it. He had good reasons to be paranoid, just from his experience with Voldemort alone. On top of that, he kept playing games against Dumbledore of all people and he managed to remain just far enough ahead to not get himself caught. That much was certain.

But Regulus wasn't prone to colourising. He explained things as they were, didn't sugar coat anything. Also, rather than outright lying about them, he omitted subjects he didn't wish to discuss or didn't consider himself ready to discuss.

That meant that whatever he saw on the mysterious woman was true which meant that the change between the colours had to be true. And Sirius knew what sudden change of hair colour meant.

For Mirzam it was her wonder wig which she designed herself and used as often as she used spells and potions to change the length or structure or colour of her hair. She preferred to use it when and where she didn't have time or enough privacy to change her appearance via potions. She added into it a neat enchantment that was bound to her own blood which meant that the only person who could use it aside of her was Bathsheda (who eventually took it once after an incident that involved little Sheba and scissors and since then she kept it as a souvenir).

Most of the other Aurors Sirius knew, like Mirzam for most of the time, relayed on changing their appearance during tracking by using spells and potions. Then there was changing one's appearance via changing clothes, something Sirius himself excelled at. Unlike the majority of his male peers in the training, he had no trouble with disguising himself as a woman, a very flat woman but well enough to fool the entire class that was supposed to find him when it was his turn to be located during the exam. Well, the entire class with the exception of Mirzam who saw him when he was learning to put the makeup on but she had an unfair advantage over them so she didn't exactly count.

Unless Auror Office had undergone a major change and received a major founding in the past eleven years odds were that they still relayed on the same sort of mechanism they relayed when he was an Auror: if you want the best disguise you have to make it yourself and not wait for anyone else to make it for you. No, as necessary as it occasionally was the Research and Development Department for Auror Office wasn't something Ministry of Magic was willing to splurge on. Not back then and probably not now.

It could have been a wig but Regulus would have recognised an average wig and Sirius knew from watching Mirzam that a good wig required a lot of dedication and constant alteration. Not many people were willing to do so much work or had time to do so. And Regulus didn't mention the change of the length or structure of the woman's hair, just the colour.

That meant another obvious answer: a Metamorphmagus. And not just any Metamorphmagus. A female Metamorphmagus that was younger than Regulus or at least appeared to be younger than Regulus.

But there was no Metamorphmagi in Auror Office at the time when he was an Auror. There used to be a trainer who was one but at the time he was pushing steadily toward his one hundred and first birthday and he felt his age keenly even when he was wearing the skin of a twenty years old. He was a great instructor but the days of active work were long behind him.

"I'm going to be an Auror when I will grow up, like you," he could almost hear a solemn
proclamation, slightly whistled, made by the bright face with a big grin that was missing two upper front teeth.

Nymphadora.

It might not be Nymphadora.

It had to be Nymphadora. He didn't pay too close attention to Andromeda's complaints about the downsides of raising a Metamorphmagus and the lack of literature on the subject. He did however paid attention when she mentioned that Ministry of Magic's form of help to parents of Metamorphmagi was allowing them to take a look at Metamorphmagi register so they could locate fellow Metamorphmagi or their relatives and question them themselves. Another thing which they provided as a form of supposed help - more like a way to protect the Statue of Secrecy – was a magic binding bracelet that Dora was supposed to wear almost at all times when she was around Muggles.

From Andromeda who saw the list he knew that on the territory of the United Kingdom, to a certain point also including Ireland, there were about twenty Metamorphmagi born in the twentieth century. Some of them emigrated, quite a big number of them died in wars and those who hadn't gone off the grid. A few of them were born after the wars, actually six of them including Dora. Two of them died before they reached Hogwarts age, one in childbirth and the other in some vehicular accident. As for the other three… Well, one aside of being able to change her own appearance was a complete squib and ended up working on carnivals. Remaining two were boys and they both managed to get to and finish Hogwarts but one of them upon finishing school decided to become a priest and the other became a magical zoologist and harried off to Australia.

So, the mysterious woman whom Regulus saw if she was a Metamorphmagus and not a very dedicated female Auror had to be Nymphadora. She, of course, could have been an Auror trainee. Her surname was Tonks and while Ted's genes mellowed some of the Black family traits Dora was a Black through and through. She had the Black family stubbornness and persistence that much was certain from the very beginning. Like any Black, she was also prone to defiance, something around which Andromeda as a Black got easily. So, if Dora decided to become an Auror and hadn't changed her mind about it in the meantime odds were that the woman which Regulus saw was her.

But why she was tailing Moony? Was she tailing Moony or was she tailing Reg? How Bathsheda fit into it all?

Why did she want to become an Auror in the first place? She used to hero-worship him when she was little but even back then he knew that the upcoming years would rub off her enthusiasm towards the profession. He knew that Andromeda and Ted fervently wished for it because one daredevil in the family was enough. But then what?

Then her beloved and adored adopted older brother in the eyes of the public turned into the worst kind of a traitor and a mass murderer. That had to hit hard and especially at that age. But it didn't make sense. His apparent betrayal had to be a traumatic experience for Dora, there were no questions about it.

"And how people react to traumas?" he could practically hear Mirzam's voice whisper in his ear. "What did you do? What do you think she's doing?"

"She wants to settle a score," he whispered. "With the memory of me or myself whichever comes first."

"Atta boy," she chirped just as he heard Regulus coming down the stairs, no, he wasn't coming
down the stairs he was coming up the stairs.

"So?" Regulus asked briskly. "What's the plan?

"Derbyshire," answered Sirius simply.

"You're planning to risk that?" asked Regulus sceptically.

"We're risking getting caught if we won't find an alternative," Sirius pointed out. "It's an obvious alternative but that alternative has far better wards and unlike this place, it's under the Black family Fidelius Charm and that Fidelius doesn't extend to buildings only," he added. "The entire land around the mansion is under it. It stretches just wide enough that they would have to mobilise the entire Auror Office and Hit-Wizards to maintain some semblance of a perimeter and they would have to maintain it for days on end. Provided that they would be able to narrow down the location enough and you know that there are wards for that."

"Are we moving now?" asked Regulus as he looked at Harry.

"That's what I'm thinking about," sighed Sirius. "On one hand I do want to talk to Bathsheda and on the other, I'm uncertain about whatever or not Moony is working alone. She knows where to find us, he might not."

"So, what now?" sighed Regulus as he approached him.

"Portkeys," said Sirius simply. "Give me the medallion," he added quickly. "I will be aiming for Grandpa Arcturus's official study, the one in the main building by the terrace. It has the easiest access to the centre of wards. The Portkey will be thought activated but you will have to grab it tightly."

Regulus obeyed and handed him the medallion.

Once Sirius was done with the medallion and gave it back to Regulus, he pulled from underneath his shirt the chain with his and Mirzam's Auror dog-tags and turned his into another Portkey.

"Alternative if we will get separated," he added after he dropped the chain. "Which we won't and hopefully if the push comes to shove, we will only need one of them. The most important thing is that Harry has to be within hands reach at all times. If not mine then yours. If it will come down to that we will follow him to the bathroom or we will both camp outside it until he gets out."

"What about now?" asked Regulus.

"Now we wait," sighed Sirius.

"How about we split?" offered Regulus.

"Sure," agreed Sirius. "Go ahead first."

"You sure?" asked Regulus.

"Yeah, I'm sure," Sirius smiled at him.

"Fine with me," shrugged Regulus. "Just so you know, I will wake up in three hours."

"Sure," agreed Sirius.

"And don't you dare to place sleeping spells on me," warned him Regulus. "I will know."
"Why would I do that?" asked Sirius simply as he stood up from his chair and approached the window.

Nothing was going on outside. Yet. But that could change at any minute. He patiently waited through Regulus shuffling the furniture around so he could sleep with Harry within hands reach before he turned around to quickly look at them before he turned back towards the window.

He was tempted to put a sleeping spell on Reg. Not out of spite but pure certainty that he wouldn't be able to sleep for a single wink tonight. Nah, he would rather take the hissed battle of wills three hours from now rather than the outright fight over it if Regulus woke up from a sleeping spell.

"Come on Moony," he muttered to himself. "What you're up to?"

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Nymphadora Tonks with guest appearances of a variety of characters with one Remus Lupin in the background (and to give him justice he gets a chapter of his own right after her because having her chapter before his made more sense plot-wise than the other way around). Their version of the day might stretch between two to three chapters at the maximum (I'm leaning towards two but that would depend on how long Lupin's chapter is going to be).

Also. I'm very curious about what you think about this one here.
Chapter 09 - Tales of the Tail

Chapter Summary

Nymphadora Tonks, enough said. With one Remus Lupin in the background and a guest appearance.

Chapter Notes

This one is very brief but I wanted to catch up with Tonks, figure out where she is when this story starts. I had a vague idea but I wanted to give it some shape. The thing that fascinated me the most was her relationship with Sirius, who was Sirius to her before everything. But don't worry Moony is next and his chapter is longer (also I greatly enjoy the banter between the two of them).

Not beta read due to some communication issues with my beta. Treated with Grammarly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"The opposite of love isn't hate. It's indifference. And if you hate me, that means you still care, and we're still connected... and I still have a chance to set you right."

~Bruce Zimmerman

Secrets & Keepers – Keep Us

Chapter nine: Tales of the Tail.

*Nymphadora Tonks, The Lonely Farm between Robin Hood's Bay and Ravenscar, 7th August, early morning.

One of the things which little Nymphadora Sadachbia Tonks hated the most, aside of both of her names which seriously sucked, was a small yellow bracelet which she was forced to wear whenever her Muggle cousins were visiting. For some reason it was okay for her parents and her to live with her Muggle grandparents, Rebecca and Aaron, it was okay for them to witness her parents' and hers magic, as well as her transformations but the very moment one of her aunts or uncles or cousins showed up at her grandparents' door the bracelet came out. Charmed to only be removed by an adult (Dora tried to remove it by herself many times, tried to get her cousins to remove it too but it didn't work) the bracelet was designed to bind child's magic, including Metamorphmagi transformation.

If her relatives' visits were few or far enough between each other she could bear them, with some minimal grumbling but as close as the Tonks family had been hardly a day went by when one of her relatives didn't show up at the door. Their knocking on the door or ringing the doorbell was always followed by her mother's call, "Nymphadora!"
Even at the age of four, Dora knew what it was. It was a bloody shackle and she hated it as much as she began to hate her extended family. She didn't have anything against them personally, they were great and funny people, well, most of them were. If only they visited less.

December was the worst. In earlier months there was occasionally a day, even two when one of her relatives wasn't visiting. But the moment December started at least one of her relatives was in, mostly her aunts, helping mum and grandma prepare for Hanukkah. Then Hanukkah came and went when there were at least three additional people around from very early morning until very late at night. Once Hanukkah had ended however one would expect that the others would go away, at least for a few days. But no, days went by and they were still there, if not aunts, uncles and cousins, then at the very least cousins. Then Christmas rolled around and the whole thing started again. It made very little sense to Dora. Why a Jewish family celebrated a Christian holiday?

To include the customs of not Jewish family members, said Grandma Becca. It's another excuse to get together, said Grandpa Aaron with a fond smile. Of course, like with Hanukkah, there were presents, some great ones, some lousy ones and every kid got one. And even though Dora received presents for both, the greatest present she really wanted to get, and would happily trade all of her presents for that one thing, was the freedom of being herself. Pink-haired, violet-eyed, dark-skinned or blue-haired, orange-eyed, olive-skinned. She promised herself that the very moment the last of her extended relatives would leave the house and the bracelet would come off she would spend at least the rest of the day sporting rainbow coloured hair, a pair of different coloured eyes and blue skin.

She would also try to lose that bracelet again.

It was a Boxing Day because the Christmas presents were exchanged yesterday and the family had gathered again in the dining-room, eating what wasn't eaten on Christmas Day, laughing and arguing. Dora had all of it up to her ears. Come to think about it, having elf's ears for a while would be nice. She ate what she could and excused herself, told the others that she was tired and that she wanted to lie down. But while she pretended to remove herself to her room, she didn't make it there.

She sat at the top of the stairs from where she had a view at a part of the dinning-room and she wished, with all her heart for all of her relatives to just go away and not return for few days.

Instead of shuffling of the chairs and beginning of goodbyes she heard the doorbell ring just as massive laughter erupted from the dinning-room and she groaned silently. Great, Uncle Zechariah finally decided to come by.

Maybe she could turn him away. It didn't seem that the others had heard him. But she had to be fast and quiet. Another massive laughter erupted from the dinning-room and using the opportunity to not be quiet Dora practically flew down the stairs and got to the door.

She turned on the handle. She had to stand on her toes to do it but she managed it and with what she believed was a frown and a 'no soliciting' on the tip of her tongue she opened the door.

The man on the doorstep, with one hand hovering near the doorbell, was not uncle Zechariah. He was tall, so tall that she had to look up very high to see his face; and lean, unlike uncle Zechariah. He was wearing a pair of blue jeans and a black leather jacket. On the top of his head was a Santa's hat and its pompon was swinging by his left ear.

"Hello there," he said with a smile and a glint in his grey eyes. "Is it Tonks residence?" he asked

"No soliciting," she replied stiffly.
"Good," he smiled again. "Because I'm not soliciting. You see, I need to have a word with a cousin of mine, Andromeda is her name," he added.

"That's my mum," she mumbled nervously.

"So..." he started before he crouched in front of her, "you must be Nymphadora Sadachbia Tonks," her names rolled from his tongue perfectly, the same way her mother always said it and not unlike her aunts or uncles, who just couldn't spell it without stuttering on Sadachbia.

"Dora," she replied.

"Hey, Dora," he smiled again. "My name is Sirius and..." he was cut off by footsteps coming from behind her.

"Sirius!" she heard her Mum gasp. "What you're doing here?" she asked quickly. "Did something happen?"

"No," he replied as he stood up. "I..." he paused. "Am I interrupting?" he asked nervously.

"Of course not," it was Dad who replied. "Come in, Sirius."

"I would rather like if you came out if that won't be a problem?" he said sheepishly. "I want to show you guys something."

"Ours?" asked Dad cautiously.

"Definitely," nodded Sirius.

"Nymphadora..." started Mum but Dora cut her off.

"I'm going," she said swiftly as she made a beeline for her shoes.

"Can she come with us?" asked Dad. "She's been cooped up..."

"Of course," smiled Sirius without letting him finish. "I was a kid not so long ago, I know how boring family gatherings can get at a certain age."

"You were always bored," said Mum in that, don't do that, tone as she reached for her jacket.

"Because they were boring," shrugged Sirius.

Dad headed back to the dinning-room to make excuses for them which made the others follow him back into the hall, curious about the newcomer.

Sirius, of course, was introduced all around and invited to join them, but he apologised with a sheepish smile and said that he needed to talk with his cousin and her husband alone. That caused Grandma to shoo the entire bunch back into the dining-room. She followed them after giving Dora's shoes and jacket a lingering look.

"Don't forget your cap, Dora," she said just as Dora put it on her head. "It was nice to meet you, Sirius."

"Nice to meet you too, Rebecca, everyone," he called out after them.

Once they stepped outside of the house Dora grabbed his arm and said cautiously, "Piggy-back?"
"Sure," smiled Sirius before he picked her up as if she was light as a feather.

"Don't try to spoil her," said Mum fondly once they started to follow him. "She grew up a lot during last year and she's been getting heavier."

"Aren't you special?" asked Sirius cheekily.

"We are, but my relatives aren't," chuckled Dad. "With some Feather Light I could carry her on my shoulders until she outgrows me but my Mum and Dad can't do that and she spends a lot of time around them so we are trying to wean her off."

"And make me walk everywhere by myself," said Dora quickly.

"You have a pair of excellently working legs, young lady," sighed Mum.

"I know," muttered Dora.

"So what you wanted to show us?" asked Mum curiously.

"A thing," said Sirius simply.

"A thing?" asked Mum. "Why don't we talk about a thing?" she pressed.

"We will talk about a thing when we get there," answered Sirius. "It's not very far from here. Like three blocks away."

"You didn't buy a Hippogriff, did you?" asked Mum.

"No," chuckled Sirius.

"A werewolf then?" asked Dad.

"Err..." mumbled Sirius. "No to that too."

"A carnival?" pressed Mum.

"No."

"Ice-cream truck?" asked Dad.

"It's the middle of winter, Edward," protested Sirius.

"It's Ted," said Dad.

"You saw a Santa Claus then?" continued Mum.

"No," said Dad. "He has been writing to me about motorcycles."

"Please tell me that you didn't get one," groaned Mum.

"Not yet," chirped Sirius. "But I know which one I will get when I'll be looking for one, that much I'm sure."

"Please, don't you ever take my daughter on one," said Mum.

They continued to bicker all the way through the entire three blocks. It was funny, Mum occasionally got a funny look on her face but Dad looked happy. And lately, there weren't a lot of
things Dad had been very happy about.

Finally, they stopped in front of a town-house. It was smaller than the one they lived in and looked far scarier. The windows were boarded, the front door had a split in the middle of it. The glass in one of the upstairs windows was missing.

"Is it a haunted house?" asked Dora curiously. "What's in there?"

"A thing," said Sirius as he opened the door and then stepped inside.

"Please, Sirius, tell me..." started Mum but Sirius was already striding through the dark hall, pulling Dora down from his shoulders and twirling her around before he finally put her down right in the kitchen.

The kitchen, unlike the hall, was awash in the glowing lights of several candles that were standing on the top of lower cabinets as well as the table in the corner. But the candles weren't what caught Dora's attention.

By the far end of the kitchen, leaning against the counter was a tall, lean woman. She was wearing a long dark blue dress without sleeves but she had a heavy looking grey shawl wrapped around her shoulders. She was also wearing long, dark blue gloves and pearls, lots of pearls. Her curly, blonde hair was pinned up high, with few strands falling around her face. She was just as pale as Sirius was and when she looked closely, Dora realised that her eyes were just as pale as Sirius's.

Sirius immediately strode towards the woman and whispered something to her before he turned around and leaned against the counter next to her just as Mum and Dad walked into the kitchen.

"You got us..." started Mum and took a deep breath before she whispered, "Narcissa?"

"Andromeda," the woman smiled brightly but as she looked at Dad that smiled dimmed slightly as she added, "Edward."

"Miss Black," said Dad softly. "It is Miss Black, am I right?"


"Stop whining," the woman, Narcissa sighed. "I'm getting married, not moving to the wilderness of Canada."

"Still, you could have done better," muttered Sirius. "Granted your choices are pretty limited but you could have gone with someone decent."

"Lucius is decent," Narcissa said sharply.

"Don't come crying to me when a few years from now I'll come knocking on the door with an arrest warrant for your husband in my other hand," snorted Sirius. "Cissy agreed to marry Lucius Malfoy," he said to Mum. "He proposed on Christmas Eve, the unoriginal pillock," he snorted.

"At least he did it properly," retorted Narcissa. "Mother and Father approve of him and I actually could have done worse. A lot worse."

"Like Prewett worse?" offered Sirius. "Or Weasley worse?"

"The Weasleys don't have any son of marriageable age," replied Narcissa. "We're not doing it your parents' way."

"... to talk Cissy out of marrying Lucius Malfoy?" asked Mum pointedly.

"I already tried that," muttered Sirius. "It didn't work."

"He's a pillock is hardly a proper argument, Sirius," said Narcissa simply.

"He's a pillock that has been hanging around You-Know-Who's Death Eaters and I can bet you my New Year's Eve dinner that he already has a Dark Mark," said Sirius quickly.

"That's not the reason we got you here," said Narcissa before she rolled her eyes. "Really, Sirius, you're such a child."

"Pardon me for looking out for what remained from my family and is still talking to me," snorted Sirius. "That list of people has gotten very short, pretty fast. Not that it had been long to begin with," he added grimly. "You will regret it, Cissy."

"Okay, Cassandra," sighed Narcissa. "If I'll ever regret it, I shall inform you immediately so you can come and defend my honour."

"You know that the only way for me to defend your honour is to dishonour you, don't you?" asked Sirius grimly.

"Try to not do that without my permission first, would you?" said Narcissa quickly. "Wizard's oath."

"You have my word," snorted Sirius.

"And that will be enough?" asked Narcissa pointedly.

"My word matters to me, I don't need wizard's oath to keep my promises," said Sirius grimly. "Speaking of which, shall we?"

"Yes," Narcissa smiled before she looked at Sirius and yanked Santa's hat from Sirius's head. "Try to look presentable."

"I'm presentable," hissed Sirius. "That's my best pair of jeans and the jacket is new."

"What a child," sighed Narcissa.

"Exactly," quipped Sirius. "Remember why we're here. We're not waiting for an audience with the Queen."

"Okay, now I'm worried," muttered Mum.

"Oh, don't be," smiled Narcissa. "It's a good thing, Meda. I wouldn't let Sirius bollocks it up."

"Language," Sirius and Mum hissed in unison.

"If our mother heard you," sighed Mum.

"She would wash my mouth with a bar of soap," snorted Narcissa. "Never worked on Bella or on Sirius. Anyway," she paused dramatically. "Andromeda, Edward," she nodded, "we asked you to
come here because Sirius and I want to give something to little Nymphadora Sadachbia," Dora's names rolled from her tongue the same way they rolled from Sirius's or Mum's.

"Now I'm worried," mumbled Mum.

"Don't be," chirped Sirius. "It's great," Narcissa glared at him. "I mean it's not that great now but it has a lot of potential, just like little Dora."

"What Sirius isn't saying is, it's that it's a bloody ruin," snorted Narcissa. "But that ruin was the best we could afford between the two of us that remained within Sirius's criteria and wouldn't have me raising too many eyebrows for too many people."

"You got us this house?" whispered Mum. "Cissy, I'm afraid that we cannot accept it."

"You're right," chirped Sirius. "You cannot accept it, Meda. Remember that I know you well, and I know that pride..."

"That pride and him go way back," snorted Narcissa. "Believe me, I tried to convince him to borrow some money from me, as did Uncle Arcturus, Aunt Cassiopeia and I'm also sure Reg. The only one who actually succeeded in giving him some money was Uncle Alphard and he only accepted it because Alphard decided to have a heart attack and die."

"So, in order to avoid having this wonderful gift returned," said Sirius as he waved his right hand around the kitchen, "Cissy and I decided to put together a Black family dowry for Dora. It's not as much as it should have been, but we decided that any young lady should have something to fall back on."

"Sirius, Narcissa," whispered Mum.

"Andromeda," said Narcissa quickly. "Don't fight us, we've done our homework and you're going to lose, we made sure of that," she added briskly. "The deed to the house is in Nymphadora's name. It lists you as stewards, you can do everything you want with it, with only one exception, you cannot sell it until your daughter turns seventeen and signs the paperwork herself."

"Cissy, Sirius," sighed Mum. "You can't..."

"They can and they did," sighed Dad. "Well played, Miss Black, Mister Black," he nodded at them.

"Lawyer? Right?" chirped Sirius.

"I was planning to be," admitted Dad. "Don't get me wrong, wizarding laws are fascinating and I won't be abandoning independent studies but cooking is fascinating too and it won't take me seven years of studies to get licensed."

"Any particular cuisine?" asked Narcissa.

"None fixed yet, I'm leaning towards pastries though," answered Dad.

"Blueberry biscuit with coconut ice-cream?" asked Narcissa.

Dad nodded.

"And she's lost," chuckled Sirius.

"Oh, bugger off, you elaborate chocolate, coffee, toffee, peanut butter, coconut six-decker biscuit with rose cream on the top," snorted Narcissa.
"At least he doesn't have it as bad as Reg does, I'm sure that by now Reg actually ate his body weight in Lola's elaborate cheesecakes," said Mum fondly.

"They aren't cheesecakes," muttered Narcissa. "They are elaborate death traps for people allergic to raisins."

"You aren't allergic to raisins," said Sirius and Mum in unison.

"Lucius is," sighed Narcissa. "Quite violently in fact and that littl shared with him his raisin cream pastry."

"Knowing Reg, he wasn't asked to hand it over nicely enough," muttered Sirius. "Plus, I call Hippogriff manure, I saw Lucille drinking wine and eating plenty of grapes."

"So did I, but something in dried grapes makes him violently sick," answered Narcissa. "So?" she looked at Mum and Dad. "Are you going to fight?"

"Do we have a chance to win?" asked Mum.

"I'll need to see the deed," answered Dad.

"There's a copy behind you on the table," said Sirius. "The original is in Gringotts, in a vault in Dora's name."

"Let me guess, you set up that one too?" sighed Mum.

"Oh, stop whining," chirped Sirius. "It's a trust vault and it isn't as big as you think. It should cover school expenses. All seven years, provided that the inflation won't render it pretty useless, but even then, it should cover at least first year at Hogwarts."

"What I'm supposed to do with you?" whispered Mum.

"Adopt them?" asked Dora eagerly. "They're like fairy godparents."

"Hardly fairy," snickered Sirius.

"Much less godparents," added Narcissa bitterly.

"It's not your fault," sighed Mum. "I made my bed; I happily sleep in it every night."

"I know," muttered Narcissa. "Doesn't mean that I'm happy that our own bloody family excludes out of it the most magical kid this family got in decades."

"And I told you why," chuckled Sirius. "Still not too late to ditch Lucius Malfoy and elope..."

"With whom?" Narcissa asked sweetly. "Are you offering?"

"Eww," gagged Sirius.

"James Potter maybe?" offered Narcissa.

"You aren't his type and the Potters marry for love," snorted Sirius.

"Then maybe that sensible one, Lupin, is that it?" asked Narcissa.

"He's not your type," said Sirius quickly. "And you aren't exactly his type either."
"Quiet, intelligent, funny in his own way," continued Narcissa. "Is he homosexual?" she asked curiously.

"I never asked and he never said," shrugged Sirius. "Plus, we aren't really on talking terms right now. Why don't you ask him yourself? Just write to me before you do that so I can hide."

"He can't have a worse temper than you," said Narcissa.

"Oh, Cissy, it's always the quiet ones," snorted Sirius.

The bickering continued for quite a while after that until Narcissa excused herself and left. Shortly after, after ascertaining with Dad and Mum what needed to be done and who would be the best to contact to solve this or that issue, so did Sirius, leaving Dora with her parents in their new home.

It didn't become a new home straight away. The repairs that needed to be done to make it liveable dragged on way until late summer. Sirius and Narcissa were right, the house was a ruin, there were termites in the wood and quite a lot of bricks had to be replaced. It was also costly but her grandparents chipped in, and Grandpa Aaron, a retired carpenter helped them eagerly with everything he could do. Electricity and gas had to be connected, Mum and Dad debated for a while about going full wizard but in the end, they decided against it.

Once the summer started and the entire house had to be painted Sirius joined them. He forbade everyone from painting the room which Dora picked as her own. Only once he was done with painting, he let in Grandpa Aaron before they locked themselves there for two days straight.

But the effect of their work was simply amazing. For the walls Sirius chose a magical paint, Doctor's Rainbow Mood Reflective paint which colour Dora could change just by placing a hand on the wall (he also taught her how to lock the colours for when she would have her Muggle cousins and friends over). The ceiling was magical too, charmed to reflect the sky above the house with a confounding charm placed over it so it would seem white to the Muggles.

The furniture too was amazing. Build Muggle way, according to Grandpa Aaron and charmed by Sirius to be scaled down to Dora's age. It was also covered with Doctor's Rainbow Mood Reflective paint so Dora could change its colours without having her parents to paint it over. Like with walls, there were general locking charms.

Narcissa came too, rarely, but she always had a present for Mum and Dora, occasionally Dad (claimed that they were harder to come by since they were law books mostly). She always managed to time her arrival to be there for tea.

Sirius came more often, even when the school year had started. He always had a present for Dora, sometimes Muggle, sometimes magical. If he ever came empty handed, he always managed to convince Mum to let him take Dora out so that Mum and Dad could have some time to themselves. Dora loved those times. Growing up around a big family there was always someone to compete for the attention of the adults. Granted, living with just Mum and Dad, calmed some of her exuberance but she still missed something she couldn't put her finger on.

Sirius was that something, significantly older than her and technically an adult he was still young enough to find some of Dora's antics funny rather than endearing. She felt around him as if she had an older brother, one that wrote to her (TO HER!) long letters, describing Hogwarts, suggesting pranks or new games. He doted on her in a way an older brother would and Dora was convinced that once he would finish Hogwarts, he would move in with them.

She was very disappointed and refused to speak with Sirius for a month when she realised that
Sirius was never going to move in and in fact had been living on his own in his own flat during the summer. Then his work had started and she had seen him less and less and every time she did see him, he looked more and more worn out. He stopped taking her out for walks, occasionally he took her to the cinema or to a carnival but even when that happened, she always had a feeling as if he wasn't fully there, as if he didn't have as much fun as she did.

Years passed and out of five years old she turned into eight years old. Sirius still kept coming around but his visits were shorter and too far between. Mum said that it was because of the war with You-Know-Who. Sirius was an Auror and had to catch the bad guys. He occasionally told Mum that this or that guy had been caught or killed but rather than be happy about it he always looked tired and sometimes sad.

It was probably then when she decided that one day, she would become an Auror so she would help Sirius catch the bad guys. Mum looked horrified when she heard that but for the first time in a long time after hearing her proclamation Sirius smiled at her and it was a smile that finally reached his eyes and gave them this spark that was lost from them.

The last time she ever saw Sirius was sometime later in September when he picked her up from school and invited her to ice-cream, even though it was raining cats and dogs that day. He didn't eat anything, only drunk a lot of coffee the entire time while Dora ate her body weight in ice-cream. Only once she was done with her ice-cream, he shifted closer and wrapped his big hands over her smaller ones. He spoke about having to leave soon, for a very long time, for a mission from which he might not return. He refused to get in the details though, only begged her to not cry after him if he never returned.

Then he took her to the carnival where they had fun through the rest of the afternoon. She dragged him from one ride to another, had him win her the stuffed Teddy bear that was nearly as tall as her (and also damn ugly). She dragged him to a photo-booth, they wasted a lot of pennies on these photos. In all of them, they tried to make silly faces but the last set of them was her favourite one because it wasn't silly. She was sitting on his knees and he had his arms wrapped around her tightly, he was smiling over her head with that weirdly soft smile and this weird look in his eyes she couldn't identify. She was brown-haired in that photo and had grey eyes (a deal with Mum when she started Muggle primary school, at home, she could look however she wanted but at school, she needed to control herself and pick just one appearance and stick to it). She tore one photograph from the set and gave it to him. She placed the rest of them in photo-frame she made in an art class and kept it on her night-stand, next to the photos of Mum, Dad and her together.

He never returned after that. All that was left of him was the magical photographs on her night-stand and tiny silver pendant he gave to her on her eighth birthday. It was a simple N letter carved in his handwriting.

September ended and turned into October. Soon October passed too and as it ended, He Who Must Not Be Named had fallen, vanquished by little Harry Potter. The world rejoiced but Tonks household did not. It occurred to Dora immediately after she learned that You Know Who had fallen that whatever mission Sirius was sent on was somehow connected to You Know Who and that with the Dark Lord gone Sirius could finally return. So, she waited patiently for his return and even had a present for him. He was surely going to come around.

But he didn't and when Mum asked her why she was sitting on the stairs and staring expectantly at the door and she answered that she was waiting for Sirius Mum burst in tears. It was then when she learned that Sirius died by You Know Who's hand. That it was a lie she learned three years later when she came to Hogwarts, she learned from her dorm-mates while they were sharing family stories. They told her that Sirius wasn't killed by You Know Who but was his right hand all along.
and in fact for the last three years had been rotting in Azkaban prison.

She didn't believe it right away and called Rita Smith a filthy liar because Sirius wouldn't do that. Nevertheless, she wrote home to her parents, telling them exactly what she learned and from whom. She feverishly wished him to be a dead hero and not an alive traitor. While waiting for her parents' reply she even got into old editions of The Daily Prophet, still convinced that Smith was lying to her.

The Prophet confirmed what Smith was saying but even then, she couldn't believe that. Sirius was like an older brother to her, he was an Auror and a hero, he would never hand his friends lives over to You Know Who, he just couldn't. Except he did, so claimed the Prophet. Even her parents confirmed that once they arrived at Hogwarts and requested a private meeting with her. Mum tried to explain why she lied to her but the very moment she confirmed that what Smith and the Prophet were saying was true Dora fled from the room.

She locked herself in her dormitory and hid behind the curtains with the last photo of her and Sirius in her lap. Sirius couldn't have done it, he just couldn't, he wouldn't… Anyone else but not Sirius, not the older brother she never had and one she would never have again. Dead or alive Sirius was beyond her reach. It took her years to reconcile the image of a doting older brother with the image of a Dark Lord's right hand. It wasn't an easy journey and she constantly went from defending his honour in her own eyes to cursing his very existence. It was only once she was studying for her O.W.L.s when she finally acknowledged that one didn't exclude the other and he could be both, her doting older brother and the Dark Lord's right hand.

At the same time, she missed him terribly and hated him with every fibre of her being. She wanted him to sit next to her and advise her on a future career just like she wanted him to do the entire family the courtesy of dying in prison. She wanted both to have him teach her new flying tricks and beat him to death with a broom.

She wanted to no longer care about him at all and just ignore his existence but there was no middle ground with him. It was always fierce love of a little girl who found an older brother and equally fierce hatred of a moody teenager that despised him and hated him for destroying the lives of so many innocent people. Ironically it was also Sirius who once told her that opposite of love was not hate rather than indifference because if you hated someone it meant that you still cared about them and still remained connected to them.

And that connection lasted through the years. It drove her mad and alternatively led her to chucking her Advanced Potions Making at the wall and going back to pick it up to study Potions. Because while Snape at the beginning of her sixth year allowed into Advanced Potions students who received Exceed Expectations, he only did so because no students from her year had received an Outstanding on their O.W.L.s and he was contractually obligated to do so. But if their overall grades would slip below Exceed Expectations, he wasn't going to allow them into seventh-year Potions. So, Dora studied, cursed Snape, cursed Sirius and kept throwing her book at the wall when it became too much.

She got an Outstanding on her Potions N.E.W.T.s. She also got another in Transfiguration, Charms, Defence Against the Dark Arts. From Herbology she received Exceed Expectation and it exceeded her own expectations because her herbology books kept hitting the wall with nearly the same frequency as Advanced Potions Making. It would have helped if she and Sprout ever saw eye to eye but for some reason, they couldn't. Really, there were times when she wished that she let the hat sort her into Slytherin or Gryffindor. Snape was Snape and open disdain she could stand but if she was in Slytherin she would be under his care and as cruel and spiteful Snape could get, he always had his Slytherins backs. McGonagall had no favourites; she was strict and had a low
tolerance for idiots but she was always fair.

She got into Auror Academy on a waiting list, with entrance pending on the results of Academy's inner exams. She did reasonably well in joint Potions and Herbology exam, mostly due to Snape's lessons on Poisons and Antidotes. She got the top marks again in Practical Use of Defensive Magic which covered Transfiguration, Charms and Defence Against the Dark Arts. She went through screening with Admittance Officer, swore up and down that she wanted to work in the field and not in the laboratories and then she was in.

Out of sheer overwhelming joy, once she got the news, she purchased three bottles of the best elf-made wine she could find and sent them to her professors thanking them for the effort they put into teaching her. Just three of them because poor Professor Duncan from DADA passed away in his sleep on Friday before the N.E.W.T.s and O.W.L.s exams had begun and seeing that he was dead he wasn't going to drink anything and Sprout didn't really deserve a bottle of her own.

In return, she received congratulations and wishes of good luck in her future career from McGonagall and Flitwick. Snape rather than congratulations in his letter thanked her for the wine and sent back an entire page of reference books on the subject of Poisons and Antidotes – an excellent list which she found very useful once Auror training started covering the subject, it was so excellent that once she got the top marks in it she sent the man another bottle of elf-made wine.

The first year of training was brutal, very physical and exhausting. In theoretical lessons, they were building up their knowledge over what they already learned at Hogwarts while in practical lessons they had their arses handed over to them by their instructors for the most of the time. It was oddly satisfying that she wasn't doing worse than her fellow trainees even though she was the only one who was admitted into the training straight from Hogwarts. The rest were either recent graduates from defensive magic programs or applicants from earlier years who tried their luck again, and again, and sometimes again.

She soldiered on, didn't quit the training like four of her classmates or failed end of the year exams like another six of them. She didn't make the top of the class but came pretty damn close and happily retired to a month-long vacation in August to Greece where her parents decided to take her for doing so well.

The second year was even more brutal but also more practical. She got top marks in Concealment and Disguise but nearly failed Stealth and Tracking, she made up for it in Poisons and Antidotes thanks to Snape's reference books. She did great in Laws and Administration thanks to Dad's help and his law books. All in all, it was a good year and she was reading herself to depart with Priscilla Perkins, her friend and fellow trainee to spend at least two weeks in Priscilla's family summer home in Tuscany when the news of Sirius Black's escape from Azkaban had reached her.

Immediately she cancelled the vacation and went straight to her mentor, Mad-Eye Moody and asked if she could help the fully fledged Aurors to look for him. Moody turned her away but not before he managed to mutter something about Black heading for Hogwarts and the need to find Montague because he had an assignment for him.

Montague was a recent graduate from the training, who just literally got admitted into Auror Office. He was a good student, one of the best in his year when it came to theoretical aspects of the training but didn't do well around people so entire three years of Auror training had a bet going on how long it would take Montague to drop out if he won't get into his beloved laboratory before the year would end. On top of that Montague was completely gullible and couldn't keep a secret to save his life, not out of malice but simply from the lack of confidence in his abilities.

Tracking him down after his meeting with Moody didn't give her much trouble. Neither did getting
Montague to talk about his assignment. He quickly divulged that he was going to sit on Sirius's old friend, one Remus John Lupin, a registered werewolf who lived in a small cottage between Robin Hood's Bay and Ravenscar. He was going to do that at least until Muggle authorities would show up to take over. He then begged Dora to not repeat their conversation to Moody and once she swore that she won't repeat what she heard from him to anyone and quite eagerly on that, he went on his way and she went hers.

She sneaked into archives and tried to learn something more about Mr Lupin. Dishearteningly, there wasn't much on him. He was a werewolf, registered himself immediately after graduation, admitted to the registry that he was bitten during Easter break of his seventh year and that he didn't register immediately because he wanted to finish Hogwarts but took necessary precautions and removed himself from the school grounds before the full moon. He paid his fine for not registering immediately. He finished Hogwarts with good grades, had Third Class Mastery in Defence Against the Dark Arts and Charms. His employment record was spotty and he worked in a lot of different places all over the country even though he didn't move from his tiny cottage for years.

It was the location of that cottage that bothered her. Robin Hood's Bay was on the east shore of Northern Yorkshire, north from Scarborough which itself was west of Azkaban prison. In fact, a guest entrance to Azkaban, to anyone brave or foolish or determined enough to go there, was located in Scarborough's docs. She didn't know how Sirius managed to escape but if he was heading to Hogwarts, he just had to at some point pass between Scarborough and Robin Hood's Bay.

He might have done so already or he might have been waiting for the chase to pass through the area. Sirius was an Auror, he participated in occasional chases and he knew how they were done. Not that many criminals run on foot but Sirius knew the protocol and he would use it against the Aurors.

Technically Lupin could be an innocent bystander, who just happened to live in the area but Dora wasn't convinced that the location of the cottage and its proximity to Azkaban was a coincidence. Spending some time in the area could be a coincidence but a stay that lasted years was not a coincidence. Lupin had to know something, perhaps he had nothing to do with Sirius's escape or perhaps he helped him.

Moody would know for sure but she wasn't going to ask him about it and technically she was supposed to be on vacation. But she wasn't going to sit back and wait for everything to resolve itself. Moody might have some faith in Muggle police but while Dora didn't live in the country, she had a better understanding of the Muggle world than most Aurors. Small, country police departments were notoriously understaffed and they wouldn't need much of a distraction to abandon baby-sitting Lupin for more serious work.

Well, goodbye sunny Italy, welcome windy Northern Yorkshire Moors. She was going to find Sirius dead or alive and she would use against him what he taught her himself, and also what she learned without him.

It was the ninth day of her stakeout at Lupin's place. It started simply enough, she parked her butt under heavy duty Disillusionment Charm about two hundred yards away from Montague because she didn't want him to discover that he wasn't alone, it would freak him out and he would immediately contact Moody. She sat there through the entire day until Montague was changed by another recent graduate from the Academy, Wilcox. She sat through the night too until Wilcox too was relieved, again by Montague. When she wasn't sitting around and observing Lupin's cottage with pretty strong silencing charms and a fancy odour blocking spells on herself (because not only she started to smell and one could only get as far with refreshing charms but also because she
wasn't sure whatever or not the rumours about werewolf heightened sense of smell were true).

Nothing was out of place and quite frankly from the distance Lupin was very boring to observe. He hardly ever left his cottage and if he did, he always went to the back garden to pick some vegetables. Other than that, he was pretty stationary. Once, he walked to Robin Hood's Bay to buy stuff he couldn't grow in his garden and even had lunch in the pub. She graciously used the time he was staying there to check into one of the upstairs bedrooms to have a proper shower while Montague was sitting on him.

Thanks to her old school bag she had clean clothes with her. It was a gift from Sirius with pretty neat Undetectable Extension Charm as well Feather Light Charm. She had no idea where he got it or how much it cost him but she was in love with that bag since she was seven years old, there wasn't a thing she didn't manage to put in there and carry it for days and when she was planning to leave for her vacation in Italy she simply packed in there rather than into the trunk like Priscilla.

Granted she was prepared for sunny Italy rather than windy Northern Yorkshire but since she always carried on her both galleons and Muggle pounds, she quickly managed to add to her wardrobe a proper jumper and some food before she resumed tailing Montague who was tailing Lupin.

As she predicted Montague and Wilcox on the fourth day of the stakeout were replaced by Muggle policemen from Robin Hood's Bay and just as she predicted it had taken them another day to ditch sitting on Lupin. Since 4th August she was on her own.

It annoyed the ever-loving fuck out of her. Sure, she could contact Moody and request reinforcements but if she did Moody would make sure that she would be removed from the stakeout rooster. Firstly, because she wasn't a fully trained Auror or a Muggle officer. Secondly, because Moody knew that she and Sirius were related.

So, she kept vigil on her own. She set down quite a big perimeter of wards around the cottage that would alert her if they were crossed by anyone or anything who wasn't her or Lupin and she napped whenever she could.

Lupin spent the full moon on 2nd August locked in earth cellar, he didn't get out of there until very late at night and he immediately headed back inside the cottage. He didn't leave it for the next two days and even when he did, he only went into the garden.

Tired with sleeping in a tiny tent, without access to a bathroom and a shower, she tried poking around Lupin's wards to see whatever or not she could get in there unnoticed. For a Third-Class Master of Charms and Defence Against the Dark Arts Lupin was a peculiarly lousy warder. Sure, he had some pretty impressive wards around the cottage, especially around the earth cellar in the back of the property but they were all designed to keep him inside rather than keep people out of his place.

She got inside the cottage very late on 6th August under Disillusionment and Odour Blocking Charms and Silencing spell once she was sure that Lupin would be asleep. She placed several strong silencing charms, including one that Sirius taught her, around Lupin's bedroom and bathroom and then she soaked in the tiny bathtub for nearly an hour. Oh, glorious civilisation and its achievements like indoor plumbing.

Once she tidied up after herself, she placed a ward on the door to Lupin's bedroom that would alert her when Lupin would open the door and she curled up in an armchair in the corner and fell asleep. She woke up rested and pleasantly warm. Sleeping inside, even in an armchair, beat sleeping in a tent. Hearing no sound coming from Lupin's bedroom she quickly ate a snack from her bag and
helped herself into Lupin's coffee. It was surprisingly good. She managed to wash the mug, put it away without breaking it and settled herself back under freshly reapplied charms just before Lupin walked through the door.

She watched him tinker around the kitchen, preparing breakfast and the cursing the owl which delivered The Daily Prophet. She watched him as he unrolled the paper and suddenly, he had gone drastically pale, his hands started to shake badly enough for him to drop the paper while he was gasping for breath.

Finally, fighting the instinct to just run to him and help him because if she did so she would have revealed her presence to him and she didn't want that, she watched him fall to his knees and the complete collapse that followed it.

Only then, when she was certain that he lost his consciousness she dared to cautiously approach him. She crouched by him and turned the dropped newspaper to the front page so she could see what kind of distressing news caused him to faint. The headline on the top of the page claimed:

**HARRY POTTER MISSING!**

*Harry Potter, 13, has been found missing from his Muggle relatives this morning. It appears that he didn't return to their home last night. As of right now, it is unclear whatever or not The Boy-Who-Lived left his relatives voluntarily or not. If anyone should see him please contact Aurors immediately.*

The article was accompanied by a photograph of Potter. The kid was small and scrawny, his hair was unkempt and he was wearing a pair of round glasses.

She looked at Lupin and moved her palm to the close vicinity of his mouth to check whatever or not he was still breathing. He was, erratically and they appeared to be shallow. She quickly scanned the rest of the front page. There wasn't a single mention about Sirius Black or Potter beyond the statement that he went missing from his relatives.

Could Sirius get to Potter? And what for? If he had he probably done so for a reason related to You-Know-Who. Retribution for killing the Dark Lord in the first place probably. Or something far more sinister, she mused.

Either way, shit, bugger, a resounding fuck.

What to do now?

Common sense dictated abandoning sitting on Lupin – after doing him common decency of reviving him – and heading back to the Auror Office to offer herself as a volunteer to look for the kid. Moody might have been unwilling to let her get involved with the search for Sirius Black but he might let her help with the search for Harry Potter.

But something was holding her back from simply doing so. Something was going on, something Moody via Montague didn't let her on. She was probably missing a vital piece of information and she knew who might have it. She sighed, pulled her wand from her holster and after steeling herself for whatever might come after that she revived Lupin.

Chapter End Notes
Next chapter: Remus Lupin in all of his slightly confused, slightly agitated detective glory accompanied by no one other than Nymphadora Tonks. Possibly with a guest appearance by Bathsheda Babbling (most probably).

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